

# Indexing chronotopes: An ethnographic approach of the changing linguistic landscape of Mytilene

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## Περίληψη

Σε αυτήν την έρευνα προσεγγίζω το γλωσσικό τοπίο (ΓΤ) της Μυτιλήνης ως αρένα όπου εγγράφεται δυναμικά η παρουσία προσφύγων και μεταναστών τόσο από τον ντόπιο πληθυσμό όσο και τους/τις ίδιους/ίδιες. Εστιάζοντας σε δεδομένα που συλλέχθηκαν στο πλαίσιο συνεχιζόμενης επιτόπιας έρευνας, επιχειρώ τη σύνθεση των διάφορων φωνών που συμβάλλουν στη δημιουργία μεταβαλλόμενων ενδεικτικών σχέσεων ανάμεσα στον χώρο, τον τόπο και τον χρόνο, τις γλώσσες και την εμπρόθετη ανθρώπινη δράση. Στόχος μου η ανάδειξη της σημασίας των χρονοτόπων (*chronotopes*) στην έρευνα του ΓΤ, με εθνογραφικό παράδειγμα τη σταδιακή μεταβολή του ΓΤ της Μυτιλήνης από ημιαστικό σε διεθνοποιημένο στον απόηχο της ανθρωπιστικής κρίσης.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: εθνογραφική έρευνα γλωσσικού τοπίου, χρονοτόποι, ενδεικτικές σχέσεις, Μυτιλήνη, ανθρωπιστική κρίση

## 1 Introduction

Despite the unprecedented visibility of Lesvos as a result of the humanitarian crisis following the war in Syria, little is known about its multilayered and dynamic linguistic landscape (LL) (cf. Canakis 2016, Christoulaki 2017). Moreover, although it is not uncommon for LL research to focus on social struggles *qua* claims to space as aspects of changing notions of citizenship (Kasanga 2014, Martín Rojo 2014, 2016, Kitis and Milani 2015, Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić 2016, Goutsos and Polymenenas 2016; Stroud 2016; Canakis 2018), less is known about the effects of forced mobility on the LL (Mackby 2016, Brown 2019).

In this paper, I am approaching the LL of Mytilene, as an arena where the presence of newcomers is dynamically inscribed both by themselves and by locals. Focusing on ethnographically collected data as diverse as top-down administrative and commercial signs aimed at a changing demographic basis and market, respectively, and bottom-up graffitied signs by refugees and locals supporting (or opposing) their cause, I examine the LL as a forum where different voices (and interests) join forces to create and, given time, consolidate a new reality –while in so doing, indexical relations between time/space, language, and agency (Blommaert 2013) are significantly changed in this mid-sized border town.

Data collected between 2015 and 2019 shall be mined with a focus on indexicality vis-à-vis *chronotopes* in the LL (Blommaert 2015, 2017, Blommaert and De Fina 2016) as the preferential analytical tool for historicizing the dynamic presence of language in public space in the wider context of semiotic landscapes, as theorized by Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), and Pennycook (2010), and further discussed in the volume by Pütz and

Mundt (2019), notably by Shohamy (2019) and Pennycook (2019). Drawing on earlier observations about how LL signs come to stand in an indexical relation to the space they occupy at a certain point in time (Canakis 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018; Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić 2016), I shall show that LL signs, no matter how durable materially speaking, are inextricably tied to *chronotopes*. In fact, one may even argue for a kind of commensurability which may be called “mutual indexing” and alludes to higher orders of indexicality (cf. Silverstein 2003).

Chronicling the humanitarian crisis through the LL in Mytilene over time affords insights into an ongoing process of change: the change from a largely monolingual or bilingual LL in Greek and English to a radically polyglot LL where Greek and English coexist more often and elbow each other in an environment which now features at least Turkish, Arabic, and Farsi (among miscellaneous tokens of other languages); indeed, it closely monitors the change from a midsize, rather inward-looking semi-urban space into a decidedly international melting pot whose complexity defies its size and where discourses spray-canned on walls may, but certainly need not, be imported: for Mytilene, the epicenter of an influx of populations in European space, is chronotopically in a position to create and export discourses without the mediation of Greek institutions in the capital.

In the chronotope I am focusing on, Mytilene is the undisputed Greek capital of the humanitarian crisis, as framed by global socioeconomic and political discourses.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the writing on the walls of Mytilene is as much a product of its very time of production as the chronotope in which it appears is shaped by its very presence there –and this is a tall indexical order.

