

# Signs in cities: The discursive production and commodification of urban spaces

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## Abstract

*The analysis of signs in cities is known as research into 'linguistic landscapes'. Following Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), this paper focuses on 'semiotic' not linguistic landscapes. I argue that visual images and visual aspects of writing such as font or colour are essential for the meanings conveyed on signs. As an example, I examine the semiotic landscape of parts of Prenzlauer Berg, a neighbourhood of the former East Berlin. Neglected in the 1980s, after reunification, this originally working class area became middle class and trendy, popular for its shops, cafes and arts culture. Using multimodal and ethnographic methods, my paper reveals the important role commercial signs and street art play in the discursive re-construction of this gentrified neighbourhood. Both contribute to the area's commercialization and aestheticization. My paper also illustrates how semiotic landscapes contribute to place-making and the commodification of urban spaces. The combination of multimodal analysis with interviews with sign authors allowed for insights into the reasons specific semiotic choices were made, adding to our understanding of discourse production by revealing intended meanings which were not identifiable based on text analysis alone.*

KEYWORDS: SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPES, BERLIN, MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS,  
COMMODIFICATION, GRAFFITI, STREET ART, DISCOURSES

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## 1 Introduction

In the late 1980s, Prenzlauer Berg, a neighbourhood in the east of Berlin but close to the wall dividing the city prior to German reunification in 1990, was a rundown place whose poorly maintained houses were noticeable for their grim facades and poor amenities. Neglected by the GDR (German Democratic Republic) authorities, this primarily working class area had become a niche for students, squatters and artists seeking escape from the regime. By 2010 and 2011, however, the time of my research, things had changed considerably. Prenzlauer Berg had become a middle-class neighbourhood, known for its lively arts and culture scene and its many shops, bars and restaurants. Prenzlauer Berg had also become popular amongst tourists and day-and-evening visitors from other parts of Berlin. The effects of gentrification the area experienced are particularly visible in those parts of the neighbourhood where the nineteenth-century tenement buildings survived World War II and which after reunification were expensively refurbished. Helmholtzkiez (Kiez meaning neighbourhood), located in the north-east of Prenzlauer Berg and the focus of this paper, is one such area. The newly painted facades of its restored houses with their loft extensions and cast-iron fenced balconies and the many signs of shops, galleries, bars and cafes covering the ground store level of the otherwise primarily residential buildings reveal the changes this neighbourhood has undergone.

Elsewhere (Papen, 2012), I have argued that gentrification, ‘the process of upgrading urban neighbourhoods’ (Bernt and Holm, 2009:312), is reflected in the changing ‘linguistic landscape’ (Landry and Bourhis, 1997) of the neighbourhood and contributes to it. Following on from this, in the present paper I turn my gaze away from a focus on writing to suggest that visual images and visual aspects of writing play a significant role in the re-construction of urban spaces. Accordingly, I examine the ‘semiotic landscape’ of an urban area, which Jaworski and Thurlow (2010:2) define as ‘any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making’. The term inscription here covers different forms of semiotic expressions, including visual images and the visual properties of written language. I use the term semiotic landscape to refer to the variety of signs that can be found in urban areas, including commercial and non-commercial signs.

The second argument I make in this paper is that a neighbourhood’s semiotic landscape is part of what imbues it with recognisable social meanings as, for example, found in travel guides and known through newspaper reportages (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht, 2006; Leeman and Modan, 2010).

Landscapes, including cityscapes, are about how a place is perceived and talked about. We refer to an area as ‘middle class’ or ‘ethnic’. Language and images used on signs, together with aspects of the built environment (Aiello, 2011), contribute to such meanings. Warnke (2013:160) refers to these as material manifestations of ‘discourses in urban space that are also discourses about urban space’.

My third argument is that in the part of Prenzlauer Berg which my study covered the discursive construction of space is primarily driven by commercial signs. Commercial discourses, as found on the signs of shops, cafes and galleries, dominate the semiotic landscape. Discourses here mean expressions of ideas about aspects of the world shared by a group of people which include values and identities and are associated with activities (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Commercial discourses put forward specific ideas about the consumer and the product on sale. Such discourses are expressed through writing and visual images. In this paper, I examine commercial discourses which are materialised on signs in shop windows or billboards.

The commercial signs that dominate Helmholtzkiez and its streets reveal the importance of the neighbourhood as a ‘landscape(s) of consumption’ (Zukin, 1998:825), indicating the commercialization of public space that is a common phenomenon in cities (Baker, 2007). Zukin (1998:835) also argues that the consumption-based economies of contemporary cities encourage the ‘aestheticization of the urban landscape’. This is related to the proliferation of image production in contemporary cities. Such images contribute to how a neighbourhood is commodified and sold to new residents, visitors, tourists and investors. The forms of consumption prevalent in Helmholtzkiez are somewhat different from the mainstream consumer cultures of high streets and big chain stores. Instead, consumer culture claims to be more individualistic and to promote socially and ecologically responsible forms of consumerism. At the same time, the area’s semiotic landscape draws on elements that are not purely commercial, for example street art, which in Helmholtzkiez partly colludes with commercial values.

