Floating Traffic Signs and the Ambiguity of Silence in the Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract The ever-changing, often contested, and ambiguous spaces of the linguistic landscape (LL) offer endless opportunities for language educators interested in promoting multiple literacies, transcultural understanding, and symbolic competence. Yet the LL images featured in commonly used language textbooks often appear to be floating on the pages, isolated from the ambiguity of their contexts in the target cultures. The pedagogical module in this chapter presents a more contextualized approach to the LL for language learners in a region of the US where the language being learned, German, is not highly prominent. Thus, this chapter contributes to continued discussions within the field of Language Acquisition and Teaching about supplementing the language textbook with authentic texts to go beyond grammar and vocabulary exercises built around isolated images or artifacts (e.g., Swaffar J, and Arens K, Remapping the foreign language curriculum: an approach through multiple literacies. Modern Language Association of America, New York, 2005). It provides an overview of silences that language learners encountered and expressed when engaging with the ambiguity of various LLs and demonstrates how this contributes to language learners becoming more aware of their place in today's multicultural and multilingual society.

Keywords Silence · Language awareness · Linguistic landscape

1 Linguistic Landscape as a Tool for Language Awareness and Learning

Language as it is or is not represented in the public sphere is the object of study within the discipline of Linguistic Landscape. This chapter provides a view of the linguistic landscape (LL) as a space of ambiguity and invites language learners and instructors to explicitly engage with its related gaps or silences, namely, that which is excluded or at first glance perhaps unnoticed, unobserved, or misunderstood.

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The classroom-based research study featured in this chapter draws on existing LL research that has been conducted in general education settings for language aware-ness (e.g., Dagenais et al. 2009) and in urban settings where the languages being learned are very prominent, often settings where English is being taught as a foreign language (e.g., Rowland 2013; Sayer 2010). It highlights the transferability of those studies to contexts in which the language being learned is scarcely represented, and outlines the affordances of various dimensions of the LL for language learners who are bound by the situated-ness of their learning context. In this case, the language learners were studying German at a large public university in a large city in the southwestern US (Arizona), where on the surface there would seem to be little con-nection to German. However, by bringing former study abroad students and materi-als they had collected abroad into a fourth-semester German class, students in Arizona were exposed to LLs of Germany. They then also explored the LL of their campus and city to find connections to the German language or the German-speaking world. This chapter describes that LL pedagogical module, which was part of a larger curriculum development project, and unpacks the language learners' reflections on the ambiguity of silences surrounding all of those LLs. It does this by examining the broader context of the landscapes, and then focusing on dimensions of silence as identified through analysis of student responses.

Using more authentic, contextualized texts and artifacts from the target cultures in the language classroom has been a topic of interest for years within the field of Language Teaching and Acquisition in the US. This study contributes to the related discussions, which have also promoted supplementing standard language textbooks in order to go beyond common grammar and vocabulary exercises that are often built around isolated cultural notes, images or texts (e.g., Swaffar and Arens 2005). Similarly, the LL images or even drawings that are sometimes featured in language textbooks might be isolated from the authentic settings in the target cultures, and thus appear to be floating on the pages.[1] Simply by reframing the activities corre-sponding to such images, program directors and instructors can initiate a more con-textualized discussion of multiple aspects of language and cultural learning as related to the LL. By looking beyond the textbook, though, language educators can expose learners across all levels, from beginners to advanced, to an even more mul-tifaceted view of LL as a particular kind of authentic text. This in turn supports a more integrated approach to language curriculum development as a means of over-coming the divide that oftentimes still exists between postsecondary language and content instruction in the US (e.g., Maxim 2006).

Bridging that language-content divide was a focus of a report released in 2007 by the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages of the Modern Language Association of America, which emphasized the development of transcultural understanding as critical, defining it as "the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form" (MLA 2007, p. 4). The cultural

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[1] See for instance the "floating" traffic signs image and exercise in a beginning-level German lan-guage textbook (Tschirner et al. 2013, p. 248).

narratives found within the LL make it ideal for lessening the language-content divide, perhaps in particular when implemented at the intermediate level. In addition to enhancing language learners' transcultural understanding, the current study was designed to instill a sense of symbolic competence. Symbolic competence as part of language learning involves confronting learners with form as meaning, production of complexity, and developing a tolerance of ambiguity (Kramsch 2006). This means approaching grammatical, textual, visual, or other structures as meaningful tools for using or understanding the language in an increasingly more complex manner, all the while navigating potentially ambiguous, unclear, or uncertain meanings or situations. The latter component, tolerance of ambiguity, is a central notion for this study, whereby the terms ambiguity and ambiguous as used here refer broadly to the multiplicity and indeterminacy of meaning within and related to texts (of the LL). Bringing learners to feel more comfortable with ambiguity as experienced in various LLs, despite the potentiality of being unable to determine a meaning or entirely disambiguate a text, is one aim of the current study. In so doing, this can lead to a heightened sense of symbolic competence for language learners, while also developing other literacies.