## 2 Setting the scene: Pragmatic and theoretical prerequisites

Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos and administrative seat of the North Aegean district, is a border town with a population of approximately 27,500 (based on the 2011 census). It boasts an international airport connecting Mytilene directly with several international airports in Europe, and has been the seat of the Ministry of the Aegean (1985-2004) –and its successor, the Ministry of the Aegean and Island Policy (2004-2007/2009)– as well as the seat of the University of the Aegean since 1984, which accounts for a sizable student population (the overwhelming majority of whom are not locals). This results in a bustling town with a very diverse LL, given its size.

Mytilene’s proximity to Turkey has resulted in regular boat service to Ayvalık, which, since the late 00s, has been used not only by Greeks crossing over to Turkey but also by a steadily growing number of Turkish tourists (and later businessmen, border control-, and immigration officials), an immediate consequence of decreased fees for a Schengen visa (and, since 2015, international and bilateral Greek-Turkish agreements or, quite simply, “understandings” regarding migration). This proximity to the Turkish coast, in actual and symbolic terms (cf. Green 2010), partly explains why refugees from the Middle East and Asia have opted for Mytilene as a preferential entry point.

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<sup>1</sup>Even if this presupposes ignoring many other humanitarian crises which do not affect Europe –or the “first world” and its problems– directly.

Having had the opportunity to observe the LL of Mytilene closely since 2000 and register its dynamic more closely since 2008/9 has been instructive in how language in public space is interweaved with actuality; notably with major sociopolitical and economic issues, trends, and stakes –all of which, incidentally, spell out chronotopes as intended here.

As Blommaert and Maly put it, in their defense of ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis (ELLA) as a way of historicizing LL research, features of the sociolinguistic situation “can be read off literacy artefacts” (2014: 2). What is more, entrenchment of LL types (and even tokens, especially stencils), given time and high frequency, come to stand in an indexical relation to the place they are found in (cf. Canakis 2012, 2014).

Diversity is not a novelty in the LL of Mytilene, which is regularly punctuated by political slogans, often directly indexing its large student population and the advocacy groups they participate in. However, there have been notable changes, since inefficient austerity measures following the economic collapse in 2010 have given new momentum to the part of the population most ravaged by dire prospects for the future: youth. What is new, then, is

- i) the frequent appearance of radical slogans relating to issues of (mostly non-heteronormative) gender and sexuality (Canakis 2016, Christoulaki 2017)
- ii) the burgeoning presence of Turkish in commercial signage (Canakis 2016)
- iii) the ubiquitous presence, since summer 2015, of administrative and commercial signs in the Arabic script, directly inscribing immigrant and refugee presence in the LL (Canakis 2016), and
- iv) LL signs, notably graffitied slogans, overwhelmingly in support of immigrants and refugees, *indexing stance while conferring visibility* to immigrant and refugee causes.

I shall focus on the last two points and address them in turn. Specifically, I will show that although use of the Arabic script indexes immigrant and refugee presence in the LL directly, it is predominantly used in commercial and administrative signs authored by local vendors (Pictures 1-8) and authorities (Picture 11).<sup>2</sup> In this case, immigrants/refugees may well have been the producers but are not the authors of the signs (cf. Goffman 1981). There are few instances of signs in Arabic most likely authored by non-locals (Pictures 9-10). Still, all of them obviously target a non-local audience.

On the other hand, there is a proliferation of LL signs, in Greek and English, directly indexing a positive stance and conferring visibility to immigrant and refugee causes (Pictures 12-36). These signs typically deploy the idiom of *solidarity* (vs. *altruism* or/and *philanthropy*; cf. Papataxiarchis 2016) and index the left-of-center ideological affiliation of their authors. These signs are, crucially, not a reaction to hate speech in the LL (since there is hardly any until early 2020),<sup>3</sup> but rather a response to xenophobic discourses circulating in the media and originating in the ideological agendas of conservative parties. Therefore, they are highly *intertextual* but typically address “uninscribed presences” (or LL absences); i.e., they are *semiotically intertextual*.

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<sup>2</sup>Picture numbers refer to photographic data listed in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> Recent events in Mytilene, especially since January 2020, have caused unprecedented upheaval which has resulted in at least some LL presence of anti-refugee/immigrant sentiment. However, since this is all still very new at the time of writing, I shall focus on data collected until September 2019.