To illustrate the above arguments about the semiotic landscape of Helmholtzkiez and the specific role commercial discourses play in shaping it as a middle-class and gentrified neighbourhood, my methodology combines an ethnographic approach with interviews with sign authors and a multimodal analysis of specific signs.

## 2 Space and the discursive construction of place

The study on which this article is based is grounded in a view of space not just as physically constructed but as socially produced and culturally framed. Originating in the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), this non-essentialist concept of space is nowadays widely applied in disciplines such as human geography and urban sociology (see for example Harvey, 2006).

Lefebvre suggested that (urban) places are constructed through people's everyday practices in space, through their imagination of this space and also through representations of urban spaces by outsiders, for examples planners or scientists. Lefebvre's ideas offer a way of conceptualising space as ongoing practice and associated with the way specific physical areas of a city are culturally defined. Tuan's (1977) distinction between space and place can be used to examine further the role writing and visual images, next to architecture, play in giving meaning to urban spaces, turning them from 'undifferentiated space' (Tuan, 1977:6) to known and identifiable places. This is an ongoing process, though, and it is therefore more appropriate to think in terms of changing constructions of place, from 'older' to 'newer' places. Words and images – as found on signs – together with architecture play a central role in the process through which streets and neighbourhoods are imbued with cultural meanings (cf. Lou, 2007). To operationalise the idea of places as resulting from ongoing social practice, I also draw on the idea of place-making (Friedmann, 2010) which, as Warnke (2013) explains, captures the interactions between the physical dimensions of space, its use and the way it is represented.

The term landscape does not only refer to a tract of land, but to representations of it (Gorter, 2006:82). Landscape thus always means a particular way of seeing and understanding space. The concept of a landscape is bound up with human beings seizing, measuring and assessing parts of the physical environment that surrounds them (see Cosgrove, 1984, cited in Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010:2–3). Accordingly, what we perceive as a landscape is shaped by Berger's (1972) idea of a 'visual ideology', referring to specific ways of seeing and thus defining the spaces we gaze upon and inhabit. Put differently, ways of seeing a place are associated with discourses about it. An example would be the way Prenzlauer Berg is described by the German publisher of travel guides Dumont (Giebel, 2011). In its 2011 guide of Berlin, the section on Prenzlauer Berg is headed 'Live more beautifully in the East – Prenzlauer Berg' (*Schöner Leben im Osten – Prenzlauer Berg*). No doubt this heading conveys a specific discourse about the area: that life here is beautiful, even more beautiful than in what can only be the inferred contrast of the old West Berlin. 'Beautiful' surely refers to quality of life here. But it is reasonable to assume that the choice of an aesthetic term is deliberate,

pointing to the importance of the area's houses and streets as visually appealing. In the travel guide, the chapter heading is framed by a picture of a street scene showing people sitting in an outdoor café (see Figure 1). Clearly visible in the picture are the beautifully restored house fronts as well as the board placed on the pavement to advertise the café's food and drink. The photograph has a soft orange glow giving the impression of warmth and a feeling of gentleness. It certainly emphasizes the beauty of this street scene.



**Figure 1.** Opening page of the chapter on Prenzlauer Berg, 'Dumont Direkt Berlin', travel guide, Dumont Verlag, 2011, page 69. © MairDumont, Germany.

The idea that signs in cities are part of what imbues them with specific social meanings results from their indexicality: 'the semiotic property of pointing to other things' (Kallen, 2009:273). Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) too suggest that semiotic codes found in space index specific localities and territorial claims, for example of migrant communities. Semiotic landscapes can also index middle-class communities, as in Helmholtzkiez. The prevalence of signs relating to the consumption of particular goods and services in a neighbourhood signals that these practices are commonly shared by those living in and visiting it. In so doing, they establish a link between the semiotic landscape and the kind of community residing in the area. In Figure 1, the menu placed on the street indexes a consumer practice (drinking coffee) that is – as anybody who has visited Prenzlauer Berg will confirm – very popular in this neighbourhood and which in itself indexes a certain level of affluence.

### 3 The study of urban semiotic landscapes

The study of signs in cities is primarily associated with the field of 'linguistic landscape' (Landry and Bourhis, 1997). Most studies are based on surveys of languages found on signs. More qualitative studies, such as by Coupland (2012), examine the display of languages not as indications of linguistic power, but in relation to the interpretational and ideological frames that assign cultural values to different languages (see also Kallen, 2009). More recently, researchers have become interested in the way writing in urban space contributes to how cities and neighbourhoods are recognised as specific cultural places (Leeman and Modan, 2009, 2010; Jaworski and Yeung, 2010), what Jaworski and Thurlow (2010:1) call the 'discursive construction of place'. While some researchers examine these discourses from a primarily linguistic perspective, others focus on the multimodality of all discourses, thinking in terms of semiotic rather than linguistic landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010). Several studies illustrate this new perspective. Gendelman and Aiello (2010) who studied facades and commercial signs in Central and Eastern European cities illustrate how changes from the communist to the capitalist system contribute to a remaking of the urban visual environment. Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) compare the signs of 'luxury' on the billboards of large companies with the signs of 'necessity' on the locally produced signboards of small shops in a South African township. Juffermans (2012), looking at the linguistic landscape of The Gambia, emphasizes the multimodal character of signs in a society where many people cannot read. These studies show that research into semiotic landscape needs to pay close attention to local linguistic, social and political contexts. The need to take account of the 'complexity' of meanings associated with specific signs is also emphasized in Blommaert's (2013) recent work. He illustrates how ethnographic, historical and text-based methodologies are brought together in linguistic landscape research.

