

The semiotic dynamics of a small place: a linguistic landscape approach to Olga's Square, Patras*

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Περίληψη

Στόχος του παρόντος άρθρου είναι η ανάλυση των νοημάτων του δημόσιου χώρου. Συγκεκριμένα εξετάζεται η περίπτωση της πλατείας Όλγας, στην Πάτρα, από τρεις διαφορετικές σκοπιές: λόγος, γλώσσα και υλικότητα είναι οι σημειωτικοί κώδικες που επιλέγονται για να αναδείξουν τη δυναμική του χώρου και τα διάφορα νοήματα που μπορεί αυτός να φέρει. Τα δεδομένα προκύπτουν από φωτογραφίες του χώρου, που ελήφθησαν μεταξύ του χρονικού διαστήματος 2018-2019. Συνεντεύξεις, οι οποίες πραγματοποιήθηκαν στο πλαίσιο της εθνογραφίας, λειτουργούν επικουρικά στην αποκρυπτογράφηση των σημειωτικών ερεθισμάτων που προσφέρει η πλατεία. Παρά το ότι θεωρείται ένας ενιαίος δημόσιος χώρος, τα δεδομένα παρουσιάζουν την πλατεία Όλγας διαιρεμένη σε “ζώνες”, οι οποίες βρίσκονται συνεχώς υπό τη διεκδίκηση ετερογενών σημειωτικά δυνάμεων.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: γλωσσικό-σημειωτικό τοπίο, πλατεία Όλγας, λόγος, γλώσσα, υλικότητα

1 Introduction

The present paper is a summary of a completed master thesis which focused on the examination of the features that shaped the Linguistic Landscape (LL) of Olga's Square in the city of Patras (Greece). The research was conducted during a specific period of time (from September 2018 to January 2019), with the aim of exploring the semiotic dynamics of that space. Based on the proposition that space and human agency are in constant interaction (Lefebvre 1974), an examination of the square's static signs was attempted using three different perspectives: discourse, language and material (Scollon & Scollon 2003). This methodology, employed in conjunction with ethnographic observations (Blommaert & Maly 2014), was adopted in order to thoroughly investigate the range of meanings that each sign may produce, discovering, by extension, how these fuel the space's semiotic dynamics by theoretically and materially dominating over the square. Olga's Square emerges as a semiotically divided and heterogeneous space with multiple as well as contradictory meanings.

2 The space

Olga's Square is an open space in central Patras (Greece) (Figure 1). The official language of the city is Greek and its population amounts to ca. 200.000¹ inhabitants, with Greeks

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¹ <http://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM03/> - (last accessed on 28/04/2020).

being the predominant ethnic group. From an urban planning view, Olga's Square (~0,8ha) is surrounded by four streets, which form the square's perimeter and are lined primarily with shops, cafeterias and fast-food restaurants. Its space constitutes an urban point which fosters social gatherings, entertainment and interaction within the city center. Hence, Olga's Square is not simply a point of the city's spatial network, but it also constitutes a core element of the city's social network, which in turn means that the square may bring along additional signifieds. The subsidiary questions of this project, which will help us analyze and reconstruct the space beyond its material form, relate to how possible signifieds are created and to who partakes in their creation.

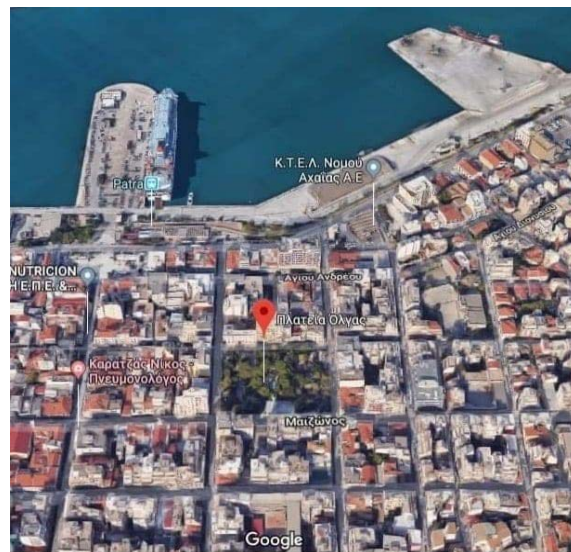


Figure 1 | Olga's Square in Patras.