Moreover, pro-immigrant/refugee signs allude to other, local concerns to which they are related in an oppressive political climate, as evidenced in signs repudiating values such as xenophobia (Picture 18), racism (Pictures 13, 21, 28), patriotism (Picture 15), and nationalism (Pictures 16, 19), and are often signed by the same groups. Therefore, signs directly indexing positive stance towards immigrants and refugees are instrumentalized in indirectly indexing affiliations with local political significance.

Taking a stance on an issue in the LL presupposes inscribing it, thereby conferring visibility to it. This is a case where Stroud's comment on turbulent spaces and citizenship becomes relevant:

Because LLs provide the discourses and important reference points by means of which people make sense of local place [...], the challenges confronting a sociolinguistically informed politics of place are those of heeding the plural voices layered into, or erased out of, the semiotic landscape [...]. LLs are actively deployed by groups and individuals to enhance local engagement, sense of belonging or acts of resistance, and to create conditions for new emotional geographies of place (Stroud 2016: 4).

In this sense, the LL of Mytilene emerges as a space where local and wider European and global policies (and views) on immigrants and refugees are contested at a given point in time: a specific chronotope of which LL signs –given entrenchment– serve as indexes.

### 3 Indexing chronotopes: Analyzing the data

Blommaert and De Fina (2016) rework the Bakhtinian concept of *chronotope*, arguing for time-space configurations as compelling aspects of context, especially for sociolinguistic treatments of identity, irrespective of LLs. However, ethnographic LL research, given the dynamic nature of its subject matter, is also crucially linked to chronotopes (spatiotemporal coordinates and presuppositions arising therefrom), regardless of the topic investigated. On the other hand, “chronotopes invoke orders of indexicality valid in a specific timespace frame” and allow “chronotopically relevant indexicals [...] that acquire a certain recognizable value” (Ibid.: 7). Indeed, LL signs may create place out of space and therefore index it even out of context (cf. higher order of indexicality, e.g. stereotypes). And yet, places may also be understood as preferential loci for certain kinds of LL signs at a certain point in time (rather than permanently, cf. Canakis 2016, 2017, 2018). Therefore, I understand chronotopes in LL research as involving Silverstein's higher orders of indexicality (2003) and van Dijk's (1998, 2008, 2014) work on social cognition (*qua* shared set of beliefs) in the study of discourse, since metapragmatics tacitly relies on shared beliefs which are constitutive of social cognition. These approaches cross paths in that they focus on indexicals and indexicality in the context of the “Discourse-Cognition-Society triangle” (van Dijk 2014). I therefore argue for chronotopes both as a prerequisite for LL ethnographic research and as the spatiotemporal coordinates of social cognition: the frame holding it together (and conferring howsoever frail and transient currency to it).

### 3.1 *LL novelties: Signs in Arabic script*

Arabic signs in the LL of Mytilene since 2015 are tokens of multilingualism which could potentially also be seen as a sign of cosmopolitanism, but in a different context. For LL signs in Arabic in the data are primarily functional (rather than symbolic), serving transactional purposes and indexing presence of the other as a commercial opportunity. The kinds of businesses in which these signs appear underscore this point: they are typically the mini markets and kiosks (Pictures 3, 7), affordable clothing stores (Picture 8), travel agencies (Pictures 1, 4), and exchange or money transfer services (Picture 2) located on the waterfront and the busiest streets of the town center. The middle eastern restaurant *Damas* (Pictures 5-6) is an exception which marked the possibility of Arabic being used both functionally and symbolically –for the brief period of its operation–as an element of marketing a foreign cuisine to the local clientele, especially since it occupied coveted business space on Sapphous Square, the main square of Mytilene.

The relatively few administrative signs in Arabic (cf. health service headquarters and children’s welfare agencies) are often multilingual (e.g. Picture 11, in English, Greek, French, Arabic, and Farsi) and index the presence of the other as an extraordinary event, as an aspect of crisis management. On the other hand, graffitied signs in the Arabic alphabet (e.g. Pictures 9-10) are rarer and incommensurate with the visibility of Arabic in other types of signage, which may be due to the subordinate and precarious status of immigrants/refugees as primary users of Arabic (and other languages using Arabic script) in this chronotope. Still, the scribbled “fuck you” note in Picture 9 is more convincing of a knowledgeable hand when compared to the (stylized but most probably non-native) writing in Picture 10.

Commercial signs in Arabic are relatively scarce now. They peaked around 2016 and have been steadily diminishing. Still, both their proliferation after summer 2015 and their relative scarcity now may be traced to the “good-reasons principle” (cf. Ben-Rafael 2009: 45-48), which guides LL actors and is instrumental in shaping LLs.