A literacies-based approach to language learning informed the pedagogical design of the current study, largely influenced by Kern's (2000) notion of literacy for the language classroom, as well as other significant works on the topic of multiple literacies (e.g., Swaffar and Arens 2005) or multiliteracies (Paesani et al. 2015). LL research related to education (e.g., Cenoz and Gorter 2008) has also identified multiple areas of literacy to which the integration of LLs into the classroom can contribute, including:

- pragmatic literacy (i.e., understanding the communicative intent of linguistic forms and speech acts ranging from indirect language to metaphors and collocations);
- multimodal literacy (i.e., not just the understanding of isolated words, but all additional aspects that might influence the meaning and interpretation of those words, including symbols, colors, placement, etc.);
- multilingual literacy (i.e., the ability to draw on knowledge and make use of several different languages as well as to reflect on how the languages all influence each other);
- and affective literacy (i.e., the development of positive attitudes towards language and language learning).

That study (Cenoz and Gorter 2008) as well as others (Dagenais et al. 2009; Sayer 2010) have applied the methods used in qualitative LL studies to educational settings in order to provide students with the opportunity to recreate empirical LL research that their instructors have already conducted. This allows the learners to take on the role of researcher by going into a designated area and documenting the linguistic and cultural representations found there. Those studies demonstrate the benefits that explicit engagement with the LL has in educational settings, including the fact that students make connections between the classroom and the real world by applying higher-level, creative, and analytical skills to think about

language use in context. These aspects contribute to language learners becoming more aware of today's globalized society—one in which cultural and linguistic ambiguity is inevitable.

More loosely structured LL projects have been suggested for the language classroom that avoid narrowing "students' perspectives of the LL by focusing them on particular aspects of public signage" (Chesnut et al. 2013, p. 10). The approach in that study, as in the current study, is to urge students to "ask their own linguistic landscape questions and pursue them as they see fit" (Chesnut et al. 2013, p. 106) in order to allow for "a greater focus on the confusion of students, the meandering paths they attempted to take, and their initial ideas about their own sociolinguistic ecology" (p. 105–106). One finding of Chesnut et al.'s (2013) narrative analysis highlighted the "challenge of overcoming naturalized discourses, that render the linguistic landscape unimportant, ordinary and trivial" (p. 116). Motivating language learners to overcome indifference to the LL, to take an active interest in it, with an eye for potentially confusing ambiguities—oftentimes created through silences—guided the pedagogical materials and assessments that were implemented for the current study.

A conceptual framework that would allow language learners to pursue their own LL questions was proposed by Malinowski (2015), who applied LL theory and methodology to language education contexts by adapting Lefebvre's (1974/1991) paradigm of conceived, perceived, and lived spaces. Using the guiding questions provided by Malinowski (2015), learners in various contexts can navigate the LL so that they are brought to reflect critically on a more complete experience of the multiple dimensions and layers to be found within and beyond those spaces. For language learning contexts where such an experiential approach is less feasible, Cenoz and Gorter (2008) offer guidelines for the careful selection and contextualization of authentic textual representations from the LL. The guidelines can be helpful to curriculum developers, instructors or learners themselves and could be adapted for examples from virtual linguistic landscapes (Deumert 2014; Ivkovic 2012; Ivkovic and Lotherington 2009) or, as is the case of the current study, those collected by study abroad participants and brought back to the home university or school. In this manner, language learners who may be learning in a setting where the language is not so noticeable, and who may never have the opportunity to go abroad, can be exposed to authentically contextualized use of the language as well as related issues pertaining to language awareness, status, policy, and planning. The next section proposes a view of the LL as a place for language and cultural learning in particular regard to its potential for highlighting silences and exposing language learners to related ambiguities.