3 The data

The data comprise 174 photographs, each one depicting a sign, as this is defined by Backhaus (2007: 66). The photographs were collected by means of repeated fieldwork visits. All static signs of Olga's Square were photographed, including those that had an indexical relation to the square. Afterwards, they were enumerated, classified and uploaded on the Google My Maps Application², so that any stakeholder could have access to a more detailed picture.

With regard to the ethnographic part of the study, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted, in some of which more than one interviewee was present. On the one hand, I interviewed passers-by at random or people hanging out at Olga's Square and willing to

https://www.eetaa.gr/metaboles/apografes/apografi_2011_rev.pdf (p. 239, last accessed on 28/04/2020).

² Specific colors were chosen for the Google pointers in accordance with the signs' discourses: black is for transgressive signs, pink for commercial, yellow for infrastructural, and green for regulatory signs. The presence of more than one discourse at the same place is marked with purple. To get a better view follow this link: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_IM_LPY7ly7icqrXwgQnTCSLdKpSJnBv&usp=sharing.

answer my questions (students, immigrants, etc.). On the other hand, I interviewed some of the local shopkeepers, since they play an active role in shaping the square's landscape.

4 Methodology

After an examination of the various analytic categories being proposed within the domain of LL, the data were coded and analyzed according to the theoretical tools provided by the work of Scollon & Scollon (2003). More specifically, the semiotic resources of discourse, language and materiality were chosen as the analytic categories of the present project. During the analysis, each one of these resources was enriched with ethnographically derived remarks in order to outline a holistic picture of the social space under research.

Discourses are significantly anchored to (social) spaces and they thus reveal not only 'social languages' (ibid.: 210), but also human actions (de Saint-Georges 2002: 1). The four types of discourses being employed and studied regarding the emplaced signs of Olga's Square are: transgressive, commercial, infrastructural and regulatory.

Language is also a key factor for the accurate interpretation of a space. As Landry & Bourhis (1997) note in their definition of LL, language is to be found almost everywhere. Together with an ethnographic approach, language can reveal many complex features of the social fabric and patterns of the social interaction.

Finally, materiality is a cultural and social semiotic resource shaping the context of a sign by adding extra meaning to it³. But while the importance of materiality has long been stressed and studied under the realm of inscription (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 1998), most of the heretofore LL studies tend to overlook it, despite the material form of our environment. The materials examined here refer to the material condition of each sign and not e.g. to every distinct material used for the production of each sign.

5 Discourse

The analysis begins by showing how discourses spread around the area. Table 1 presents the numerical results (signs per discourse), while Figure 2 illustrates how the 174 signs are distributed in Olga's Square space.

5.1 *Transgressive⁴ discourse*

The majority of this project's signs are transgressive. Their unauthorized emplacement through human activity transgresses the normative setup of Olga's Square in various ways; transgressive signs are tracked down almost in every 'corner' of the square, e.g. on benches, street-light poles, on the ground and even above other transgressive signs (Figure 3) and historical monuments (Figure 4).

³ See also Hodge R. & Kress G. (1988: 9) for certain examples.

⁴ The term '*transgressive*' is mostly translated in Greek as '*παραβατικός*', while a more precise translation would be '*μη θεσμοθετημένος*'.

Type of discourse	<i>N</i>	%
transgressive	111	63.8
commercial	38	21.8
infrastructural	16	9.2
regulatory	9	5.2
Total	174	100

Table 1 | Signs per discourse



Figure 2 | Distribution of signs in Olga's Square according to discourse.

