

# Challenging the monolingual nature of a micro context: A case study of linguistic landscape in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## ABSTRACT

Investigating a corpus containing 241 images of signage, this article focuses on the linguistic landscape of a small town called Sanski Most in north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using the framework developed by Koskinen (2012), the study was carried out in a micro context researching linguistic landscape in attempt to detect the presence of multilingualism and translation in the mentioned area. The data was analysed to determine the presence of different languages in written form and the translation of commercial and public display signs. The findings indicate that traces of multilingualism in written form can be seen through the presence of different languages, but that traces of translation are very limited. The results show that Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, German, French, Italian, Arabic, Turkish, Latin, Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian, Danish, Albanian, and Chinese were all present in this area. The results also show that the translation in public signage in this area tends to be rather weak and that only 13 signs displayed translation.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, public signage, multilingualism, translation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Izziv enojezični naravi mikrokonteksta: primer jezikovne krajine mesta Sanski Most v Bosni in Hercegovini

### IZVLEČEK

Pričujoči prispevek se z raziskavo korpusa 241 fotografij znakov osredotoča na jezikovno krajino manjšega mesta Sanski Most na severozahodu Bosne in Hercegovine. Na podlagi klasifikacije, ki jo je razvila Kaisa Koskinen (2012), je bila v mikrokontekstu izvedena študija jezikovne krajine, katere namen je bil zaznati prisotnost večjezičnosti in prevajanja na omenjenem območju. Z analizo podatkov je bila identificirana prisotnost različnih jezikov v pisni obliki in prevajanje komercialnih in javnih znakov. Izsledki so pokazali, da je mogoče sledove večjezičnosti v pisni obliki zaznati v prisotnosti različnih jezikov na analiziranih znakih, vendar pa je število prevodov nizko. Rezultati pokažejo, da so bili na območju prisotni naslednji jeziki: bosanski/hrvaški/srbski, angleški, nemški, francoski, italijanski, arabski, turški, latinski, nizozemski, španski, slovenski, danski, albanski in kitajski. Rezultati prav tako pokažejo, da je prevajanje znakov na tem področju razmeroma šibko in da se prevod pojavi le na 13 znakih.

**Ključne besede:** jezikovna krajina, javni znaki, večjezičnost, prevajanje, Bosna in Hercegovina

## 1. Introduction

Language is an integral part of our everyday lives and the ability to use it presents one of the most fascinating abilities human beings possess. Language is our tool for communicating, for sharing thoughts, ideas, for expressing our feelings, for understanding the world, for maintaining relationships, and simply for everyday living. Nowadays it has become almost essential to be familiar with at least one foreign language. Or, as Jarc (2020, 241) puts it: “Globalisation has produced not only denser, but also linguistically more complex communication networks. Multilingual interactions are increasingly becoming part of the everyday routines of millions of people”. Languages have spread all around the globe and are particularly visible in urban centres. As Cronin suggests “cities are stories they are the accumulation of narratives, photos, historical documents, symbolic sites and anecdotes that together create a sense of place. But each city will tell different stories according to the languages in which these stories are told” (Simon 2021, 24). However, languages are present also elsewhere: “language does not just happen against an urban backdrop, it is part of the city, the barber shop, the market garden, the networks of buying and selling” (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015, 33).

This paper focuses on the presence of multilingualism and translation in written form in public signage in a micro context in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The linguistic landscape of a town called Sanski Most was observed and for the purpose of this article a corpus of 241 images was analysed in order to answer the questions to what degree multilingualism is present in signs in Sanski Most, what languages can be seen in public signs and to what extent commercial and public display signs are translated.

### 1.1 Linguistic landscapes

Linguistic landscape research usually attempts to identify the evidence of multilingualism in a certain environmental context. If translation can be viewed as a “wide category of language exchange that includes translanguaging, multilingual artistic projects, political activism mediating across global movements, projects of renaming that symbolically territorialize public space, and the shifts in individual identity that are forms of self-translation” (Simon 2021, 16), then translation may become the focus of linguistic landscape research. In fact, linguistic landscapes have emerged as an area of study that has the potential to investigate both multilingualism and translation. According to Michael Cronin (2006), the city presents a space for translation because the multilingual and multi-ethnic space that is nowadays encountered in urban settings is first and foremost a translation space. As Sherry Simon writes: “Urban

languages do not simply coexist: they connect, they enter into networks. This means that cities are not only multilingual – they are translational. Translation tells which languages count, how they occupy the territory and how they participate in the discussions of the public sphere” (Simon 2021, 15).

In 1997 the Canadian researchers Landry and Bourhis introduced the concept of linguistic landscape in the context of language planning and ethnolinguistic vitality. According to this definition, which captures the essence of linguistic landscapes, the term “refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 23). They further explain that “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government building combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration” (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 25).

