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## SIGNIFYING BRNO – CREATING URBAN SPACE, SHAPING THE CITY

### **Abstract**

Written verbal expressions displayed in urban spaces offer valuable insights into a city's identity from the perspectives of those who live there and have an urgent need to express themselves publicly but anonymously. In accordance with the bottom-up approach of linguistic landscape studies (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), the paper presents the author's pilot research project investigating the Brno linguistic environment in which vernacular street signage found in the neighborhoods of Židenice and Střed are documented and categorized according to their functional, visual and distributional aspects. In addition to outlining the signage typology, the paper attempts to answer the question of how these messages and their locations reflect the reputations of the two districts and how they participate in the discursive construction of Brno's urban spaces.

### **Key words**

*Linguistic landscape, vernacular street signage, Brno, graffiti, existential messages*

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### **1. Introduction**

Within the discourse of linguistic landscapes, urban spaces function as channels of communication that allow for the expression of a broad scale of messages, ranging from official announcements, public signs, store signage, billboards, and outdoor advertisements to street art and other forms of unofficial scribbling. Texts located in such spaces thus offer remarkable insights into the society, signifying the relationship between the higher authorities that govern a city and the ordinary

citizens who can thus “confront the lines of authority around the public space” (Pennycook 2009: 306–307).

The officially approved texts enable a municipal administration to regulate and control the language policy of a given society. Such texts became the subject of research interest at the beginning of 1990s when sociolinguists started to analyze bilingual messages in order to find the reflection of a multilingual society in the public discourse (see e.g. Spolsky and Cooper 1991 or Landry and Bourhis 1997). This top-down approach (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), however, does not reveal the real *vox populi* of a society. In order to find out how some people verbally participate in urban spaces, it is important to focus on authentic texts sprayed on or scratched onto walls, facades, pavements, and other types of surfaces situated in the public space. These illegal writings construct the social design of a given neighborhood in a much more evident way than official texts do since they document and reflect what a city’s inhabitants really think about, believe in, or are troubled by. Such texts have caught the attention of scholars only recently, as is illustrated by e.g. Papen’s research (2012) on graffiti expressing residents’ protest against gentrification in Berlin or Busse’s (2014) study of Brooklynites’ linguistic activities constructing this New York district as a specific brand. In order to enrich this bottom-up approach (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006) in linguistic landscape studies, the present paper introduces the author’s pilot project researching the linguistic environment of Brno, the second largest city in the Czech Republic. The objective of the paper is to define a term that can cover all forms and varieties of urban communication and to outline the typology of the documented texts found in two neighbouring districts. The typology is primarily based on Jakobson’s (1960) functions the texts fulfil, but their typographical character and form of distribution are taken into consideration as well. The paper also aims to discover how the original location of the texts factors into the discursive construction of the studied locations.

## 2. Terminology

Since linguistic landscape is a relatively young discipline, terms related to texts located in urban spaces have not yet been firmly established, and thus the terminology might differ among scholars (Shohamy and Gorter 2009). Therefore, it is important to introduce and define the key terms used in the present paper.

As written above, the paper explores texts that were created by people rather than by a municipal administration. In order to encompass the origin, the placement, and the diversity of modes of such writing, the paper uses the term *vernacular street signage*. This is meant to convey wall writings and drawings that are sprayed, inscribed, scribbled, scratched, stuck, rolled, stenciled, or provided by any other artistic or non-artistic techniques. Following Kress and van Leeuwen’s semiotic approach (2001), such texts represent multimodal texts that are meant to distribute messages both verbally and visually. Therefore, the content and the

form as well as the text location are important factors in this particular communicative process.

The term *signage* covers any form of expression that an anonymous author chooses for communication. Due to its multimodal character, the term ranges from letters and other visual symbols such as hearts or skulls to what might be called ‘crafted’ forms of communication represented by for instance knitting and planting flowers as performed by guerilla knitting and guerilla gardening communities, respectively (for more information, see the profiles of such communities on their Facebook webpages). *Signage* thus refers to the collective of signs that have the potential of being displayed in urban spaces and thus of addressing the public.

As far as the attributives are concerned, the expression *street* does not refer to where a text originates, but rather where it is placed. The environmental context, i.e. where exactly, in which place and on what type of an object, a text is located thus participates in the multimodal character of a given text. The expression *vernacular* relates to the language variety that the author of a text uses for communication. Whether authors are individuals or members of a group, as may be the case with graffiti, they remain anonymous. This allows them to address the public unofficially, using non-standard language. Therefore, *vernacular* refers to the folk or plebeian language variety that is expressed anonymously and publicly.