### 3.2 *LL signs indexing pro-immigrant/refugee stance*

Activist pro-refugee LL (printed, stenciled or graffitied) signs in this context are crucially intertwined with claims for non-precarious citizenship (cf. Stroud 2016, Canakis 2017) which go well beyond the humanitarian crisis. They contribute to shaping a topography of political and identitarian contestation and to the creation of an “emotional geography” (Stroud 2016) of indignation which immediately indexes the current chronotope (Pictures 13, 16, 17, 20, 22, 25, 27, 30) but is certainly not neatly separated from Greek debt crisis (Pictures 23, 26, 31) with which it is ideologically fused for various LL actors (Pictures 15-17), which may include local and foreign NGO members in this chronotope.

Signs directly inscribing or indirectly alluding to pro-immigrant/refugee stance bear semiotic marks manifesting their interrelations (cf. materiality) with other (e.g. feminist, anarchist) advocacy groups denouncing inequality on various levels. A good example are stencils which bear identical messages and appear both in black and purple colour (Pictures 32, 33, 34-45), purple being characteristically employed by feminist advocacy groups (also Pictures 12, 14, 15 where purple and black are used in different graffitied

signs welcoming refugees –in the same location– in Greek and English). On the other hand, black is both more common and often explicitly associated with anarchist sensibilities (Pictures 19, 24, 28, 29).

Integrated as they are in local discourses of political contestation (Pictures 19, 23), these LL signs are experienced as one moves in space as part of a wider sociopolitical arena blurring the boundaries between the global and the local (as well as the boundaries between “different issues”). In the current chronotope, abstract and concrete nouns – notably, xenophobia, racism, border(s), nation, nationalism/nationalists, patriotism/patriots, immigrants, refugees, etc.– form a kaleidoscope of predicates, some of which seem to be partly understood as overlapping–indeed, as bearing family resemblances–both for LL actors who perceive a continuity between them, and consumers of the LL.

The UNHCR poster (Picture 36), reading “We are [together] with [the] refugees” in Greek, encapsulates what many of the LL signs seem to presuppose. However, future research will have to elucidate an observable discrepancy: the preponderance of pro-refugee/immigrant signs and the near absence of anti-refugee/immigrant signs in the LL vis-à-vis the increasingly virulent rhetoric circulating on this issue in Greek society in general and in Mytilene in particular.

#### 4 Conclusion

Both signs in Arabic script and activist pro-immigrant/refugee signs in the LL enhance the visibility of the issues and people concerned. However, they operate in very different ways. Specifically, LL signs in the Arabic alphabet manifest an LL economy indexing a population which uses languages deploying it (not only Arabic but also Farsi, etc.), even if one has little or no access to the content of the messages. As such, signs in Arabic have as much to do with business opportunities for local entrepreneurs as with the people they address. On the other hand, activist slogans, in Greek and English, intertextually oppose and respond to anti-immigrant/refugee rhetoric which may be largely absent from the LL (at least until January 2020) but is alive and kicking in public discourse. In these signs, content (and sociopolitical context) is crucial. And given their sheer number, these LL signs are key to inscribing the presence of immigrants and the refugee crisis on the island.

Moreover, by systematically deploying the idiom of *solidarity*, antinationalist rhetoric, and a marked aversion to Greek and European handling of borders (cf. especially Pictures 13, 16, 20, 27, 30), these slogans assume a specific *stance* and allude to local political concerns –notably issues of citizenship– affecting locals as well as newcomers regardless of their status. It has to be noted that the idiom of *philoxenia* ‘hospitality’ (linked to *altruism*) is systematically avoided in these LL signs, as it indexes face-saving discourses prettifying local authorities and policies (cf. the slogan *No prison is hospitable*).

However, given that immigrants and especially refugees are separated from the local authors of these LL signs by multiple layers of precarity (documents being just one example, Pictures 34-35), one wonders about the degree to which the humanitarian crisis has been instrumentalized by locals as a way of voicing disappointment (and anger) towards the iniquities of their homeland (cf. Picture 23 and the famous slogan during the

debt-crisis –i.e. “killers of people, well-to-do respectable citizens, you look good drowned in debt”– which has reappeared, gaining new momentum (and connotations) over the last few years).