A public sign is described as “...a notice on public display that gives information or instruction in a written or symbolic form” (Backhaus 2007, 4). Researchers distinguish between top-down and bottom-up public signs, where top-down public signs refer to official signs placed by the government or related institutions, and the bottom-up signs refer to nonofficial signs put there by commercial enterprises or by private organizations or persons (Gorter 2006, 3). Private signs are created, designed, and placed by civilians or ordinary people and are usually billboards for shops, cafés, restaurants, or other similar service providers. Private signs tend to be a valuable lens into the socio-economic, ethnolinguistic, and sociolinguistic situation of an area, because they are placed by the civilians of a certain place (Tankosić and Litzenberg 2021, 9). Public signs are placed by local or national governments and include road signs, place and street names, inscriptions on government buildings such as ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations, and public parks (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 26). Public signs generally display the content and language in accordance to government expectations and/or regulations, while private signs tend to be more flexible when it comes to linguistic representations (Tankosić and Litzenberg 2021, 9).

In their study Landry and Bourhis investigated language use in public spaces in Quebec, Canada, and have interpreted their results with regard to language maintenance in a multilingual setting, connecting the linguistic landscape with the theoretical framework of ethnolinguistic vitality. They concluded that “the linguistic landscape is a sociolinguistic factor distinct from other types of language contacts in multilingual settings” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, 45), and that areas with multilingual and multicultural linguistic landscape provide a good resource for measuring the ethnolinguistic vitality of language groups.

Two other researchers, Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter, used the linguistic landscape approach for the study of multilingualism and minority languages; they focused on “the use of the minority language (Basque or Frisian), the state language (Spanish or Dutch) and English as an international language on language signs” (Cenoz and Gorter 2006, 67). In their study they analysed over 975 pictures of language signs. Their findings pointed towards the dominance of the majority languages in public signs. But the results also showed the strong presence of minority languages in public signs, reflecting the wish to preserve them. This study also revealed the informative and symbolic nature of multilingual signage: not only were the signs in different languages used to indicate the language to be used in communication at shops and other businesses, they also reflected the relative power of the different languages (Cenoz and Gorter 2006, 78). For example, the use of Basque is not just informative, but it is also symbolic because it emphasizes feeling of Basque as a symbol of identity. This study confirms that a language can directly contribute to the positive social identity of ethnolinguistic groups (see also Bourhis 1997).

Israeli researchers (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006) used linguistic landscape research in combination with sociolinguistic approaches. Their research compared patterns of linguistic landscape in a number of Israeli cities and small towns, and in East Jerusalem. The study focused on the degree of visibility of private and public signs in the three languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English. Their findings suggest that linguistic landscapes are symbolic constructions of public space that are context-dependent. This means that the linguistic choice in signage is dependent on three different factors; *rational considerations* focusing on the attractiveness of a sign to the public, *presentations of self* aiming at expressing one's of identity through signs, and *power relations* which reflect sociopolitical forces and their relevant interests in signage.

And finally, Kaisa Koskinen (2012) studied linguistic landscapes from the perspective of translation studies. Koskinen analysed the presence of translation on public signage in Hervanta, Tampere, Finland. Koskinen observed 22 cases of translated signage, focusing not only on which signs are translated but also on how translations are produced in the increasingly multilingual town of Tampere. Koskinen also tested whether studying linguistic landscapes from a translation studies perspective would be possible. She concluded that even a small amount of data (22 cases) could provide diverse material to work with, and that in the case of Hervanta, the most multicultural and multilingual area within the City of Tampere, translational assimilation is practiced by using Finnish side by side with the other languages in signage and thus “supporting the immigrants’ languages of origin without excluding the speakers of the dominant language” (Koskinen 2012, 90).

Linguistic landscape research has also been done in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first study focused on the city of Mostar, where the linguistic landscape was studied in order to find out to which extent it reflected the languages spoken by the speech community of this city. Grbavac (2013) concluded that “linguistic landscape in Mostar has its specific traits influenced by ethnolinguistic composition, geographical distribution, power relations, prestige, symbolic value, vitality and literacy” (Grbavac 2013, 501). More research in the field of linguistic landscapes was conducted in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, and it focused on the presence of Bosnian, Serbian and English language on public signs in the main streets of these two cities. Lay (2015) hypothesized that the linguistic majority would match the ethnic majority in both cities, and that English would appear frequently in advertisements. The results showed that English is the second-most ubiquitous language in both streets, after Bosnian, and that Serbian was rarely found in signage in either street.