2 Language Learning and the Ambiguity of Silences in the LL

Considerable research has been conducted in the growing discipline of Linguistic Landscape since Landry and Bourhis' (1997) seminal study, expanding the definition of linguistic landscape to a broad concept that goes "beyond displayed 'written' texts of signs in multilingual versions and includes verbal texts, images, objections, placement in time and space as well as human beings" (Shohamy and Waksman 2009, p. 314). There have been studies that draw on expertise from various areas, including semiotics, multimodalities, and multiliteracies (e.g., Bever 2012, 2015; Gonglewski and DuBravac 2006; Shohamy and Gorter 2009). The research has come to include studies on soundscapes (Backhaus 2015), love sculptures (Jaworski 2015), scentscapes (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015), and skinscapes—in particular tattoos and a tattoo parlor in South Africa (Peck and Stroud 2015)—as part of or related to the LL. The latter study refers to the excess of meaning that can arise within linguistic landscapes as "sometimes contradictory and potentially ambiguous, oftentimes aspirational and many times unfulfilled" (Peck and Stroud 2015, p. 147). Bringing language learners to actively engage with contradictory and ambiguous meanings of various kinds of texts is an overarching goal of the current study, including a focus on ambiguity induced by silence.

Silence is referred to in this study as more than just the absence of sound; rather it includes when certain things are left unsaid or unwritten, intentionally or unintentionally (see Jaworski 1997, for interdisciplinary perspectives on silence). In the language learning context, this can be seen as a practical limitation in general, for instance, through the omission of a more multidimensional depiction of cultural narratives related to the target cultures or regions in language textbooks, curricula, materials and assessments. This in turn can result in a stereotypical notion or conceptualization of those groups of people as an imagined community (for more on the latter in relation to language learning with the LL, see Bever and Richardson 2020). The silence around such cultural stereotypes can lead to fossilization or naturalization, giving them what is referred to here as mythical status. In terms of the LL, the notion of silence used here applies to absence of entire languages, dialects or translations, and thus the silencing of those people who are excluded from more active participation in sociopolitical realms. Such silences can make just as powerful a statement about the symbolic image or status of the related languages as the dominance of a given language in a particular linguistic landscape (Backhaus 2009; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). This notion of "visible silence" also includes the absence of certain words, symbols, colors, or other elements in the signs of linguistic/semiotic landscapes (for discussion of those terms see Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; for more on absences in the LL see Malinowski 2018; Zhao and Liu 2014). In places where on the surface there seems to be little connection to the language being learned, such as is the case with German in Arizona, the entire topic of local linguistic landscapes might be silenced.

The pedagogical opportunities of confronting language learners with such silences related to the LL inspired this study, informed also by the following wide ranging notion of silence that encompasses: "an auditory signal (pause) in a linguistic theory, as a pragmatic and discursive strategy, as a realization of a taboo, as a tool of manipulation, as part of listener's 'work' in interaction, and as an expression of artistic ideas" (Jaworski 1997, p. 4). Manipulation in various forms is significant for the notion of silence referred to in this study, with one dimension being the manipulation of language and public places to express or comment on topics that are otherwise oftentimes silenced—not only in the language classroom—because they are considered taboo, sensitive or too difficult to discuss. Another dimension is through the use of metaphoric language and paralanguage, or visual elements and symbols instead of text, all of which can be used to mask otherwise unstated, unwritten, implicit, or symbolic meanings. By using these techniques to create meaning, while at the same time distracting from it, the meanings of and within the text become more ambiguous (Cook 1992). This kind of manipulated language is likewise often silenced or avoided in the language learning context because it is considered too complex, difficult, or ambiguous for learners to decipher, particularly at the beginning levels.

The pedagogical framework of this study purposefully confronts language instructors and learners with manipulated language and spaces as well as the corresponding gaps, silences, and ambiguities. It takes into consideration the accompanying uncertainty or unease that can arise for language learners and instructors and the pedagogical implications and benefits. The unease of silence in the narrow sense, as in audible silence, is one reason why it has been described as "the utmost of ambiguity" (Perniola 2010), since it often leads to or is induced by confusion, misunderstanding, miscommunication, uncertainty, or doubt. Despite this fact, ambiguous elements of silences in the LL are not viewed here as a problem that needs to be reduced or solved, rather embraced as a natural occurrence in everyday life and encounters. What this means for the language classroom is exposing learners to the silences within and related to texts of the LL, in order that they become active participants in meaning making and negotiation. This can cause even more ambiguities to arise, as Myers (1994) has discussed in regard to language in advertisements, because active participation with the silences in various texts does not always result in one universal interpretation or answer. Instead, this process ideally prompts language learners to move beyond concrete, material aspects of signage and language to contemplate the multiple ambiguous, symbolic and non-neutral meanings which the texts provoke and foreground. In this manner, students can become involved in "shaping the contours of cultural gaps in meaning and relocating them" (Kramsch and Nolden 1994, p. 34). The process of actively shaping and engaging with the cultural and linguistic gaps or silences in the language classroom in order to relocate or unravel them is a critical aspect for cultivating a deeper sense of transcultural understanding by bringing more awareness to learners about their role in contributing to today's society.