Be that as it may, these LL agents engage in “identity building” (better: acts of identification) in the LL by adopting a clear stance on a controversial issue (cf. Blackwood, Lanza and Woldemariam 2016). The two types of LL signage discussed here, as experienced by passers-by and researchers of the LL of Mytilene, jointly provide access to major changes effected by the humanitarian crisis. Moreover, given their high visibility, they offer an opportunity for the study of “situated practices of embodied conduct” (cf. Szabó and Troyer 2017).

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APPENDIX: Pictures



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7



Picture 8



Picture 9



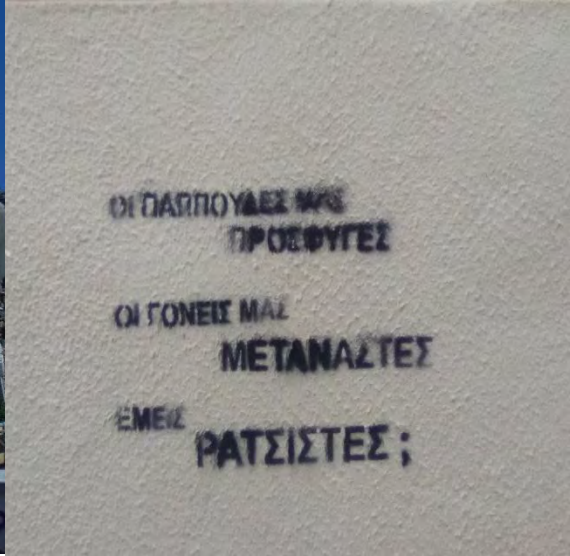
Picture 10



Picture 11



Picture 12



Picture 13



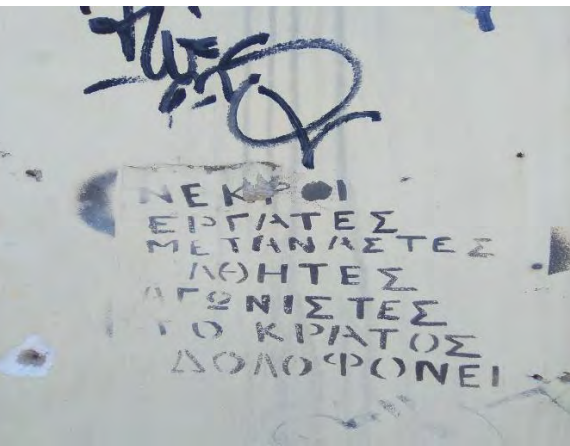
Picture 14



Picture 15



Picture 16



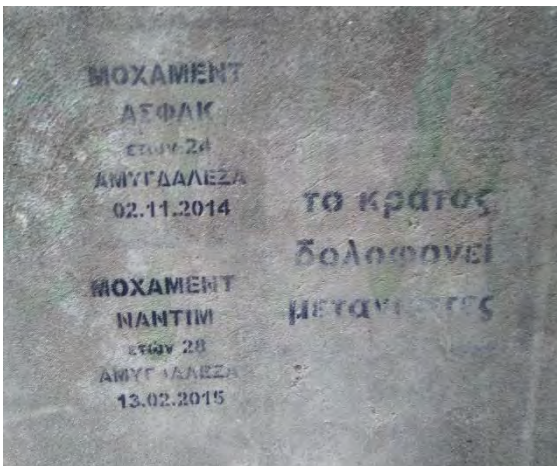
Picture 17



Picture 18



Picture 19



Picture 20



Picture 21



Picture 22



Picture 23



Picture 24



Picture 25



Picture 26



Picture 27



Picture 28



Picture 29



Picture 30



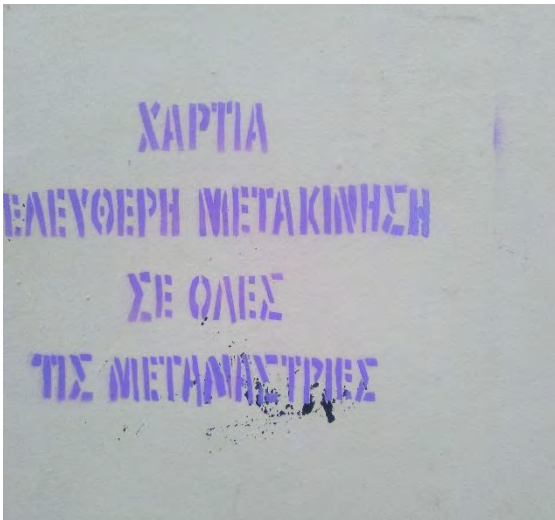
Picture 31



Picture 32



Picture 33



Picture 34



Picture 35



Picture 36