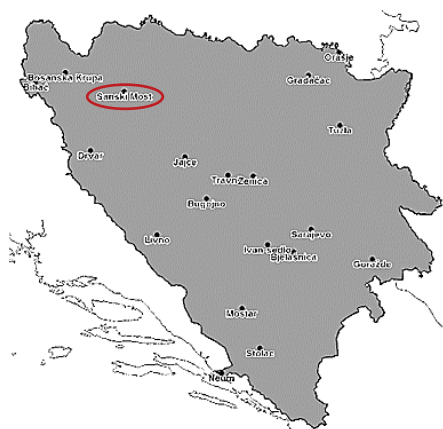
The linguistic landscapes research in Bosnia and Herzegovina was thus conducted in the capital of Sarajevo and bigger cities like Mostar and Banja Luka. In this article, however, we report on research conducted in a smaller urban community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If the previous studies have shown that the capital and bigger cities do have traces of multilingualism and translation in the public signage, a question arises as to whether the size of a settlement or the community impacts the multilingualism present in public signage. In big cities multilingualism may be taken for granted, and it is less known whether the same can be expected in small towns. This article will therefore address the following questions: What is the linguistic landscape of a smaller town? Is it monolingual or do traces of multilingualism and translation appear in its public signs? And if so, in what form? The study reported in this article will shed light on the presence of multilingualism and translation in a micro context within the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Multilingualism is both an individual and a social phenomenon. As Cenoz puts it: “It can be considered as an ability of an individual, or it can refer to the use of languages in society” (Cenoz 2013, 5). In this study I am interested in the latter, in particular in the contexts, circumstances, order, manner and routines of the use of different languages in a smaller urban centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the purposes of this paper, only those instances of multilingualism that manifest themselves as the presence of written content in different languages in the same environmental context were investigated.

## 2. Research design

The focus of this research was to detect multilingualism and translation in public signs in the town of Sanski Most in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sanski Most is located in

the north-western part of Bosnia and Herzegovina and about 300 kilometres north-west from the capital Sarajevo. This place is known for its natural sites, such as caves and waterfalls, and the fact that it is one of the few places lying on nine rivers. The town has its own a local government, a hospital, local television and radio station, non-governmental organizations, sports clubs (football, handball, judo), seven primary schools and four secondary schools, two kindergartens, multiple supermarkets, a senior citizens retirement homes and similar. However, due to its relatively small size Sanski Most does not have public transport, universities, theatres or museums. As such it could be described as a typical small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



**Figure 1.** Bosnia and Herzegovina map indicating the position of Sanski Most.<sup>1</sup>

As with other settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sanski Most has three official languages that are defined in the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ustav Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine), which states the following in Amendment 29:

- (1) The official languages of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are: Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Official alphabets are Latin and Cyrillic alphabet.
- (2) Other languages can be used as a means of communication and teaching.<sup>2</sup>

The official languages of Bosnia and Herzegovina are observed as one language and this research does not focus on the presence of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian languages separately, but on the presence of other/additional languages in the area.

1 Source of the image - Federalni Hidrometeorološki Zavod Bosne i Hercegovine. Sanski Most was marked on the image by the author of the article.

2 Translation by the author of the article.

## 2.1 Research questions

The study aimed to shed light on the presence of multilingualism and translation in a micro context and answer the following three research questions.

1. What languages are displayed in the public signage of Sanski Most?
2. To what degree is multilingualism present in the public signage in Sanski Most?
3. To what extent are public signs translated in Sanski Most?

## 2.2 Methodology

The methodology used in the research reported in this article follows the one developed by Koskinen (2012) that was applied in her studies of the linguistic landscape of Hervanta. The data was gathered with field work and then analysed focusing on linguistic and translational features. Collecting photos of public signage was conducted by walking around with a camera and notebook.

The area covered in the field work was the narrow centre of the town, covering Prijedorska Street (the main street), one part of 17. Viteške krajiške brigade Street, the squares Trg Oslobodilaca and Trg Ljiljana (the areas are indicated in Figure 2). This area was selected for the study because it represents the very heart of the town, where most of the coffee shops and stores are located. It is also the part of the town most often visited by foreigners.