3   The Study: Investigating the LL at Home and Abroad

3.1   Overview of the Study

During the spring semester 2015, a new curriculum was introduced into the fourth semester German class (GER4) at the University of Arizona. That course curriculum was divided into three units that focused respectively on the ambiguity of genre, perspective, and silence. During the third unit, students spent several weeks analyzing various linguistic and semiotic landscapes in films, music videos, lyrics, and postcards. The texts included were selected by the instructor for the potential they offered the learners to explore the direct and indirect manner in which various dimensions of silence, both audible and visible, are conveyed through verbal and nonverbal means. The unit closed with a module that focused more explicitly on the LL, which was developed according to the following objectives:

- Learners will enhance multiple literacies, transcultural understanding, and symbolic competence, in particular a tolerance of ambiguity, by:
  - investigating and reflecting on (silences in) the local LL, a setting where the target language (German) is not highly visible;
  - investigating and reflecting on (silences in) the LL of a city that they have never visited (in Germany);
  - expressing their own opinions (and silences) on the importance and role of the LL for language learning and in general.

In order to approach these objectives, authentic LL materials for the classroom were collected in two phases. Phase 1 involved ten summer study abroad participants of a four-week fifth-semester and above German language and culture course instructed by the author during the summer of 2014 in Leipzig. Leipzig is in the state of Saxony, in eastern Germany, where architectural remnants of the post-World War II Soviet occupation are not the only reminders of the long-lasting effects of the separation of Germany and isolation of former East Germans from Western influences. Economic and mental divides still exist for many Germans, which is evidenced in various aspects of life there, including in the LL. Phase 2 involved students in two sections of GER4 at the home institution who collected examples of German in the LL of their campus and city during spring 2015. While there have been some German influences in Arizona, the vicinity to Mexico makes Spanish the most visible language other than English in the region and on that campus. For Phase 2, students completed multiple LL activities and reflections, including a discussion with study abroad participants from Phase 1. One section of GER4 (Sect. 1) was instructed by the author and 20 of 21 students enrolled in that section consented to be included in this study. The other section of the course, Sect. 2, was instructed by a graduate assistant in teaching, whom the author also supervised. 12 of 17 students in Sect. 2 participated in this study. All student quotes included in this study were selected from submissions of those 32 participants.

3.2   Introducing LL and the Notion of Silences into the Language Classroom

To introduce the topic of linguistic landscapes into the newly designed curriculum of GER4, several songs and corresponding music videos from the Berlin-based band DOTA, made up of singer/songwriter Dota Kehr and the band *Die Stadtpiraten*, were incorporated into the third unit. The first song with which students worked was "*Öffentlicher Nahverkehr*" ["Local Public Transportation"] (Kehr 2003) and a corresponding music video. The video features Kehr playing the guitar and singing in the Berlin subway as well as a multitude of scenes from Berlin's LL. In one scene, a graffiti on a bridge is visible that proclaims in capital letters: *WIR WOLLEN NICHT EIN STÜCK VOM KUCHEN WIR WOLLEN DIE GANZE BÄCKEREI* [We don't want a piece of the cake, we want the entire bakery], followed by an anarchist symbol. This graffiti represents multiple dimensions of silence as referred to in this study, all of which contribute to a multiplicity of meanings, including:

- on a more indexical level as

  – silence of taken for granted-ness (that the text and symbol will be understood);
  – silence of cultural myths or stereotypes, here pertaining to the graffiti artist as rebel or more specifically to the West Berlin punk and anarchist movements of the 70s and 80s;

- on a more symbolic level as

  – silence in the use of metaphor;
  – silence in the manipulation of language and symbols, here with the intent to subvert (as opposed to establish) power.

The reader must draw a connection to the anarchist symbol in order to comprehend the more abstract level of the metaphor in the text, thus becoming an active participant in negotiating meaning of this graffiti. That is precisely what the learners in this study were asked to do.