Urban signage has also been studied by sociologists Krase and Shortell (2011), who analyse photographs of shop signs and buildings from cities across the world and show the processes of social differentiation between ethnic or working-class and gentrified areas. Patch's (2004) study of Williamsburg, a gentrified neighbourhood of Brooklyn (New York), illustrates how new consumer tastes are associated with changes in the cityscape's 'visual identity' (Patch, 2004:174), what Wells (2007) calls its 'visual culture'. These sociologically oriented studies do not analyse specific signs in detail.

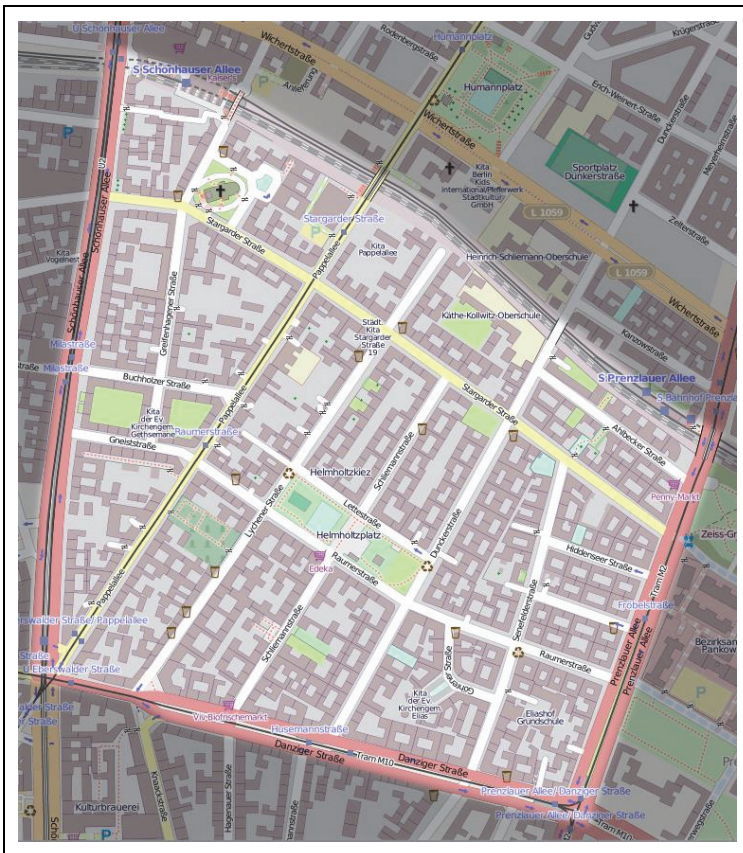
Studies such as those mentioned above have advanced our understanding of the discursive construction of space and I see my own study as contributing to this body of research. Few studies though have drawn on insider views, the ideas



of those who produce and read signs, to understand the role of signs in cities (but see Malinowski, 2009; Blommaert, 2013). The present paper seeks partly to address this gap by including the views of sign authors.

#### 4 Studying semiotic landscapes: a multi-disciplinary perspective

The research which this paper draws on was carried out in Prenzlauer Berg between October 2010 and June 2011, with an additional brief visit to the area in August 2012.



**Figure 2.** Map of the area covered by the study (<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Helmholtzkiez.png>).

Prenzlauer Berg covers a geographical area of 11 km<sup>2</sup> housing approximately 146.000 people (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, n.d.). The district includes several sub-areas, called Kiez (neighbourhood). As it would have been impossible

to conduct a thorough investigation of the semiotic landscape of the entire Prenzlauer Berg, I focussed my study on the Helmholtzkiez. I covered Helmholtzplatz, a popular square, and six of the eight streets leading on to it. Of each of these, I included one block, from the square to the next intersection. I chose this particular area because it is typical of those parts of Prenzlauer Berg where the old housing stock survived World War II. The square and its surrounding streets also illustrate the mix of residential housing with small shops and cafes or restaurants that is common in Prenzlauer Berg. I added Stargarder Strasse because it connects Helmholtzplatz to the *S-Bahn*, a local train that links Prenzlauer Berg with other parts of Berlin. Finally, I included Kastanienallee, because this is a more commercial street and also one of the most popular streets of the area which is frequently mentioned in newspaper reportages and travel guides. A map of the area included in my study is shown in Figure 2.