The examination of the context of the transgressive signs reveals the presence of collective groups related with leftist, antifascist, anti-patriarchal ideals. Local bands make their presence visible by tagging their names or their affiliation with music genres (e.g. hip-hop & punk), which are often interlinked with anti-authoritarian ideals (Figure 5).



Figure 3 | Transgressive layering probably due to potential conflict between politically active groups.



Figure 4 | Inscriptions transgressing the historical statue of A. Michalakopoulos. We can discern the anarchist symbol, as well as the word “antifa”. The verb “βανδαλίζομαι” (Eng. I am vandalized) alludes to the Greek slogan “βασανίζομαι” (Eng. I suffer), whose use became widespread during the Greek financial crisis. The fact that those signs are on the sculpture indexes a confrontational dialogue between the typical state practices and anti-authoritarian ideals.



Figure 5 | Graffiti of Pavlos Fyssas, the Greek rapper who was murdered on 18/09/2013 by the neo-Nazi political organization Golden Dawn. The symbol of anarchy is again on display; the red and black colors are closely associated with the anarcho-communist movement.

Another example of transgressivity is the glued notes advertising places for rent (Figure 6). At first sight, they seem to be littering clean surfaces, but in essence they show a typical communicative relationship among the local people, confirming thus the square’s open communal character. These signs become transgressive mainly due to the lack of

ample authorized space where such announcements ought to be placed (e.g. municipal bulletin boards).



Figure 6 | Transgressive “for rent” signs.

The wider presence of transgressive signs created either by individuals or by groups confirms Auer’s argument (2010: 290), that static signs also have the function of marking membership and bringing out various senses of belonging. Olga’s Square obtains a twofold meaning through transgressive discourse and the consequent alteration of its urban landscape: on one hand it gets associated with features such as decay, illegality, damage, etc.; on the other, its particular communal character is highlighted through such transgressive practices, which indeed contribute to the resemiotization of Olga’s Square (Pennycook 2009: 307). This duality of the square’s characteristics is also expressed by the locals:

I.⁵ Olga’s Square, I would characterize it as a social space of gathering, a place, where different social groups of this world coexist: immigrants, drug addicts, anarchists, what we call “divergent” (...). [The square] remains a point of gathering in the outer space for different cultures and people.

(woman, ~25 y/o)

5.2 Commercial discourse

A number of restaurants, cafeterias, shops, private offices and institutions exist around Olga’s Square. Their signs often try to capture the attention of the passers-by either through their visual dominance or through the provocation of mental and cultural associations that are considered to be appealing to the public.⁶ Although these signs account for approximately 22% of the data (Table 1), it should be borne in mind that commercial discourse is essentially ranked as second, competing thus with the transgressive one.

⁵ The majority of the interviews were conducted in Greek.

⁶ See also Schmitz (2018).

Despite the fact that Olga’s Square is an open public space, a part of it is occupied by coffee shops and fast-food restaurants. This is achieved by having special sections carrying specific signs on the top of their construction, such as the name and/or logo or slogan of the corresponding shop. Furthermore, there are signs that are situated on the pavement or on poles, at eye-level height, contributing thus to the shop’s promotion (Figure 7).

All those signs showcase the commercial activity (semiotic scope) by appropriating and privatizing the space; this appropriation in turn partially cancels the square’s public and open character. Due to this fact, issues of territoriality and power relations are raised, since the emphasis is placed on values like supply and demand and not really on the space’s (public) communality.