After having discussed and analyzed this song and graffiti, another music video was shown of a live performance at which Kehr explained that the quote in that exact graffiti inspired the lyrics for another song called "*Utopie*" ["Utopia"] (Kehr 2010). That song depicts the world as a man-made place, and is a commentary of capitalistic structures and tendencies, drawing attention to the ambiguity created by the silences of those in power through the manipulation of language and information. These are common themes in two additional DOTA songs that were included in the curriculum. By engaging with all of these songs and videos, the GER4 students trained not only their listening and viewing abilities, but were exposed to the ambiguity of several dimensions of silence within the LL. Furthermore, the students saw that by paying attention to Berlin's LL, Kehr had the inspiration for an entire song and then made use of her position as musician to point to the power of the LL, thus giving voice to those who might otherwise be silenced in political processes.

Following this introduction to the notion of LL and silences, students were asked, like Kehr, to be more aware of their LL. More specifically, participants had 3 weeks to find at least two examples of German(ness) in their city and everyday surroundings. During that time, there was a recurring emphasis in class on additional texts from and related to LLs that highlighted the ambiguity of silences.

3.3   Tasks and Topics of the LL Module

Once GER4 students had time to collect their LL images, the course ended with a final LL module as outlined in Table 1. Student responses submitted for these tasks served as the main data sources for the current study. For Task 1, images were used that had been collected by the ten students during Phase 1 in Leipzig, although a few were from day-trips or weekend excursions to nearby towns and cities in eastern Germany (Wernigerode, Dresden, Berlin). 58 photographs were collected and can be sorted into the following categories, although some could correspond to multiple categories:

- Graffiti (21)
- Artistic Graffiti (5)
- Political Graffiti (6)
- English Language Graffiti (8)
- Other Graffiti (2)
- Signs (11)

  – Official Signs (7)
  – Unofficial Signs/Stickers (4)

- Public Sculptures/Architecture/Museums (8)
- People and Cultural Events (8)
- Food (5)
- Alcohol (5)

Table 1 Overview of the LL module topics and tasks

Topic	Task
1. Leipzig's linguistic landscapes	Categorization and analysis (in-class, small group) of photographs
2. Study abroad participants in the language classroom at home	In-class group discussion about Leipzig's LL and study abroad experience
3. German in our City	Post two photographs with written explanation to online discussion board (individual, at-home)
4. Status of German in our city and general impact of linguistic landscapes	Written reflection (individual, at-home)
5. Comparison of linguistic landscapes in Leipzig and our city	Final unit reflection (individual, written, at-home using online quiz tool)

The four latter categories are sometimes signs or include some linguistic element, for instance, a sign at a museum or the label on a wine bottle, while some images from all categories have no linguistic elements.

Learners in the US viewed printed copies of the pictures of Leipzig's LL, which had previously been grouped by the author into the six main categories above. In small groups, students first speculated on what the "category" was and gave it their own title. Then they chose one or two pictures from their category to analyze in writing and discuss with the class. Written group reflections were collected from the six groups in Sect. 1. While the LL images collected in Leipzig provided more contextual clues than is often the case in standard language textbooks, they were still to an extent also simply floating in a decontextualized realm for those learners in the US who had never been abroad. In order to bring in some more context and human agency for a better appreciation of the images of Leipzig's LL, two of the study abroad students who had participated in that initial investigation came to both sections of GER4 at the end of the spring semester 2015. They shared about their study abroad experience in general, and about their experience of the LL in particular.

Following the tasks around the LL abroad, the curriculum turned to the photos of German(ness) in the local LL that students in GER4 had collected and posted to their online learning platform with an accompanying explanation or description. The 32 participants submitted a total of 52 photographs. One student only posted photos, but no explanation. All of the pictures posted were printed and enough sets made so that in small groups, the students could categorize them. Since students were familiar with this kind of categorization from Task 1, they were quick to start categorizing on their own, even before the task was explained. After the in-class categorization and discussion of the posted pictures of German(ness) in the local LL, students were asked to complete a take-home written reflection (Task 4). The purpose of this task was for learners to begin critically reflecting about what these representations of German(ness) in their city might say about the status of German there or in the US in general, and the impact of LLs in our lives.

A similar prompt was used on the two-hour final unit reflection that was conducted at home during the officially scheduled exam time using the online quiz tool. Students were provided with a German version of Table 2, which shows the

Table 2 Categories of the LLs identified by GER4 students during spring semester 2015

Our City	Leipzig
1. Restaurants	1. Drinking (and love)
2. Products	2. Advertisement/informational signs
Cars	3. Graffiti
Food (candy)	4. Food/drinks
Alcohol	5. Culture (multiculturalism/art)
Hygiene	6. Events
3. Places/cultural events	7. Buildings, art, memorials
4. Names	
Companies	
Street signs	

categories identified by the GER4 students during the in-class tasks and at-home written reflections prior to the final unit reflection. Students were asked to draw comparisons and reflect on the meanings of the LLs in each specific context, and in general. Only one participant did not access the quiz, who had unofficially dropped the class by that time. The high participation rate was somewhat surprising, since the final unit reflection only accounted for 7% of the overall grade and participants were allowed to complete it from home.