My investigations covered two levels. In a first step, I systematically surveyed all signs on the above-mentioned streets, using photographs as well as written records. At this level, I was interested in gaining an insight into, for example, the prevalence of commercial signs on the streets of Prenzlauer Berg compared to street art, graffiti or personal notices. At a second level, I analysed selected signs in detail and examined how they relate to the discursive construction of Prenzlauer Berg as a middle-class neighbourhood. To do this, I drew on two further methodological perspectives: New Literacy Studies and multimodal analysis.

The New Literacy Studies (Street, 1993; Barton, 2007) use ethnographic methods to examine specific acts of reading and writing as instantiations of culturally shaped and socially situated practices. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) pay close attention to the context within which texts are produced and used. NLS researchers seek to understand the perspectives of text producers and text users. With regards to semiotic landscape research, this calls not only for a close examination of a city or a neighbourhood's social, cultural, political and historical context, as Leeman and Modan (2009) suggest, but also invites us to talk directly to those who produce and read signs. To achieve this, I consulted urban development reports, sociological studies as well as newspaper articles. I visited local archives where I found images of Prenzlauer Berg from before 1990. I spent many days walking the streets of Prenzlauer Berg, visiting shops, cafes and galleries, talking to the locals about their neighbourhood and how it had changed and asking sign authors (see below) to explain to me why they chose certain words, colours and materials.

Multimodal analysis, the second perspective I draw on, offers an analytical toolkit allowing researchers to understand better how different modes such as writing, visual images, materiality and sound work together to produce the



meaning of texts (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Multimodal analysis assumes that communication is always based on a variety of 'semiotic resources' (van Leeuwen, 2005). It emphasizes that texts do not have a pre-given and fixed message but 'meaning potential' (Machin, 2007:19). Anyone wishing to communicate makes decisions about what semiotic resources to deploy based on what they want their viewer to see. With the above in mind, as the researcher we need to be aware that researcher-led and decontextualised interpretations risk remaining one-sided (Pennycook, 2009; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010). To be able to take account of the local context shaping sign production and reception, researchers need to reach beyond the tools of text-based analysis. This is where New Literacy Studies and multimodal analysis can complement each other (Dicks, Flewitt, Lancaster and Pahl, 2011; Street, Pahl and Rowsell, 2011). In the present study I have sought to understand in particular the views of sign authors (see also Malinowski, 2009).

As part of the wider study, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with the owners of shops, cafes and restaurants and with street artists. These interviews allowed me to understand choice of semiotic resources such as language, images, colour and materiality from the perspective of sign authors. Drawing on these first-hand insights as well as a range of secondary sources, I developed an in-depth understanding of the local context within which signs are produced and received. To complement insights gained through this ethnographic work, I used the tools of multimodal analysis. The latter allowed me to develop additional ideas about how specific signs relate to particular discourses about the neighbourhood and its residents.

Interviews with sign authors took between 15 and 60 minutes. They covered the meaning of names, choice of typeface, size, colour, images and materials. Interviews were either tape recorded or documented through detailed field notes. The choice of sign authors to talk to was driven by accessibility (e.g. not all street artists whose works I found were contactable), by the desire to cover different aspects of the semiotic landscape and by the sign itself (e.g. an intriguing name, an unusual font or a specifically bright colour). In this paper I draw in particular on my conversations with three sign authors: two shop owners and one street artist. I interviewed the first shop owner when visiting her shop. With the second owner, a face-to-face interview was followed by a series of email messages (used to seek detail on specific points regarding their shop sign). I met the street artist El Bocho once for an extended interview and again more informally through several email exchanges.

While the present paper is limited to a small selection of all the signs that were included in my research, the arguments I develop here illustrate and in that sense stand for the findings of the wider study.

## 5 Commercial signs in Prenzlauer Berg

As a city, Berlin, reunified in 1990, was fundamentally changed by the fall of the Wall and the end of the GDR regime. The administrative, political and economic changes following reunification have particularly affected those parts of the former East that were once hidden in the shadows of the Wall and that with reunification were repositioned as central locations of the new Berlin. Prenzlauer Berg, in the north-east, but close to Potsdamer Platz, the city's old and new centre, is one such neighbourhood. Built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in the 1980s the area had reached its least attractive point with many houses being empty and shops having closed. After 1990, the neighbourhood received much new investment (Holm, 2006; Dörfler, 2010). Houses were restored, new shops opened and the area began to be known as a popular place for artists and a haven for small businesses, including fashion boutiques, cafes, bars, restaurants and art galleries. Figure 3 shows the restored house facades on one side of Helmholtzplatz, in Prenzlauer Berg. Figure 4 shows a typical shop front in Helmholtzkiez.