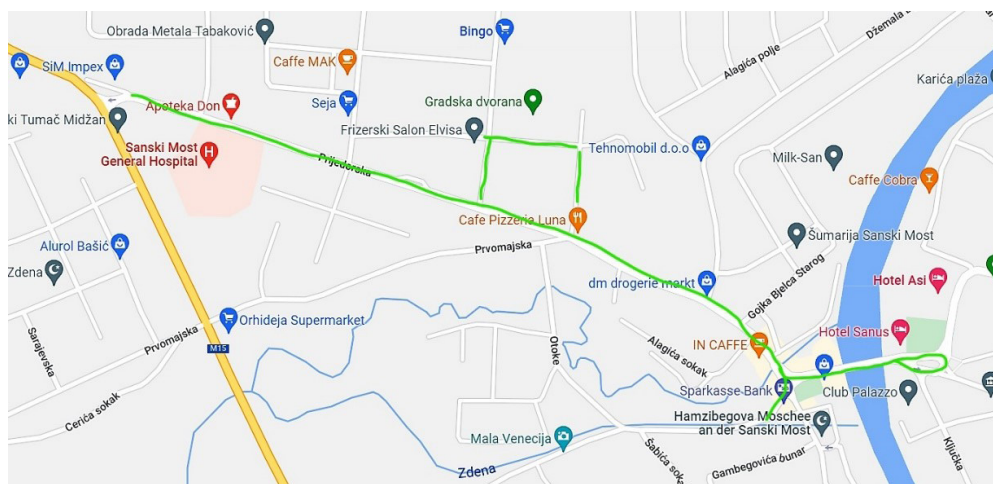
Sanski Most was observed during the summer and autumn of 2022. The summer season was chosen because this is the period when a lot of people visit the town, not only tourists but also people who come from this town but now live abroad (mostly in western Europe) and return for a vacation. In the summer the town thus has thousands more inhabitants than in other seasons, and one can hear people speaking German, Swedish, French, Slovenian, English, Danish, Dutch and other languages, and often also code switching between two languages.

A total of 402 signs were photographed for the purposes of this article. All monolingual and bi/multilingual signs were included systematically. If the same word or phrase appeared more than once I counted each appearance as a separate sign. The next step was to select the signs for the analysis. The following public signs were removed from the analysis:

- signs which were misspelled, because including misspelled signs would add another layer to the research covering the number of misspelled signage and the errors occurring in the displayed content, and that was not the focus of this article,



- signs that contained a proper noun (e.g., a first or second name),
- signs which are on display only for a short period of time (e.g., a poster for some event),
- signs only containing information about the store owners (such as phone numbers, address, web address),
- signs that only contained a brand name (however, signs that contained a brand name and additional text whether monolingual or bi/multilingual were taken into account),
- signs that contained only letters (e.g., M, E, F).



**Figure 2.** Map of Sanski Most indicating the streets observed for the purpose of this article.<sup>3</sup>

After this initial selection, I ended up with 241 public signs that were further analysed. My primary focus was the analysis of the written content, and I did not attempt to detect the linguistic background or discover the origins of the signage.

The occurrences of different languages were counted and the types of language pairs or combinations appearing on the signs were analysed.

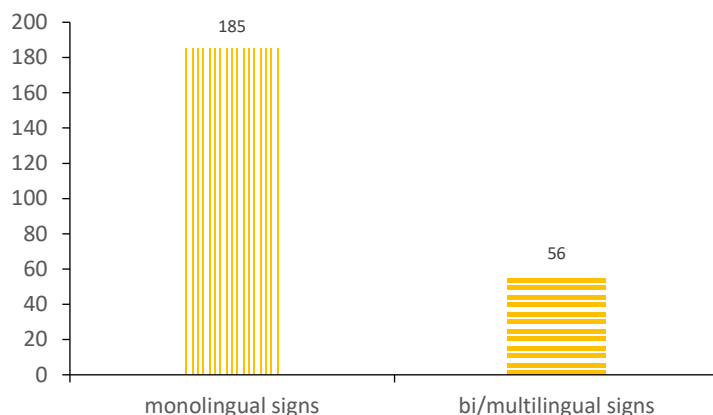
### 3. Results

Among the 241 signs that were analysed, there were 185 monolingual signs and 56 bi/multilingual signs. Monolingual signs are those that display written content in one

3 Source of the image: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Sanski+Most,+Bosnia+and+Herzegovina/>.

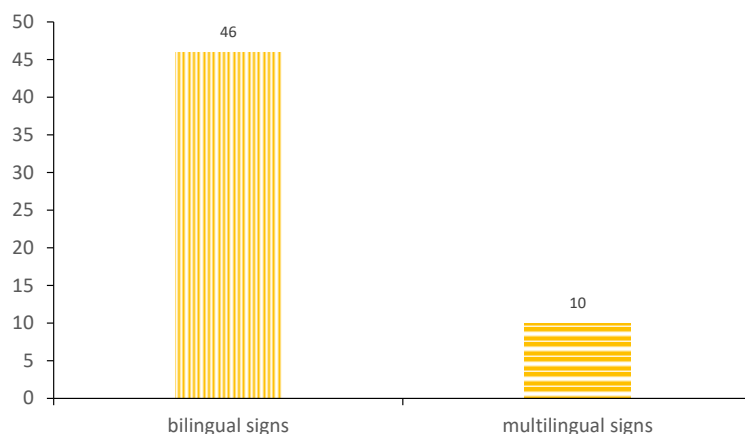


language. Bilingual and multilingual signs are those that displayed written content in more than one language. I have also taken into account those signs which may have contained only one word in some other language, for example, *Express izrada ključeva* (*express* belonging to English and *izrada ključeva* to B/C/S<sup>4</sup> [key manufacturing]). Such signs were categorized as bilingual or multilingual.



