Prohibition Signage in Public Places: On the Functional Organization of Different Media, Communication Forms, and Text Types

(Excerpt of Journal Article)

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In media linguistics a lot of research has been done on mass media and in this regard increasingly on multimodality, new communication forms and media convergence. The paper's aim is to transfer these more recent insights from the digital or rather online discourse to the texts being heard, seen or even touched at everyday places (like railway stations and market places) and to analyze their "place-bound" mediality. Thereby it is to be discussed both what kind of media (e.g. analog or digital, permanent or temporary) one is to perceive while visiting a place or buying something and what kind of relation is to be found between media like screens or posters, established communication forms like notices or announcements and text types like instruction- and prohibition-signs. The article therefore argues for a broader discussion of mediality and multimodality in media linguistics with reference to the concept of "mediatiza-tion" as a basic feature of very different discourses of everyday life.

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Multimodality and Semiotic Landscapes: Expanding the Perspective

When regarding the examples of prohibition signage in public places given above and below (see step 1 to 3, examples 1 to 21), one theoretical consideration seems to be quite evident: "All texts are multimodal" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1998: 186). Considering modes from a social semiotic point of view (see Kress 2010; van Leeuwen 2005), the layouts, images and writings of texts themselves are already generating a multimodal semiotic landscape. Recently, the approach of social semiotics has led to an increasing number of studies on mass media and the semiotic resources used for "meaning making" (see Jewitt 2009; Thurlow & Mroczek 2011). These resources, like colours, typography, visual shape, gesture, or music, are defined as modes (Kress 2009). With regard to mass media, a lot of research has been done on the relation between multimodality, new communication forms and media convergence (e.g. Bucher et al. 2010; Stöckl 2010; Thurlow & Mroczek 2011; Marx & Schwarz-Friesel 2013). Beyond that, the general assumption of a basic multimodality concerning all kinds of texts (analogue and digital) is increasingly discussed for texts in the public sphere, as well as for the resources being used for different public discourses (like infrastructural or commercial, see Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Papen 2012; Domke 2014): How, for example, public signs, billboards, graffiti and commercial signs are shaping a city's place-making has been examined from different perspectives: with ethnographic (e.g. Papen 2012), sociolinguistic (Kallen 2010; Backhaus 2007), discourse linguistic (Warnke 2011), media-linguistic (Domke 2014) and (geo-) semiotic focus (Scollon & Scollon 2003). Thereby, it is being analyzed more and more in which way communication contributes to one of the crucial questions at present: "How does the social construction of space/place take place?" (see Busse & Warnke 2014).

Refocusing on step 1 to step 3 shows clearly how important the municipal regulatory and infrastructural discourse (Scollen & Scollon 2003) is for public places like railway stations, parks and streets. At the same time the empirical examples illustrate what I have mentioned above: Different semiotic resources are merged to multimodal texts – the prohibitions are composed of colour (white, yellow, red), pictograms, written and

spoken language, sounds, different languages, using signs, posters, and mobile signs amongst others. This kind of semiotic and media diversity can be considered as one of the main reasons for establishing the semiotic landscape approach as a more qualitative, broader perspective compared to the linguistic landscape approach.

The study of linguistic landscapes, the scope of which is famously defined by Landry & Bourhis (1997: 25), has led to mostly quantitative insights into multilingual societies and the meaning and power of language use in specific territories. "The presence and dominance of one language over others" (Jaworski & Thurlow 2010b: 10) in public places, such as railway stations, market squares and different city quarters, has since been investigated in several cities and countries, like Tokyo (Backhaus 2007) and Ireland (Kallen 2010). Semiotic landscape studies, however, aim at analyzing the linguistic landscape in a broader sense, and include not only different semiotic resources but also the meaning making through the text's "locatedness" and therefore social and communicative construction of space/place.