**Figure 3.** Housefronts on Helmholtzplatz, Berlin, January 2011. Photo: author.



**Figure 4.** Shopfronts on Kastanienallee, April 2011. Photo: author.

Cafes, boutiques and art galleries have turned Helmholtzkiez and other parts of Prenzlauer Berg into ‘visible consumption spaces’ (Zukin, 1998:825). In gentrified neighbourhoods such as Prenzlauer Berg this is happening through, on the one hand, the preservation and renovation of the area’s historic houses and, on the other hand, the influx of new consumption-related establishments with their signs and shop fronts. In Helmholtzkiez, urban consumption is not limited to satisfying everyday needs, but is oriented towards goods and services addressing specific lifestyles and consumer identities. The area that I surveyed for my study had only one small conventional supermarket and two convenience shops selling fruit, vegetables and milk. There was only one newspaper store and two bakeries, but two organic food stores and one delicatessen. The majority of shops sold goods such as fashion items, gifts or toys. Cafes and restaurants and ice cream parlours were prominent. Amongst the ten houses of Lettestrasse surrounding Helmholtz square, I counted the signs of two bars, one restaurant, two fashion boutiques, an ice cream parlour, an estate agent, a budget hotel, a hairdresser and a fashion and gifts boutique. *Prachtstück* (Figure 5), ‘real gem’, illustrates the current form of consumer culture in Prenzlauer Berg: this kind of shop, my surveys have revealed, is typical for Prenzlauer Berg in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The sign is attached to the facade of a luxuriously renovated building. The golden colour chosen for the letters connotes expensiveness, as if they were made of real gold or other gems. Most of the ten houses on this part of Lettestrasse also had some graffiti on them. These were tags, many of which were not easily decipherable and understandable to the passers-by. None of these contained a direct expression of resistance to

gentrification. Revisiting the street over several months and again in 2012, I noticed that the tags had a limited life time, as the facades of these expensive houses received regular fresh paints.



**Figure 5.** The fashion boutique *Prachtstück*, Lettestrasse, December 2010.  
Photo: author.

Signs such as *Prachtstück* illustrate the urban economy's reliance on the 'aesthetization' (Zukin, 1998: 835) of urban places to sell goods and services. Commercial signs are associated with the 'symbolic economy' that shapes contemporary urban areas. Partly resulting from the decline of major industries, the new symbolic economy centres on 'abstract products' or 'cultural symbols' (Zukin, 1998:826), such as fashion, food (delicatessen, not staples) or art and tourism. Hand in hand with the rise of the symbolic economy goes an 'inflation of image production' (Zukin, 1998:826.), serving to sell fashion, arts and food. Zukin also suggests that the symbolic economy relies not only on the production of such images, but also on the construction of the spaces where these are materialised (Zukin, 1995). In Helmholtzkiez these are the refurbished nineteenth-century buildings, the streets they line and the squares they surround.

We can see from the above discussion that the symbolic economy is closely related to the social construction of commodified and (in Tuan's terms, see above) recognisable and valued places. It also contributes to the commercialization of the public sphere, illustrated by the frequent presence of advertising in shop fronts and on billboards. The signs of fashion boutiques such as *Prachtstück* index Helmholtzkiez as a haven for contemporary consumer culture. The sign of another fashion boutique, located in Stargarder Strasse, is shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** The fashion boutique *Glamorous*, Stargarder Strasse, April 2011.

Photo: author.

*Glamorous* specialises in women's clothing. It sells both 'glamorous' (*glamorös*) things, as the owner told me, as well as 'everyday' (*alltägliche*) things. When Ms T, the owner, showed me around the shop, she drew my attention to the old-fashioned but elegant-looking brass candelabras hanging from the ceiling. Ms T used to have a shop in Pankow, north-east of Prenzlauer Berg. She found the candelabras in the cellar of the old shop. She put them up in her new boutique in Stargarder Strasse. Sitting outside her new shop, polishing the candelabras, she thought that these looked quite *glamorös*, glamorous. When a couple of days later she listened to the song 'Glamorous' by the Black Eyed Peas, she decided that this should become her boutique's name. She chose gold as the colour for her sign because it fits with glamour and matches the brass candelabras. We can see here that Ms T chose semiotic resources to match the image of her goods. She liked the typeface because of its 'swing' (*Schwung*), indicating that her choice of font style

was partly based on what she herself found aesthetically appealing. When people come to Berlin for the film festival, she explained, they can buy glamorous dresses in her shop. The shop's name inside the window – placed below a decorative pattern in the same golden colour – speaks to women who would like to look (and feel) glamorous.

The choice of an English name was deliberate. When she had first thought of the German *glamorös*, Ms T wrote it on a piece of paper to see what it would look like. But she found that it 'looked silly' (*sah doof aus*). Neither did she like the sound of the *ö*. Not only did she prefer the English 'glamorous', but using an English word, she explained, had the additional advantage of allowing her to address the foreign tourists who visit the neighbourhood. *Glamorous* is only a few meters away from Gethsemane Church, a former meeting point for the GDR opposition and nowadays a place of touristic interest. The use of English in urban semiotic landscapes has been interpreted to index modernity, a cosmopolitan attitude and even sophistication (Leeman and Modan, 2010). The language is commodified, used to address a specific market (Heller, 2010). To some extent, this is also the case here with the use of the English 'glamorous'. However, English words are nowadays so widespread in German outdoor advertising that their symbolic effect is unlikely to be as strong as in the context of countries where English is more closely associated with elitism.