Figure 7 | Name and slogan of a cafeteria on a pole

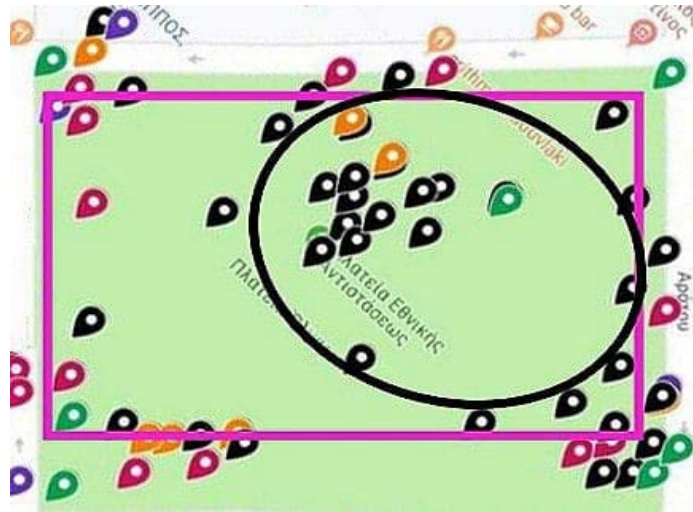


Figure 8 | Network of the commercial (pink) and the transgressive (black) activity.

By comparing the distribution of commercial and transgressive signs in Olga’s Square landscape (Figure 8), it becomes clear that commercial signs are situated at its perimeter, while the square’s center is occupied mostly by transgressive ones. At the same time, the latter make a noticeable appearance around the square, in an attempt to inveigh against commerciality.

Commercial and transgressive signs seem to be involved in a competitive dialogue, through which they try to control parts of the public urban space. The coexistence of these discourses undoubtedly confirms and serves as an indicator of the presence and the vivaciousness of different local groups. Still, it does not cease to be an expression of the social, political and economic power relations that prevail over the square.

5.3 *Infrastructural discourse*

Infrastructural discourse is present at Olga's Square (9.2%), without however dominating over the discourse types discussed above (i.e. transgressive & commercial). The infrastructural signs are under the auspices of the municipality and they play a significant role in the functionality of public infrastructure and the safety of the citizens.

Inscriptions of infrastructural signs are situated only where it is considered to be necessary. Most of them indicate facilities only to be used e.g. by technical staff and are basically related to the maintenance of the municipal infrastructure (e.g. electricity signs). Historical inscriptions⁷ can fall within infrastructural discourse, since they are situated on historical monuments, which are managed by the municipality.

5.4 *Regulatory discourse*

Regulatory discourse resembles infrastructural discourse, though the first one is the least displayed type (5.2%). Most of the regulatory signs in Olga's Square refer to vehicular traffic and are therefore mostly found at the square's perimeter, so that the road traffic may be managed efficiently. Regulatory discourse encompasses traffic lights, prohibitory traffic signs, signs indicating the allowed parking areas and other similar ones (Figure 9).



Figure 9 | Ensemble of regulatory signs

6 Languages across discourse types

The tables below depict the distribution of primary and secondary⁸ languages across each discourse type. By examining the associations among languages and discourses, possible tendencies or patterns of language use, that may be based on specific purposes, ambitions and/or estimations, are detected.

⁷ Some researchers (e.g. Papen 2012) regard such signs as belonging to a historical discourse of a LL. In this project no historic discourse is adopted, though the diachronic aspect of historic signs is always taken into account.

⁸ The languages that are not that prominent due to the visual hierarchy created by the position of different languages on multilingual signs, are mentioned here as 'secondary' languages.

Discourse	<i>Transgressive</i>	<i>Commercial</i>	<i>Infrastructural</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>
Language				
Greek	42	7	8	2
English	24	9	-	1
Spanish	1	-	-	-
Indeterminate	5	-	1	3
Total: 103 monolingual signs	72	16	9	6

Table 2 | Language distribution according to discourse type regarding monolingual signs

It is observed that about 70% of the monolingual signs fall within transgressive discourse. More than half of these (monolingual transgressive signs) use the Greek language (e.g. Figure 10). A similar distribution is again observed in the multilingual transgressive signs (Table 3a)⁹. It could therefore be argued that transgressive signs function as indicators of the local people frequenting the square.