**Figure 3.** Number of signs.

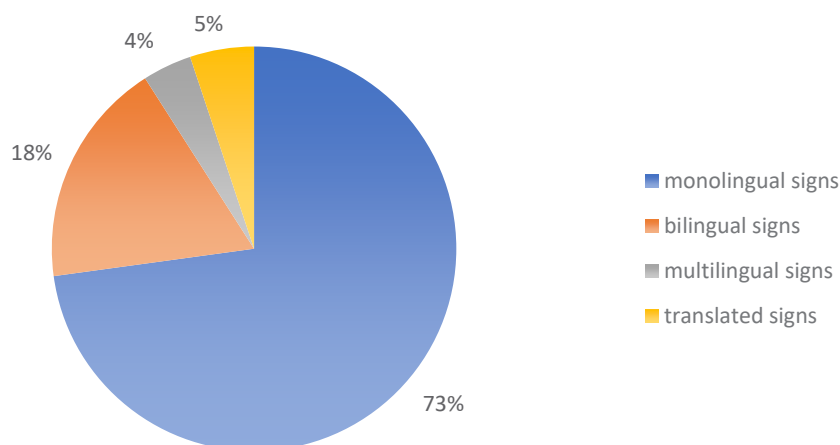
Bi/multilingual signs were further analysed. There were 46 bilingual signs (signs displaying content in two different languages) and 10 multilingual signs (signs displaying content in three or more different languages).



**Figure 4.** Bi/multilingual signs.

4 This abbreviation stands for Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and will be used throughout the article.

Out of the 56 bilingual and multilingual signs only 13 signs contained a translation. The complete breakdown of the signs in percentage terms is shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Breakdown of the signs in percentage terms.

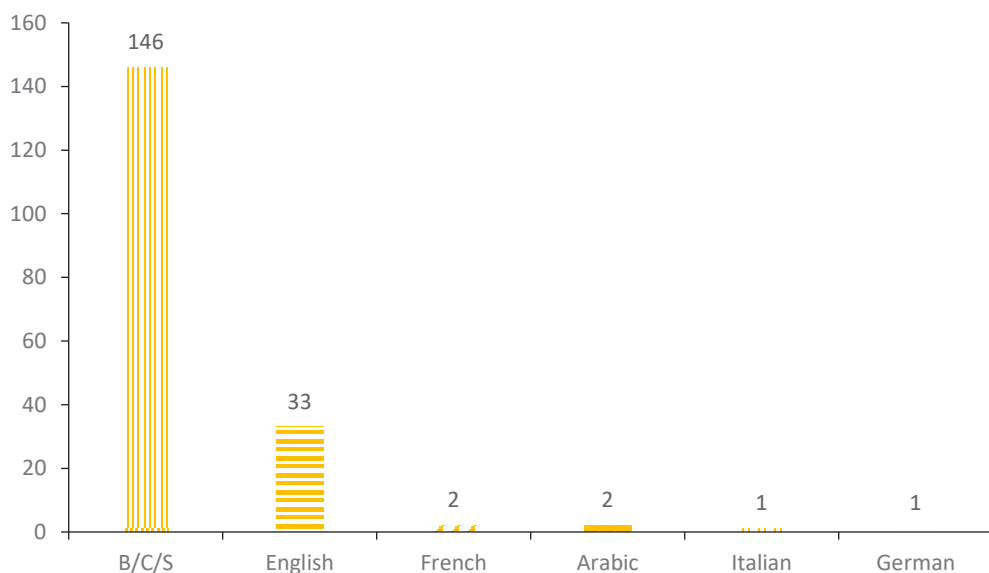
## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Presence of multilingualism