Figures 5 and 6 also reveal the importance of a sign's physical placement (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Its meaning relies in part on the character of the surface it is attached to and the houses and streets it is surrounded by. *Prachtstück* and *Glamorous* are viewed as part of restored house facades that connote bourgeois beauty and middle-class affluence (Gendelman and Aiello, 2010; Aiello 2011). The shop signs' colours blend in with the colours of the house walls. In both cases, the facade itself is a semiotic resource, indexing the area's gentrified status.

The second sign I examine in more detail here belongs to a shop called *Konsumhelden* – 'consumer heroes'. This is a shop selling goods made of recycled materials and which are produced and traded under fair conditions. A sign attached to the house facade above the shop's entrance shows the consumer hero (see Figure 7). Above the door, the shop's name is pasted (Figure 8).





**Figure 7.** The shop 'Konsumhelden', Pappelallee, January 2011. Photo: author.



**Figure 8.** *Konsumhelden*, entrance, Pappelallee, January 2011. Photo: author.

Anybody buying in our shop, Ms A, the co-owner explains, is a consumer hero, because they have thought about what they buy, under what conditions this was produced and where its material is sourced from. The hero's pose, she explains, is of somebody about to run off. The figure's androgynous build, as Ms A describes

it, was chosen because they wanted ‘to address everybody’ (*jeden ansprechen*), male and female heroes. The association with Superman was nevertheless desired, as he is a well-known heroic character who people associate with. The K on the hero’s chest links the figure to the shop’s name. The figure serves as logo and trademark of the shop. Its visual modality – how closely it was intended to resemble a particular person (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Machin, 2007) – is low. This is a schematic representation, which does not depict a specific consumer but an ideal type that people can identify with.

The figure’s thin green frame and colourless inside support the idea of lightness and agility. This is conveyed also through the energetic pose, the forward moving stride of the hero’s legs, the body bent forwards, one leg lifted and the arm raised towards the ceiling. The pose illustrates the power of the conscious consumer to shape markets towards forms of consumerism that are more socially responsible and ecologically sustainable than the current practices.

The forward movement of the hero is echoed in the typeface of the red *Konsumhelden*. Ms A explained that they had wanted a ‘dynamic’ (*dynamisch*) typeface. This particular one, she explained, is inspired by fonts used in the 1960s and ’70s to advertise the then popular Citroen DS. The forward bend of the letters invokes energy, echoing the movement of the *Konsumheld*. Multimodality researchers explain this by suggesting that ‘slope’ rather than an upright orientation can be read as ‘dynamic and full of energy’ (Machin, 2007:98). In the case of *Konsumhelden*, slope is combined with a vertical orientation (Machin, 2007), as reaching upward. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue that in Western cultures upward is metaphorically associated with matters of ideas and creativity, not the down to earth and real. The idea of the conscious consumer is presented here as an identity position, made desirable by the way the sign and its accompanying text present what the shop stands for as a ‘brand’ associated with a certain lifestyle. The letters’ regularity, their boldness and highly saturated red colour also connote the strength of a wider movement towards more ethical and sustainable consumption that this shop is part of. The purity of the flat colour suggests boldness, in a positive sense (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), and increases visibility.

On the right side to the entrance is *Konsumhelden*’s philosophy and marketing slogan, written in regular font, unadorned, upright but without slope and similar to the typeface of an instructional text conveying information without ambiguity. It is written in both German and English, Ms A explained, to address locals as well as tourists and foreigners living in Berlin. The shop is located close to the popular Kastanienallee, mentioned in many city and tourism guides. Prenzlauer Berg is also known as an area where many (middle-class and educated) foreigners live. English has value here as the language of tourism and consumerism but is also

associated with education and middle-class culture. The use of English on the consumer heroes' shop front also aligns the business with wider global initiatives towards sustainable development and consumption, thus highlighting the hoped-for global connections of the brand and its associated consumer identity. For a reader who recognizes the language but does not understand the English words, their presence might signal the shop's international orientation, which is likely to be interpreted positively.

Looking at the shop's entrance door, the text above and beside it and the image of the hero on the sign on top of it, we can see how visual image and writing complement each other. The colours red and green create visual coherence, linking name to image and philosophy. The red and green colours were deliberately chosen. Red, the traditional colour of socialism, was selected, because the business thinks 'socially' (*sozial*). Many of the products sold in *Konsumhelden* are manufactured as part of projects offering fair prices and salaries to the manufacturers. The colour green shows that consumer heroes think 'ecological' (*ökologisch*), buying products made from recycled or sustainably sourced materials. That green means ecological is a long-established connotation, illustrated by Germany's Green Party, *Die Grünen*. The meaning of a colour is, however, culturally determined. The association of green with nature may be fairly widespread, but the link with the Green party is closely bound to a European political context.