English is the most common foreign language, which is to be found both in monolingual and in multilingual transgressive signs (Table 2: approx. 33%, Table 3a-b: 45%). The incorporation of English elements into transgressive inscriptions can be closely related with hip-hop music (and youth culture¹⁰), as well as with the support of minority population groups, such as immigrants and Romani people that frequent the square (Figures 11, 12).

Discourse	<i>Transgressive</i>	<i>Commercial</i>	<i>Infrastructural</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>
Language				
Greek	25	13	7	-
English	5	3	-	-
Italian	-	2	-	-
Spanish	-	1	-	-
French	-	1	-	-
German	-	1		
Indeterminate	10	1	-	2
Total: 71 multilingual signs	40	22	7	2

Table 3a | Distribution of primary languages on multilingual signs according to discourse type

⁹ Table 3a presents that 56% of the multilingual signs are transgressive. More than half of these make use of Greek.

¹⁰ See for example: Iordanidou & Androutsopoulos (2001).



Figure 10 | Transgressive sign in Greek

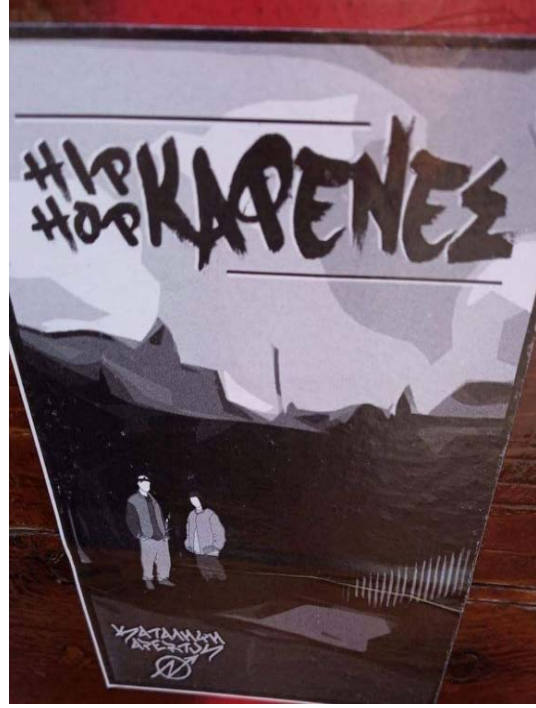


Figure 11 | Transgressive sign in Greek & English

Discourse	<i>Transgressive</i>	<i>Commercial</i>	<i>Infrastructural</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>
Language				
Greek	7	3	-	-
English	13	11	7	-
Italian	-	4	-	-
German	2	-	-	-
French	1	2	-	-
Spanish	-	1	-	-
Turkish	-	1	-	-
Indeterminate	17	-	-	2
Total: 71 signs	40	22	7	2

Table 3b | Distribution of secondary languages on multilingual signs according to discourse type



Figure 12 | Transgressive English sign in the center of the square

The element of locality can be further attributed to the monolingual and multilingual signs of the infrastructural discourse (Table 2, 3a); Greek is again the dominant language. The signs serving public orientation use primarily the official and local language, while some of them use also transliterated Greek (i.e. Greek with Roman script) or (standard) English (Figure 13) as auxiliary code.



Figure 13 | Infrastructural sign in standard & transliterated Greek

Commercial signs show a preference to multilingualism (Table 3a, 3b), though without excluding the local, official language. Greek and English seem to compete, with the former dominating on multilingual commercial signs (Table 3a: 59%) and the latter dominating on monolingual ones (Table 2: 56%). However, apart from the prominent display of Greek and English on multilingual commercial signs, various other foreign languages also emerge. Mainly this is observed on signs that belong to the gastronomy sector using languages such as Italian, French and Spanish. Such languages are often intertwined with specific connotations¹¹; French, for example, implies elegance, finesse and kind treatment, while English chiefly symbolizes modernity.