In spite of expanding the perspective, one aspect of the public communication showed above and below (see examples 1 to 21) has been largely ignored in most of the semiotic landscape studies mentioned so far: A city's semiotic landscape is not only visible (see step 2 and below) but also audible (see or rather hear step 1) and perceptible in a tactile manner (see step 2 and below). This links mainly to the infrastructural or "empractical" (Bühler 1982; Domke 2014) discourse whose functionality for different places and different „vehicular units and participation units" (Goffman [1971]2010: 5) is reflected in the increasing diversity of "communication forms" (see Domke 2014; Holly 2011) in public places. Among these communicative practices are billboards, stickers, announcements, display panels, guidance systems, public signs, notices, QR-codes, semiotic and physical barriers (see Domke 2014). Therefore differentiation has to be discussed not only for semiotic resources but also for the modes of perception, resulting from both the orientation on different addressees and the selection of different media and materiality for different places and textual functions.

The focus of semiotic landscape studies on mainly visual communication (e.g. Thurlow & Jaworski 2011; Cook 2013) has also been criticised by Redder & Scarvaglieri (2013) and Scarvaglieri et al. (2013). With reference to the research done so far, they suggest an approach of "Linguistic Soundscaping" (Pappenhagen et al. 2013: 132ff.), which aims at analyzing the discursive use of language(s) in public spaces. The extension to audible communication in cities is important in order to understand the language's, or rather languages', contribution to generate different social spaces. Nevertheless linguistic sound-scaping still excludes different modes of perception in general and likewise the differentiation of the media being used. Hence the functional use of visible, audible and/or tactile communication does not find its way into the analytical focus.

My aim is to bridge the gap between a city's diversity of communication perceivable in public on the one hand, and possible linguistic foci and questions on the other hand, as well as highlighting the media and material functionality given in a city's public texts. Using the options of an online-journal, the empirical examples fulfil two functions: Firstly, they are meant to illustrate and 're-build' the medial diversity discussed above. Secondly, they serve as an argument for semiotic and medial diversity, and therefore their significance in a broader analytical perspective including language and media use in a major part of everyday life: the public

space. Accordingly, this paper deals with two key issues: it aims to elaborate and illustrate the semiotic, medial and material differentiation of public communication by the example of prohibition signage, and to interpret it as a contribution to the discussion on the increasing "mediatization" (Krotz 2007) of all parts of our lives. Before highlighting the relation between textual function types and communication forms, some theoretical premises on "prohibitions," "texts," and "communication forms" are to be given. The empirical basis for all considerations presented in this animated text consists of a corpus of 2,500 photographs and recordings. They were collected walking along market squares, streets, railway stations and airports in mostly German cities (see Domke 2014).

Prohibition Texts as a Part of Public Communication

To focus on prohibitions in public places means to analyse one major part of the regulatory discourse (see Scollon & Scollon 2003; also Kallen 2010) which in terms of Bühler (1982) may also be defined as empractical texts. Empractical speech or writings are context-embedded and aim at guiding and supporting the reader/listener to achieve his actual goal of finding a place or building. As defined by the anthropologist Augé (1994), these texts serve as public "instruction manuals" for unfamiliar places. Place-bound "communication forms" (see Domke 2013, 2014, 2010; Holly 2011), which are potentially perceivable by everybody on location, ascribe specific characteristics to 'their' place, like being walkable or drivable, or public vs. private. Prohibition signage as a certain text type is meant to regulate for example the access to buildings and places, possible activities and the use of market squares and playgrounds. With reference to de Certeau's (1988) famous distinction between place/space (see also Hubbard & Kitchin 2010), prohibitions in public places generate specific "social spaces with specific features" (see Domke 2014). Like any other form of public communication, such as private notices, political texts, commercial billboards or verbal art, they contribute to the social construction of space (see also Jaworski & Thurlow 2011; Döring & Thielmann 2008; Rau 2014, Winderlich 2005). Thereby, "prohibition" is meant to be regarded in a broader sense, which includes not only justiciable prohibitions but also warnings, instructions and requests. "Text" is to be considered as a perceivable functional unit consisting of all semiotic resources which are used to fulfil a communicative action. This includes verbal and non-verbal prohibitions, such as "semiotic and physical barriers" (Schmauks 2002), as well. To find functionality in the diversity given means to examine the different modes of perception, as well as the media and materiality being used. This is the only way to get into focus which kind of prohibition is visible, audible and/or tactile?