4 Discussion of Student Data

Following an interpretive analysis model (see Hatch 2002), all student data were read to get an overall sense for what "silences" may have emerged in the images that students collected, during in-class discussions, and in their responses. The interpretive analysis process included categorizing the images as well as reading, rereading, and reviewing the written data analysis, and was rooted in notions presented above in Sect. 2 on Language Learning and the Ambiguity of Silences in the LL. Most important were the concepts of silence in ambiguous, metaphoric, or symbolic langue (Cook 1992), which can take for granted that the reader will be able to decipher it; silence as related to cultural stereotypes that lead to fossilization or mythical status (Bever and Richardson 2020), and silence as multiple kinds of manipulation (Jaworski 1997). Although the constructs of "silence" and "ambiguity" were never explicitly discussed with students as such, interpretive analysis process revealed the following salient impressions and interpretations:

- silence of taken for granted-ness;
- silence of cultural myths or stereotypes;
- silence in the manipulation of language, often with the intent to establish or subvert power.

These dimensions are not rigid categories, rather they serve as an aid in demonstrating a range of responses that may occur simultaneously, cyclically, or across a spectrum. In any given response most participants reflected on aspects pertaining to more than one dimension or to a mixture, while in some instances none of these aspects may have been indicated. In the following two sections, illustrative images collected by students as well as excerpts from student responses that demonstrate these main dimensions of silences are discussed. All responses included are translations of the students' original German.

4.1 Silence in the Taken for Granted Manipulation of Language

The examples in this section demonstrate how the manipulation of language through the omission of certain linguistic elements can take for granted a common base of understanding. This was the case with a picture taken in Leipzig of a spray-painted graffiti on the side of a building (Fig. 1) that reads "*1. MAI NAZI FREI*". At first glance, this brief phrase seems simple, and the (neo-)Nazi reference clear. Even novice learners of German will know that *Mai* is the month of May and *frei* means free, but due to the lack of a preposition, that graffiti caused a great sense of unease for the student who took the photo. It continued to cause confusion for the participants in Arizona, in particular when it was shown intentionally next to another student photograph (Fig. 2) from Leipzig of an official traffic sign that is covered in various unofficial stickers and graffiti. Underneath those stickers, a symbol of a bicycle is visible as well as the word *frei*. Here again, the author of the sign took for granted that the readers would understand the implied meaning behind the silence

Fig. 1 Antifascist graffiti in Leipzig

Fig. 2 Official traffic sign in Leipzig covered in unofficial stickers

of a missing preposition. The authoritative intent of the official traffic sign is unclear, but some learners noticed the background that is partially visible in the photograph—there are bicyclists on the street beyond the sign. This led them to correctly guess that the missing preposition is *for*, and that the street is free *for* bicyclists. This led to more uncertainty regarding the graffiti in Fig. 1, as the first instinct for many was to wonder if it meant that the first of May should be free *for* Nazis. That is precisely what the student who took the photograph in Leipzig had thought, which prompted discussions in both learning contexts regarding the cultural significance of May first, or International Workers' Day, in Europe and Germany, particularly the often violent antifascist resistance movements or the other peaceful demonstrations in response to neo-Nazis who continue to abuse that day. Thus, the learners were quite relieved to learn that the lacking preposition in the graffiti is *of*. The unsettling distress caused by the silence due to the absence of a single preposition brought learners to contemplate not only the importance of prepositions, but multiple cultural narratives pertaining to the German-speaking world they had not previously encountered in a textbook.

The benefit of such LL images and activities for drawing learners' attention to sociocultural narratives that may otherwise be silenced by their omission from language textbooks and curricula is indicated in the following student comment from the final unit reflection:

> For the category about German in our city, it says that we only have a little understanding of their culture. […] For me, I liked the photos from Germany. I thought that the photos with graffiti were interesting because they showed me a different side of the German culture. This was a side that I normally would not see. This "linguistic landscape" is important because it shows the unnoticed side of culture. (Sam, Sect. 1)

Sam first addressed what was perceived as an absence of cultural appreciation in the US and then expanded on the photos related to Leipzig's LL. For Sam, graffiti was a part of German culture that they would otherwise maybe never have known about or experienced. Another student from that section noted the value of the graffiti images from Leipzig in their final unit reflection, stating "In Leipzig they have more cultural expression. I love the photos of graffiti. The graffiti and art were similar to text in a book. But they preserve the value and history of Leipzig" (Logan, Sect. 1). Similar to Sam, Logan realized the power of a more multifaceted depiction of cultures—not only in the public LL, but also as presented in books. The examples and student responses in this section highlight the importance of going beyond the cultural side notes as they are often presented in language textbooks and bringing in authentic examples from the LL, even if they have taken for granted cultural background knowledge that learners might have to unpack. By confronting the silence of manipulated language as it is found within the LL, language learners gain insight on the manner in which silences can be used to subvert or impose authoritative and/or subversive intentions.