In the present study, the French word '*papillon*' (Figure 14), which actually means 'butterfly', here forms an inaccurate translation of the Greek word 'bow-tie'¹². It is employed so that the elegance and the good manners associated with French culture are imparted to the cafeteria. The use of the brand name '*la plaza*' for a cafeteria, is an attempt to frame Olga's Square in a 'fresh' and innovative way for marketing reasons, since the Spanish translation is not frequently used in Greece. '*Saloon*' (Figure 15) defines itself as an American bar-restaurant¹³; its logo, showing wheels, stars and tattoos indeed reminds us of the old Wild West. The depiction of a burger and a pizza on the store's street advertisement further links it with other American dietary customs such as junk and/or modern fast-food habits.

¹¹ See also Nikolaou 2017, Thurlow & Jaworski 2011.

¹² This is evidenced by the logo of the cafeteria shown in Figure 16 and depicting a bow-tie.

¹³ <https://www.patrasevents.gr/article/195323-saloon-square-garden-american-restaurant-bar-beergarden> (last accessed on 28/04/2020).



Figure 14 | Commercial sign in French & English

Different estimations or expectations give rise to the usage of different languages and stylistic choices. For instance, a large part of the message in Figure 16 is written in Greek, although it depicts different styles of the Greek language. The most prominent one is a sui-generis, rather unsuccessful use of Hellenistic Greek, which seeks to imply the element of Greek history and tradition. At the same time, part of the message also uses standard English along with transliterated¹⁴ English and French in order to retain their desired image of keeping up with modern times. Additionally, the same fast-food restaurant uses Turkish (Figure 17: “Sis Tabok”¹⁵) in an attempt to place emphasis on the authenticity of the provided products. In this particular case, it is the translanguaging among registers, styles and dialects that unveils various aspects of how languages are socially perceived and employed in order to express people’s needs and preferences.



Figure 15 | Commercial English sign with visual elements corresponding to American style

¹⁴ This can function as a further confirmation of the Greek population’s numerical majority at Olga’s Square.

¹⁵ Misspelled form instead of “Şiş tavuk”



Figures 16-17 | Commercial signs with Greek, Hellenistic Greek, English, transliterated English, transliterated French and Turkish

16 | “Coming soon – After the triumph of the magnificent production by the Metro-Goldwin-Mayer for 6 consecutive months – Pies, club sandwich, crepes” – Color film”.

17 | “A sublime CinemaScope – Specialty! Special şis tavuk (chicken)! – Today – Canopy pie (with lots of filling!) – Received hymn of praise by all film critics – City chophouse”.

Lastly, regulatory signs often use indexes, symbols or icons, i.e. pictorial signs/elements, along with a spoken language. Therefore, they can sometimes coincide with the traffic code. Particularly concerning Olga’s Square, the languages used in regulatory signs are mostly Greek and English (Figure 18).



Figure 18 | Regulatory sign for traffic code

7 Materials

Material expression carries connotational features which, drawing on social and cultural viewpoints, can be interpreted in various ways (Kress & van Leeuwen 1998: 231). It is crucial therefore to take a look at how the landscape of Olga's Square is shaped and affected by the materials in use. This project's findings demonstrate that the signs of Olga's Square are manufactured using a wide range of materials, though spray and paper were the most frequently used (Table 4).

Materials	<i>paper</i>	<i>marker</i>	<i>spray</i>	<i>fabric</i>	<i>plastic</i>	<i>metal</i>	<i>marble</i>	<i>indeterminate</i>
Discourse								
transgressive	28	29	49	-	3	-	-	2
commercial	3	-	-	10	24	1	-	-
infrastructural	4	-	-	-	2	6	4	-
regulatory	-	-	-	-	1	8	-	-
Total: 174 signs	35	29	49	10	30	15	4	2

Table 4 | Distribution of materials according to discourse type

Spray (paint), markers and paper are materials highly related to transgressive discourse. The factors that facilitate their use seem to have a financial, political and social basis. More specifically, these materials are considered to be low-priced and as a result, accessing them is easy for the general public. Since unauthorized activities that inscribe public space raise legal issues, most of the transgressive signs have to be created in a rush and away from the public eye. The light weight of such materials as well as their easy transfer contribute to this.