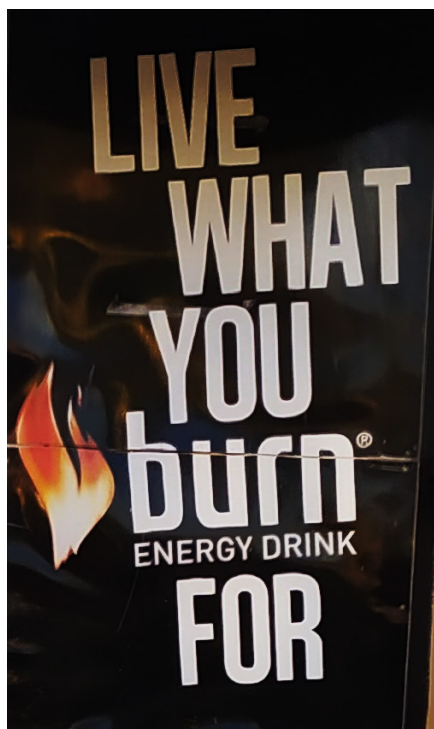
The data gathered and analysed show that there are various languages present in public signs in Sanski Most. The following 14 languages were identified: Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, German, French, Italian, Arabic, Turkish, Latin, Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian, Danish, Albanian, and Chinese. The use of these languages differs in monolingual and bi/multilingual signs.

#### 4.1.1 *Monolingual signs*

The 185 monolingual signs were written in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, French, Arabic, Italian and German. The signs in B/C/S prevail (146, see Figure 8), the second most popular language is English (33, see Figure 7), while signs in other languages are rare – French (2), Arabic (2), Italian (1) and German (1) (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Languages of monolingual signs.



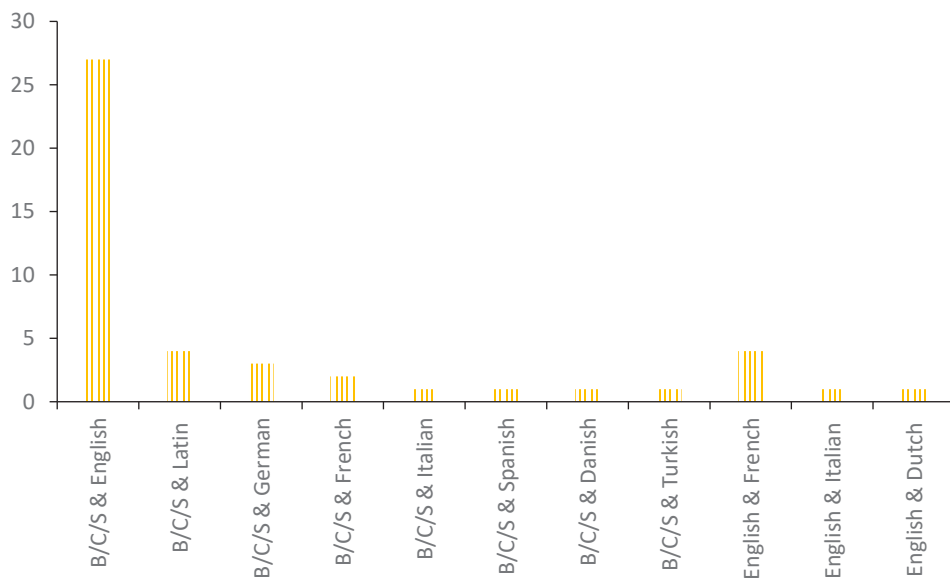
**Figure 7.** A random monolingual sign in English.



**Figure 8.** The sign of the public library in official languages.

#### 4.1.2 Bilingual signs

The 46 bilingual signs were written in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, German, French, Italian, Turkish, Latin, Spanish, Slovenian, Danish. The language combinations were B/C/S & English (27) (see Figure 11), B/C/S & Latin (4), B/C/S & German (3), B/C/S & French (2), B/C/S & Italian (1) (see Figure 10), B/C/S & Spanish (1), B/C/S & Danish (1), B/C/S & Turkish (1), English & French (4), English & Italian (1), English & Dutch (1). The combination of the official languages and English language is the most popular, while other language combinations are much rarer (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Language pairs in bilingual signs.



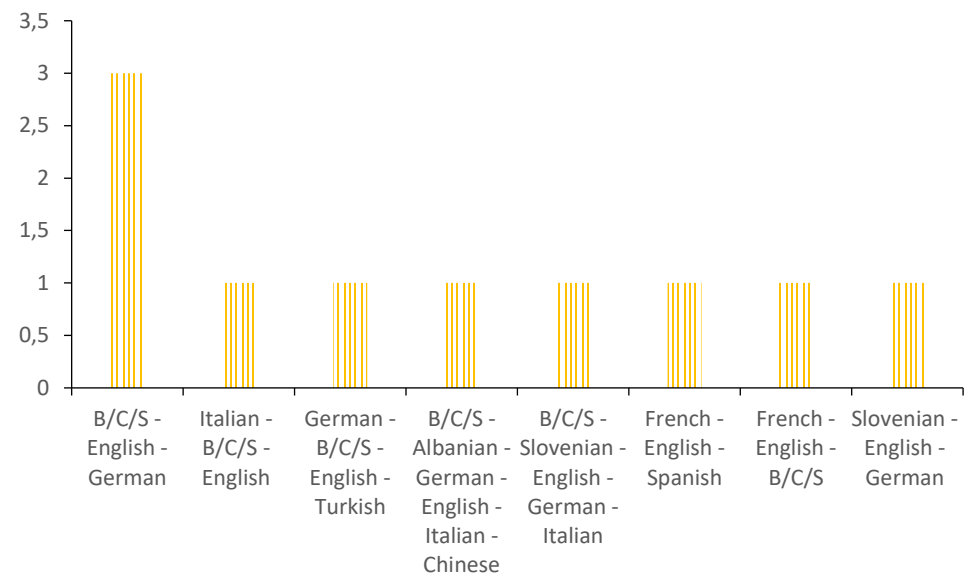
**Figure 10.** A bilingual sign in B/C/S and Italian.