With reference to the well-established concept of "communication forms" (see Holly 2011), the distinctions between media, mode of perception, semiotic resources and functional use can be elaborated. Therefore, prohibition signage can be characterised as place-bound, visually, audibly or tactually perceivable, further by means of fixed (see above, example 16) or moveable media (see step 2, example 7) with different perceptual spaces, for example overhead (see step 2, example 13) or at eye level (see below, example 20), as well as by limitations through the media material chosen. In communication forms, like signs (see step 2, example 14), notices (see step 2, example 6) and barriers (see step 2, example 5), we find semiotic resources like written language, pictograms,

colour-using and media material indicating durability or temporary communication. Based on distinctive features such as these it can be examined which communication form correlates to which textual function. For example: time-bound prohibitions on streets are expressed by means of visible and tactile barriers or moveable signs, and permanent valid warnings at railway stations are realised by means of fixed and visible signs. Thus, it seems to be clear that focusing on media and materiality offers new and further insights into understanding the function and structure of a city's semiotic landscapes.

Functional Organization of Media, Materiality and Perception

Returning to this contribution's beginning (see example 1), we regard prohibition signs expected in public regulatory discourse. By means of pictograms, bathing in the sun, playing and bicycling are forbidden. The complex sign is attached to the bottom of a display case at the entrance of a park in Vienna and can thus be considered as its 'house rules'. As in the examples 14 in Step 2 and the "Keep entry clear"-Sign on this page (see example 16), the material of the media

chosen seems to be robust. The weather-proof materiality and the fixation goes along with both the texts' permanent visibility and permanent validity. The prohibitions and warnings in the examples given are put up by official institutions as well as private owners as "principles" in terms of Goffman (1981). The perceptual space of the communication form "sign" must be considered as limited by the selection of specific media material. Therefore, the ability to read such signs requires the spatial and physical coordination (see Haddington et al. 2013 for interactional coordination) of multiple recipients at the same time.

Stickers (see above, example 17) are often visible as permanent. They are used in public places not only for transgressive discourse as Scollon & Scollon (2003) have analysed but also for commercial, political and regulatory discourse (see Domke 2014). The signs and stickers share their brevity (for example Henning 2012; Wagner 2015; Auer 2010) as well as the use of verbal and non-verbal elements. This compactness makes it possible for the reader/walker to perceive the texts while they are in motion.

Besides pictograms, which are generally considered as easily interpretable (see Stötzner 2003 for relativisation), also noun

phrases (see step 2, example 7 and the positioner's text: Caution! Wet floor!) are used to express prohibitions. Short verb phrases on public signage are frequently accompanied by nonfinite verbs, for example in German in the shape of "deontic infinitives" (see Hennig 2012; Deppermann 2011). Examples (see step 2, example 14 and above, example 16) like "Ausfahrt freihalten" (Exit – keep clear) do not have to include specification with regard to person or tense, which is explained by the fact that they are addressing everybody on location and have a non-time-limited validity (see Auer 2010: 289; Hennig 2010: 84). However, these explanations do not include the "meaning making" (see above) through the media used for the signs: Thus, the strongly fixed material of the text is to be considered as an index for both the permanence of the text's visibility and the text's non time-limited validity.

The relevance of the media chosen for a text's function and validity also becomes quite clear by looking at the opposite case: time-bound prohibitions. Announcements at railway stations belong to the group of time-limited communication forms which are used for temporary prohibitions. Standard warnings at platforms like "Please take care while the train is approaching" or "Caution! Mind

the gap!" or "Caution! The train is arriving" (hear example 1) are examples of speech as a fleeting realisation of language. Speech's general use for time-bound purposes, like arrivals and departures, seems to be quite functional: Due to the "omnipresence" (Raffaseder 2010) of public announcements, they are mostly restricted to time-bound information and deviation from a time-schedule. In contrast, if an information is not important for everybody on location at one point in time, but has a rather permanent significance, it will be realised by written language and permanent media material (see step 2, example 15 and above, example 16). With reference to prohibitions, announcements over the PA system prove to be relevant also in unexpected situations of danger. For example, when a person gets too close to the rail tracks, they may hear a resolute "Step back!".