In contrast, most of the commercial signs are made with plastic and (printed) fabric. As materials, these are more expensive and their production is particularly time-consuming since it consists of many stages (design, printing, installation, etc.). However, plastic and fabric endure longer and as such, their materiality enables the commercial signs to serve efficiently the commercial tasks (e.g. constantly promoting relevant messages). The size and the weight of commercial signs contribute further to the enforcement of the commercial discourse on the space: durable, long-lasting commercial signs inscribe unceasingly the public space of Olga's Square for the purposes of profit.

Infrastructural discourse uses a variety of materials with metal being the predominant one. Most of the metal facilities/constructions are owned and managed by the municipality. The four paper infrastructural signs, that are glued on municipal constructions, have a temporary character, while the other four made of marble are associated with a commemorative aspect (neoclassical buildings and statues). Generally, the material of marble was and still is a particularly preferable one for monuments, primarily due to its durability and resistance but also due to its purity and tone of luxury.

Metal is the material also used in the creation of the majority of the regulatory signs originating again from municipal authorities. As it turns out, the discourses associated with state authorities (i.e. infrastructural & regulatory) both employ the same material (i.e. metal). Considering that signs are motivated to a certain degree (Kress & van Leeuwen 1998: 240), the connection between these discourses and the choice of this particular material could be attributable to the characteristics of metal. Metal is a solid and hard material. These elements index strength and power, i.e. features that are often used conceptually for characterizing a functional state apparatus.

8 Concluding Remarks

The examination of Olga's Square from three different semiotic perspectives (i.e. discourse, language, material) has revealed the close interrelation of the space's heterogeneous features and the community present in that space. The analysis of the data enabled the revelation of the interconnections among certain semiotic and linguistic elements with specific population groups and communities of the space under investigation.

In particular, transgressive discourse has the strongest presence in the space and is associated with the space's communal character. On the other hand, commercial discourse emerges as a 'competitor'; commercial signs (set by entrepreneurs and authorized by the state) convert a part of the square, which is ipso facto a free public space, into a space of financial profit.

At a linguistic level, the analysis revealed that the official monolingualism of Patras city does not correspond to the sociolinguistic reality of the space under investigation. Specifically, the presence of numerous languages (inter alia, French, Turkish, Spanish, etc.) was indicated not only via pure linguistic features/practices in signs (e.g. stylistic variation, transliteration, etc.), but also through the existence of different ethnic groups of people that frequent the square (ethnographic part).

The material aspect of the signs situated at the space confirms this diversity. Each discourse tends to use specific materials for displaying its messages. Transgressivity is expressed primarily by means of cheap and non-durable materials, while commercial discourse shows a preference for costly, highly processed and long-lasting materials. In the same vein, the two discourses related to the official authorities, i.e. infrastructural and regulatory, are orientated towards materials conveying meanings such as strength and potency, which are indicative of the power of state. The above can certainly be associated with the way that each discourse chooses to signify its control over the space via its representatives.

The concept of public space is frequently contested, as various social forces are competing for hegemony over an area. Quite often, the use of public spaces is promoted in the name of the support of the economy. However, public spaces acquire their meaning through communality and sociability, not only during "normal" times, but also in periods of crisis. The continuous exploration and interpretation of a space's social construction and meaning arises as a necessary, since multiple semiotic forces influence the dynamics of a space. Olga's square specifically may be viewed as a public, unified whole; nevertheless,

it is a space which comprises semiotically divided and demarcated areas that are undergoing a constant conflictual process of construction and transformation.

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