Consumption, as argued earlier, is connected with specific brands and identities. In the case of *Konsumhelden*, the identity appealed to is not that of the typical consumer in search of the latest lifestyle accessories and practices. Rather, it is conscious consumers, aware of the kind of products they aspire to and that the shop seeks to attract. The ethos of the shop, symbolised in the colours of the shop front, matches the image of Prenzlauer Berg's residents, as communicated in newspaper articles. It is a district where the Green Party has wide support and whose residents are portrayed by *Die Zeit* (one of Germany's best known weekly newspapers) as 'politically active' and left leaning (Sussebach, 2007).

The above discussion has shown that in the part of Prenzlauer Berg known as Helmholtzkiez, commercial signs and the discourses they convey play an important role in the semiotic construction of the area as middle class and fashionable. With their ubiquitous presence in the semiotic landscape, the commercial signs of boutiques, cafes and restaurants capture an essential characteristic of life in this gentrified neighbourhood: a lifestyle that allows plenty of time for shopping and sitting in cafes. The shop *Konsumhelden*, however, seeks to make alternative forms of consumption popular by promoting these as a brand that aligns with lifestyles known to be prevalent amongst residents of Prenzlauer Berg, such as buying organic food and being 'politically active'.

## 6 Street art and its contribution to the commodification of space

Street art is a common part of urban semiotic landscapes. Following Riggle (2010), I define street art loosely as works whose use of the street is indispensable to their meaning. In Helmholtzkiez, street art can be found on nearly every street. On the eleven houses covering the part of Dunckerstrasse between Helmholtzplatz and Stargarderstrasse, for example, I found three pieces of street art. They are prominent on empty wall spaces as well as in house entrances. While Borghini, Visconti, Anderson and Sherry (2010) emphasize the anti-commercial ideologies of street art, in the neighbourhood covered in my study this outdoor art form not only blends in but supports the commercial discourses that dominate its semiotic landscape. Figure 9, showing the front of a toy store on Helmholtzplatz, illustrates this. The facade is covered in street art, including several stencils, and graffiti slogans.



**Figure 9.** *Ratzekatz Spielzeugland*, toy store, Helmholtzplatz, December 2010. Photo: author.

Local and global, consumerist and other, various discourses are materialised on this shop front. The Lego logo is visible next to the shop's individual name and cat logo and accompanied by stencils, some put up by the owner himself (he made a stencil from the cat logo), while others were added by street artists and graffiti writers. With its density of signs, the shop front is a 'communicative event' (Gendelman and Aiello, 2010:256).

*Lucy* – see Figure 10 – was pasted on the side of the shop’s entrance, by El Bocho, a Berlin-based street artist. *Lucy*, a little girl, is fond of killing cats. When I asked El Bocho why *Lucy* was pasted so high up on the inner wall, he said it was because there had been no other space to put her. He wanted *Lucy* to be close to the toy shop, but her specific place in the entrance was a matter of necessity rather than choice. Had I not spoken to El Bocho, I might have speculated on the reasons for her towering above some of the other graffiti and signs.



**Figure 10.** ‘Lucy did it’, El Bocho (entrance to *Ratzekatz Spielzeugland*), Helmholtzplatz, November 2010. Photo: author.

*Lucy*, El Bocho told me, is his mascot, designed as a marketing ploy to make his work known. Far from anti-commercialist, El Bocho pursues his own commercial interests when pasting frequent images of *Lucy* in action all over Helmholtzplatz, Kastanienallee and neighbouring streets. El Bocho works on the streets but he also sells his art in galleries. He likes to work in Prenzlauer Berg: unlike in other parts of Berlin, here, he explained, people do not expect street art to be always political. When they walk along the street, he adds, they like to see something nice.

Despite the somewhat provocative nature of *Lucy* at the door of a toy shop, the owner of the shop was happy for it to be there. Like many other local business people I talked to, he appreciated street art for adding colour and visual appeal to the neighbourhood. El Bocho himself primarily sees his work as an attempt to beautify urban spaces, in particular grey and dull house fronts. Many of his pieces are over a meter high.

Street art, I suggest, contributes to the discursive production of Helmholtzkiez and Prenzlauer Berg as a place where the arts are at home. Street art is mentioned in travel guides (Klemann, 2009; Giebel, 2011), and it is the subject of colourful and expensively produced books. There is even a street art guide for Berlin (Wolbergs, 2007). Postcards of street art, including of El Bocho's pieces, are sold in Berlin's tourist shops. That such 'secondary mediated versions of linguistic landscapes' (Coupland, 2012:15) exist and sell shows that linguistic/semiotic landscapes can become consumable cultural objects. As an outdoor art form, street art, albeit illegal, is not only tolerated but seen as attractive and used for the purposes of place-making (Friedmann, 2010) – advertising the neighbourhood to entice new residents, visitors, tourists and investors. Throughout the winter, the owner of the shop next to which El Bocho had placed the woman shown in Figure 11 (see below) helped safeguard this paper-based work from the effects of rain and snow by pasting back pieces that had fallen off the wall. El Bocho's choice of English is motivated by commercial interests: to make himself known among tourists who – as he told me – are attracted to Prenzlauer Berg in part because of its street art.