**Figure 11.** A bilingual sign in B/C/S and English.

#### 4.1.3 Multilingual signs

There were only 10 multilingual signs in the corpus, which were written in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, German, French, Italian, Turkish, Spanish, Slovenian, Albanian, Chinese. The language combinations were B/C/S – English – German (3), Italian – B/C/S – English (1), German – B/C/S – English – Turkish (1), B/C/S – Albanian – German – English – Italian – Chinese (1) (see Figure 13), B/C/S – Slovenian – English – German – Italian (1), French – English – Spanish (1), French – English – B/C/S (1), Slovenian – English – German (1) (see Figure 12). The most frequent combination was B/C/S, English and German, which appeared in three signs, while the other combinations appeared only once each (see Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Language pairs of multilingual signs.



**Figure 13.** A multilingual sign.



**Figure 14.** A multilingual sign in German, B/C/S and English.

The results presented in the figures above give a clear answer on what languages are visible in the signs on these streets in Sanski Most. It can be seen that 185 signs were monolingual, 46 were bilingual and 10 were multilingual. Even though some languages appear only once or twice they still form a part of this linguistic landscape. The languages identified in the public signs show the linguistic diversity of signage in this town, but despite this linguistic variety the most frequently found languages on public signs are the official languages, with more than half (60%) of the signs written in B/C/S.

The results also show that there is a presence of both bilingual and multilingual signs in the center of Sanski Most, although they are less frequent (23%) than monolingual ones (77%).

## 4.2 Presence of translation

Translation was detected in the analysed public signs, although it was rare, with only 13 examples (5.39%).

Using the same approach as Koskinen (2012), the source and target languages of the text in the public signs were determined by the visual appearance of the sign. The



language appearing first on the sign was thus considered to be the source language. Moreover, if the words on the sign were vertically aligned rather than horizontally, then the language on the left was considered to be the source language.

In the 13 signs that had translated content, 32 cases of translation were identified. If the same content was translated into multiple languages, every translation was counted separately. For example, if the sign displayed the following content:

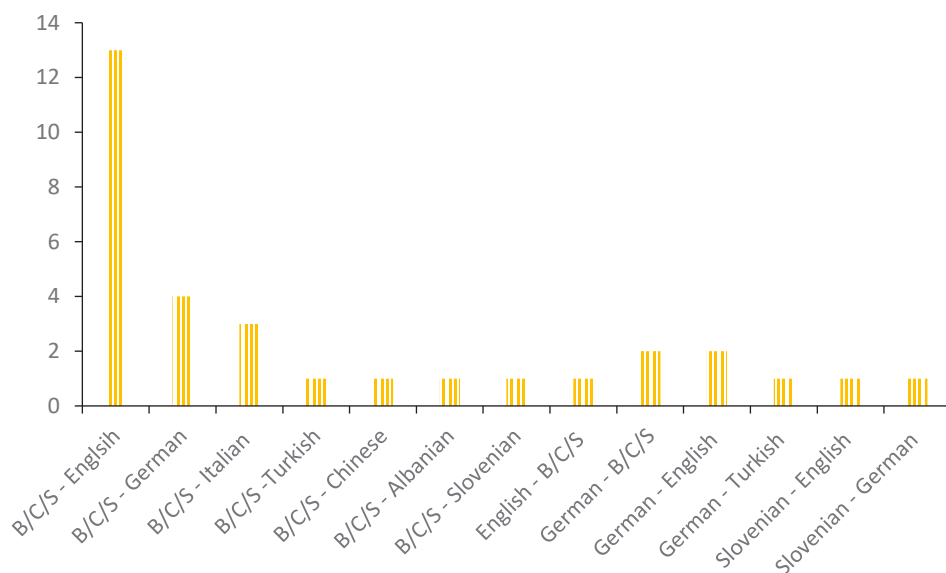
B/C/S: *Mjenjačnica* → English: *Exchange office* → German: *Wechselstube*,

and it was duplicated or appeared three times, it was counted as three separate translations and not just as one. And if we take the same example, it was considered that B/C/S is translated into English and German, not that B/C/S is translated into English and then English into German.