4.2   Silence in Cultural Stereotypes and Myths

Since German was not a highly used or represented language in the local LL of the learners in Phase 2, they did not limit themselves to public signs with German words or names when collecting examples. Instead, they also included images of places and events, from private spaces, and even of people and animals, such as a German shepherd dog spotted at a park. In their initial posts accompanying the images, several GER4 students admitted to having chosen examples that seemed at first glance to have no direct link to the German language or German-speaking world. For instance, in the following excerpt:

> My next picture is a beer called Pilsner. Although it is from Pilsen in the Czech Republic, it is very popular in Berlin. When I was in Berlin, many people drank Pilsner. I also had many interesting and happy conversations with German people, as we drank Pilsner. (Sam, Sect. 1)

Sam justified the picture of a Czech beer with an explanation that represented affective connections to Germany. While Sam's comment might seem to promote a

common stereotypical image of beer drinking in Germany, it indicates awareness of the transcultural connections created through and related to that tradition, and of the fact that not all people drank beer.

In both sections of GER4, participants posted photographs of a local German club and their related events, for instance River, who noted: "Here is a photo of the Mt. Lemmon Oktoberfest. There are German dancers, a polka band, a few beers (in bottles) and German food. You could also hike here" (River, Sect. 2). This response also indicates a stereotypical notion of German(ness), including polka dancing, which is a Czech tradition that has taken on a mythical status in the US as something German. The origins of polka dancing might otherwise have been silenced, perpetuating that myth. However, by discussing examples like this and Sam's in class, language learners broadened their awareness about the mix of cultures and traditions related to the German-speaking world.

Silence in the sense of stereotypes and perceived lack of cultural awareness in the US was a common theme among student responses in the final unit reflection, for example, as indicated in the following excerpt: "America doesn't care about culture; nobody knows what 'Linden' is. No one thinks that Himmel Park is something more than a last name" (Page, Sect. 2). In this response, Page displays linguistic knowledge of the German words Linden and Himmel, but also awareness of potential broader connotations of those names and words in the US and in Germany. Page is referencing a few photographs taken near the university, including Fig. 3. While the stop sign in that image appears to be floating in the sky, similar to traffic signs floating on a textbook page, the street sign attached to it had prompted a discussion in class of the street name "Linden" and the comparison to the well-known street *Unter den Linden* in Berlin. In that same response, Page continued to contemplate the silencing ambiguity surrounding the mythical nature that certain concepts and people have attained in the US: "But we all can comprehend German beer (at least Heineken, no?). And high souls, like Einstein? Everyone has forgotten that he

Fig. 3 Linden Street sign atop a stop sign in Arizona

was born in Germany." Page is referencing a picture taken by some of the study abroad students showing a Heineken sign and sarcastically comments on the belief that people in the US are not able to differentiate between German and Dutch beer, as well as the mythical status that Einstein has achieved.

In order to combat the silencing nature of such cultural stereotypes, many students noted the benefits of the LL in their final reflections, such as in this comment: "I think that America has a stereotypical idea of German culture. And that is why it is important to pay attention to the 'linguistic landscape'. It can decide what we think of other cultures" (Logan, Sect. 1). Logan mentions what is considered the stereotypical portrayal of German culture in the US, and realizes the potential damage that the omission or silencing of a more multifaceted depiction of a group of people can have. Logan recognizes the power of the LL in contributing to breaking down misconceptions by offering additional perspectives. The examples in this case demonstrate the pedagogical possibilities of the LL for bringing language learners to question the dimensions of silence as related to stereotypes. By addressing such topics, language learners can expose the ambiguous roots of cultural stereotypes and myths, thus expanding their transcultural awareness and symbolic competence.