Audible communication forms are also increasingly used for the guidance system of visually-handicapped walkers (see Domke 2014). Contrary to the audible prohibitions mentioned before, they are partly initiated by the walkers themselves: At traffic lights in Germany pedestrians can push yellow buttons (see above, example 19) to initiate a special sound signal, which announces both the need to wait (including an implicit warning) and the possibility to cross the street.

Time-bound communication forms are also realised by means of writings. This modifies well established assumptions concerning the durability of writings (see Domke 2014; Domke & Birk in prep.; Liedtke 2009). Digital display panels at railway stations and airports include information which are updated frequently and visible just for a short time. In contrast to permanently visible texts on analogue media (see above), their main function can be considered as offering news, and thus new validations of arrivals, departures and important current events, such as requests (as in "no boarding", see above, example 21). Notices (see step 2, example 5) and street signs are also used for time-bound prohibitions, which is reflected by their material. "Paper" as a medium in public signage always indicates time-bound information, its durability is sometimes extended by shielding it in glass cases (see step 2, the smoking ban in example 4) or protective sheets (see step 2, example 6, an individually expressed and designed warning of "no bicycle parking", signed by the institution's caretaker). The street sign in example 18 consists of weatherproof material but its content (from 6.09.2011) and its movable shape/form refer to a time-bound validation.

Besides that, the choice and placement of material and therefore the mode of perception is also to be considered as an indication of the addressee orientation (see Domke 2014). Guidance systems on pavements make it possible for visually-impaired people to follow the coded paving consisting of stripes and dots (see above, example 21) with their white cane, as well as receiving directions and warnings concerning specific hazards (see step 2, the yellow stripe in example 12). With reference to the material used, it seems quite clear that guidance systems, and tactile communication forms in general, are only used for permanently valid information.

This leads to the last group of prohibition signage in public places discussed here: semiotic and physical barriers (see Schmauks 2002). We do find semiotic barriers of permanent validity, for example, in road markings which regulate the use of public streets and place. In contrast, physical barriers are often used for time-bound prohibitions, for example in case of construction sites (see step 2, example 8). Oftentimes a physical barrier which prevents walkers from using a pavement or entering a building or place, and

a semiotic barrier like red warning tape overlay. While visually impaired walkers cannot perceive the semiotic barrier (for example the red warning tape) the physical part of the signage forms a perceivable barrier. What all examples have in common is the feature "place bound": They are only – permanently or temporarily – visible, audible and tactually perceivable at 'their' place and therefore generate a specific public space with specific features. With reference to the diversity of the media and materiality used, it seems to be quite clear that prohibition signage in public places already indicates the functional differentiation in the existing communicative options.

Conclusion

Regarding both the examples and the analytical remarks given above at least three considerations seem to be evident: Public signage as one major part of the public regulatory discourse is not only visible but also perceivable tactually and audibly. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that public texts (including writings) do not always appear permanently and do differ significantly concerning the text's validity: time-limited use of written language by means of different communication forms (like notices, fixed signs and moveable positioners) and different media (analogue or digital) has to be analyzed (more) systematically. Thirdly, the diversity of the media and materiality used only for prohibitions seems to be quite functional and important for this form of place/space-making. Walking through the streets or catching a train is always accompanied by texts such as prohibitions, commercials or private notices. These texts shape 'their' places and contribute to our recognition of different "social spaces" like railway stations or pedestrian areas. With reference to the increasing number of communication forms for different communicative functions (see above), place-bound communication is an important but at the same time overlooked part of the everyday life's "mediatization" (Krotz 2007; Krotz & Hepp 2012). The existence of the recent media system and its influence on social and cultural practices is mainly discussed with reference to the Internet and digital communication. Focusing on the examples and remarks given, it seems, however, quite clear that a city's texts are expressed by very different communication forms, including analogue and digital media which generate and change cultural practices (like private notices, display panels, audible direction information, QR-codes). Therefore, walking through a city or rather through the 'analogue world' means perceiving one "mediatized" part of our everyday life. This contribution's aim was to elaborate the functional and medial diversity in public prohibition signage. The further development of public communication in general, with reference to convergence phenomena between place-bound and digital texts, remains to be seen.

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