**Figure 11.** 'Love is closer than you think', El Bocho, Stargarder Strasse, December 2010. Photo: author.

The above comments suggest that in addition to commercial signs street art is part of Helmholtzkiez' 'visual symbolic capital' (Gendelman and Aiello, 2010:258). Street art plays a role in the neighbourhood's new image as a fashionable and 'arty' area. Place making, and the linguistic and visual message it relies on, is also an important means by which different neighbourhoods of the same city compete with each other to attract day and evening visitors, tourists,



investors and residents. In Berlin, the influx of tourists, which has substantially grown since reunification (see, <http://www.berlin.de/sen/wirtschaft/abisz/tourismus.html>) and the movements of day and evening visitors from other parts of the city or the surrounding areas contribute to the vibrancy and economic success of Prenzlauer Berg.

## 7 Conclusions

In the 1990s, Helmholtzkiez (and other parts of Prenzlauer Berg), which had played a marginal role in the GDR's urban planning policy, had found new life as a neighbourhood offering city living in renovated houses and focussing its economy on individually owned shops, cafes, bars and galleries. The area's semiotic landscape reflects the process of urban renewal, based on the rise of the symbolic economy. The symbolic economy relies on an aestheticized and commodified urban landscape to sell goods and services. Multimodal signs are an important part of this landscape. My above discussion has shown that language and other semiotic expressions are an instrument for the commodification of urban neighbourhoods, confirming what Leeman and Modan (2010) have found too.

There are, however, and as I argued elsewhere (Papen, 2012), oppositional views in Prenzlauer Berg's semiotic landscape. But these views, illustrated for example in graffiti slogans that call for 'yuppies' to leave the area, are sparse. In the area covered by my study, the slogan 'yuppies raus' (something akin to 'yuppies go home') was written on one house only. While I found the same slogan in other parts of Prenzlauer Berg, it had the same handwriting and was signed with the same name, thus indicating a single author of this expression of resistance. Commercial discourses, on the other hand, are frequent, indexing the neighbourhood as middle-class and trendy with a focus on arts, fashion as well as luxury food and drink. In Helmholtzkiez consumer culture is less shaped by multinational corporations and chain stores, but has a more individualistic note and seeks to address critical consumer identities. This echoes Zukin's (1998) point about the new urban spaces of consumption leading to standardisation but also diversification of the urban landscape. But in Helmholtzkiez, diversification remains limited as the commercial signs address a middle-class clientele and do not question the process of gentrification. *Konsumhelden* sells gifts, toys and small pieces of furniture, not bread and butter. Its goods are fairly expensive. In 2012, when I returned to the neighbourhood, small shops, cafes and bars still dominated the area's semiotic landscape with their commercial signs.

The works of street art add to the commercialized and aestheticized cityscape of Prenzlauer Berg. In Helmholtzkiez and on Kastanienallee, where El Bocho's pieces can be found, this form of street art is part of what 'sells' and appeals. No surprise then that El Bocho's interests and those of the shop owners on whose facades he displays his art collude. What both also collude on is in appropriating the visual potential of the old houses and their facades, by drawing on the symbolic meanings of historical architecture to present or 'perform' (Aiello 2011) new forms of urban lifestyle.

In methodological terms, my study illustrates that a combination of multi-modal analysis with insights into sign makers' intentions allows for a better empirically grounded understanding of the *why* of discourse by providing insights into discourse production. Shop owners and street artists of course have their audience in mind when they design their signs (Juffermans, 2012). But they also make more personal semiotic choices. An example is Ms A's interest in the fonts used for old Citroen cars. El Bocho's Lucy is modelled on a cartoon character that the artist was fond of as a child. Text-based analysis on its own cannot uncover these personal meanings of discourse. By seeking to capture the perspective of sign authors my approach allowed me to add a layer of understanding to the interpretation of the semiotic landscape which, as others will agree, cannot be claimed to have just one 'right' or possible reading.

The ethnographic approach I took also offered opportunities to understand the visual ideologies that govern what local business people accept and encourage to be put onto the urban canvas. Shop owners supported street art because they recognised its potential as adding to the aesthetic appeal of the neighbourhood, which their own businesses benefit from. They (as well as the street artist El Bocho) used English because of its symbolic value associated with fashion and elitism but also with globalisation and sustainable development. This is an example of language being commodified (Heller, 2010), as the choice of language and images on signs supports the neighbourhood's economy. Signs advertising products and services invite specific readings addressing particular customers. In so doing, individual signs not only support the local businesses they advertise but serve to sell the neighbourhood as a whole while also contributing to the establishment of social differences and spatial boundaries.

Studying semiotic landscapes from a multidisciplinary perspective, my paper has shown, allows us to sharpen our understanding of the role language, images and materials play in the discursive construction of place and the association of different places with specific communities. This kind of research also offers new insights into the links between language and space, which in sociolinguistics are

more commonly researched in relation to spoken language (Johnston, 2009). My study shows that different spaces do not necessarily produce different languages or language varieties (Warnke, 2013), but reveals a different and more complex relationship between language and space.

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