Many of the images collected in both contexts, Leipzig (Phase 1) and Arizona (Phase 2), reveal that the students had adapted a broader conceptualization of the LL, in the sense that they were not limited to purely linguistic elements and reflected more of an engagement of human agency. The LL images fostered discussions that went beyond basic vocabulary or grammar exercises and contributed to the development of multiple literacies and competences. For instance, the multiple English language signs and graffiti from Germany led to conversations in both learning contexts about the status of English as a global language and tool for power. Furthermore, instructor observations in both settings and analysis of student responses from Phase 2 revealed several dimensions of silence related to the images as well as to their implementation as learning materials in the language classroom. An example of this was the absence of a single preposition in the graffiti in Fig. 1, which caused confusion for the learners in both contexts due to the ambiguity of meaning. This confusion brought the learners to contemplate a side of (German) culture they had not previously encountered in their language classes.

The initial written descriptions posted with the images of German(ness) in Arizona varied from concrete descriptions of where exactly students had found their examples in the LL, to more extensive interpretation or analyses, and affective responses. The posts indicate that simply by drawing students' attention to the potential presence of German in their everyday surroundings, some had already begun to notice various dimensions of silence pertaining to the LL. By the final unit reflection, some student responses were still quite brief or provided only concrete descriptions or factual knowledge about a certain photograph. At the intermediate level of language learning, that kind of response is sufficient. Overall, though, the responses indicate that learners were able to use German to draw connections between their everyday surroundings, the German-speaking world, and beyond. A common theme expressed by participants in their final reflection was a positive, although in some instances perhaps naïve, view of the potential of the LL for critical

engagement with issues of sociocultural importance and the danger of silencing that may arise if the LL is ignored.

5   Conclusions and Implications

This study shows the potential that LL projects have for bringing language learners to acknowledge human agency within cultural narratives, rather than only working with de-contextualized images of signs that are floating on the pages of a textbook. While the LL images collected by learners and used in the classroom might still be seen as floating snapshots removed from their authentic contexts, they can indeed offer a more multilayered exploration of topics of transcultural relevance. In so doing, they can bring language learners to question their unique understandings and the general impact of the LL, including the ambiguity of texts that embody or impose some kind of silence, as well as the ambiguity that is created though that which remains unspoken. Thus, the current study invites language instructors and learners to

- explore the LL of their own everyday surroundings, even if the language they are teaching or learning is not highly salient;
- find ways to experience the LL of the regions and countries where the language being learned is spoken and visible;
- notice and reflect on ambiguities and silences in a broad sense within and related to those various LLs in order to enhance multiple literacies and competences.

Through pedagogical interventions and assessments designed to provoke and foreground a sense of ambiguity in regard to silence, as the discussion of exemplary participant responses has shown, language learners can negotiate meanings beyond a concrete level of description. LL activities also provide language learners with the opportunity to realize their role as active social participants who are constantly involved in an informal, incidental process of engaging in negotiation and construction of meanings of all kinds of texts. Integrating similar LL modules across various levels of the language curriculum, thereby bringing in more examples of manipulated, ambiguous language from everyday contexts at all levels, might contribute to smoothing the transition between lower- and upper-levels of instruction in postsecondary language learning in the US.

Further studies on LL activities for the language classroom are necessary to better indicate how the framework of silences proposed here might be more purposefully implemented in order to encourage learners to more conscientiously explore multiple related dimensions: the taken for granted-ness of idiomatic phrases, cultural expressions, stereotypes or naturalized myths, as well as the creative use of metaphor and other kinds of manipulation of language. A critical consideration for future implementation is how to identify "silences" in the LL toward which teachers can lead their learners. This means cultivating an awareness amongst instructors regarding the dimensions of silences that they and their learners may

encounter – the audible and visible silences that are manifested in the LL, while at the same time realizing that their learners may perceive other silences that the instructor had not anticipated. Language instructors may need training and support when incorporating LL activities into language courses, including reminders to embrace the ambiguity of the LL themselves for a more nuanced discussion and approach to cultural stereotypes or myths that might arise. The aim of confronting language learners with ambiguous texts of the LL becomes not just basic comprehension, that is, what the sign literally means in one's first language. Rather, as this study highlights, the LL has pedagogical potential for exposing language learners to, and bringing them to reflect critically on, perspectives in life that may otherwise be ignored or silenced. Through the implementation of LL activities, language instructors and learners alike can begin or continue to question literal meanings and negotiate other potential meanings that may exist: What could this mean to someone else? What could this have meant in another space? What conceived and perceived meanings become lived spaces through our active engagement with the LL? By posing such questions, language learners become more aware of their place in today's multicultural and multilingual society, deepen their symbolic competence as well as multiple other literacies, and foster a sense of appreciation for language learning and the LL in general.

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