In most cases the source language was B/C/S and the written content was translated into different languages. Two public signs had German as the source, in one instance English was the source language translated into B/C/S, and in one instance Slovenian was the source language translated into English and German. All other translations were from B/C/S into different languages, with English (13) and German (4) being most frequent (see Table 1 and Figure 15).

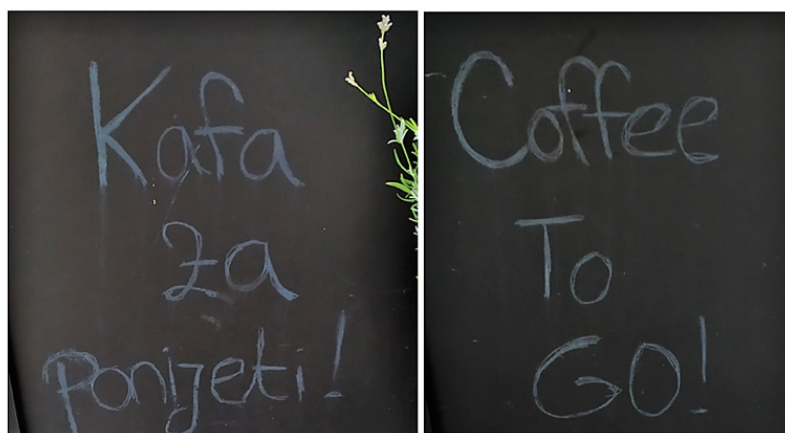
**Table 1.** Number of translations from source to target language.

Source language	Target language	Number of translations
B/C/S	English	13
B/C/S	German	4
B/C/S	Italian	3
B/C/S	Turkish	1
B/C/S	Albanian	1
B/C/S	Chinese	1
B/C/S	Slovenian	1
English	B/C/S	1
German	B/C/S	2
German	English	2
German	Turkish	1
Slovenian	English	1
Slovenian	German	1



**Figure 15.** Translations from source to target language.

Translation is visible in both bilingual and multilingual signs where the same information is displayed in two or more languages in addition to the official ones. There are instances of full sentence translations, as can be seen in Figures 16 and 17, but most of the translations were just single word translations, as shown in Figure 19.



**Figure 16.** Translation from B/C/S into English.



**Figure 17.** A bilingual sign containing translation from B/C/S into Turkish.



**Figure 18.** A sign displaying translation from B/C/S into English and German language and translation from B/C/S into English.



**Figure 19.** Translation of a single word from Slovene into English and German.

The translations on the signs were usually just single word translations similar to the translations in Figures 13, 14 and 19. Out of the 13 signs only three (i.e., 1.24% of all the analysed signs) contained fully translated sentences.

When we reflect on the translations seen in Sanski Most, it is also important to mention that the signs of local institutions such as the hospital or one of the buildings of the local government or a post office department located in the centre of the town did not show any translated public signs. The sign of the tourism office (see Figure 18) did provide partial translations in relation to some important phone numbers, but the actual buildings had no bilingual or multilingual signs.

The translations in public signs not only have informative purposes, but also reveal a relationship between communities, as is the case with translations into Italian and Turkish (see Figures 10 and 17), where the written content shows the friendly and supportive relations between these two countries.

The results of my study show that even in smaller urban communities, such as Sanski Most, there is a certain amount of multilingualism present in public signs, although it is not very common. The town is not limited to the use of the official languages, and it is not completely monolingual: different languages do find their ways into the everyday lives of those who live in Sanski Most, and people are exposed to them.

## 5. Conclusion

In this research I studied the presence of multilingualism and translation in signage in the town of Sanski Most in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a total of 241 images of public signs being analysed.

The results showed that multilingualism and translation were both found in signage in Sanski Most, although monolingual signs in the official languages still dominated. While the majority of the signage was monolingual, with B/C/S prevailing, other foreign languages were also found, with English unsurprisingly being the most frequent among them. Unexpectedly, despite the presence of text in different languages, translated signs were a small minority and even when text was being translated, it was mainly single words or phrases.

In the future other parts of the town could also be studied, and an attempt should be made to discover for whom the translations were intended, why some signs had foreign languages instead of the official languages placed first on the signs, whether the foreign language was used just for decorative reasons, and the reasons why some languages were chosen over others. Moreover, misspelled signs could also be included

and studied further with the aim of detecting the types of errors that appear, which was not done in this article since the misspelled signs were removed from the data. Finally, it would be useful to learn why the signs of important institutions in this area, such as the post office, hospital or local government buildings, were not translated.

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