Since the paper focuses on texts sprayed or scratched by anonymous authors on public or private properties, it might raise the question of why the terms *graffiti* or *street art* have not been chosen as the umbrella term. Both *graffiti* and *street art* might be misleading as far as their manifestation and interpretation by the broader public are concerned. According to Milon (2002: 87), people tend to see graffiti as “incomprehensible hieroglyphic signatures that aggressively pollute the visual space of the inhabitant”. Consequently, graffiti is perceived as a destructive element that only uglifies shared urban spaces, trains, and subways. Moreover, a large amount of public money is required to remove disruptive graffiti. On the other hand, those forms of graffiti that are artistically rendered seem to be tolerated and appreciated. For such forms, the term *street art* has become preferred. It is generally agreed that street art originated from graffiti (see e.g. Vorel 2015). For the purpose of the present paper, the term *graffiti* is reserved for the verbal expressions that serve the communicative purposes of the Brno graffiti sub-community and its members. *Street art*, however, is understood by the present paper as a very broad term that is mentioned only when the aesthetic aspect of a text needs to be mentioned or highlighted. In other words, while *graffiti* is used as a typological unit, *street art* is not, since the paper does not aim to discuss the limits of where graffiti ends and street art begins. The paper thus uses the umbrella term *vernacular street signage* to encompass all the anonymous messages that can take any form of verbal or non-verbal expression and that are found on streets. In this sense, *vernacular street signage* represents multimodal texts that are determined by the textual, visual and contextual aspects. They represent social products that participate in constructing urban spaces (Lefebvre 1991). Since

the paper focuses on vernacular signage of a written variety, the term *vernacular street writing* alternates with *vernacular street signage*.

### 3. Data

The paper analyzes authentic vernacular writing, with the material for the study provided by the author's private collection of documented Brno street signage. The corpus consists of 268 photographs that were taken with a Nikon digital camera. In order to keep the authenticity of the signage and the originality of their locations, the photographs have not been modified apart from slight changes in framing to make the documented texts legible.

The corpus is a result of fieldwork that took place from April to December 2014, during which the author of the paper documented as much street signage as possible. As far as the selection of the streets is concerned, the studied locations are the districts of Židenice and Střed, represented by the streets Bubeníčková, Zábrdovická, and Cejl in Židenice; and Koliště, Husova, Denisovy sady, Ulička Václava Havla, Běhounská, Marešova, Údolní, Obilní trh, Úvoz, Gorkého, Grohova, Jana Uhra, Čápkova, Jiráskova, Arne Nováka, and Jaselská in Střed. These two districts are perceived as locations with different economical and socio-cultural characters. Židenice, especially the street Cejl, is often referred to as the *Brno Bronx* due to a high concentration of socially excluded or maladjusted people, predominantly by residents of Romani origin (see e.g. Suralová 2008). Cejl is thus seen as a bad neighborhood where nobody wants to live. Střed, in contrast, is a residential district with high rent prices, fancy restaurants, administrative and municipal offices, cultural institutions, and the Masaryk university headquarters and two of its faculties. The resulting composition of white-collar workers, students, local residents, and tourists leads to the location's perception as a colorful, cultural, and cultivated district. According to Papen's idea that vernacular street forms of expression play a part in "shaping a neighborhood's character and reputation" (2012: 57), the paper presupposes that the reputations of the Brno Bronx and Střed will be reflected in the street signage of these two districts.

In addition to her own corpus, the author has considered comments and photographs uploaded on fan web pages related to the Brno graffiti scene and street art in order to provide as much comprehensive and compact information about the Brno linguistic landscape as possible. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the paper presents the results of just a small part of Brno's linguistic environment. To cover the whole city, more fieldwork and research are needed.

### 4. Brno vernacular street signage taxonomy

The studied vernacular street signage varies from single words to four-line poems rendered in various typographical styles and visual designs. What they have in

common are the anonymity of the authors, the heterogeneity of the audience and the public space as a channel of communication. Considering their communicative situation and context, the suggested typology is based on the following criteria. In order to distinguish their functional aspects, the primary criterion stems from Jakobson's (1960) model of language functions. His model differentiates six functions depending on which of the six communicative factors, that is the sender, receiver, context, message, channel and code, are affected and towards which of them the communication is oriented. Like in any other type of communication, vernacular street writing can combine several functions, but one of them usually stands out as the most pivotal. Besides Jakobson's model, the secondary criteria reckon the visual aspect of a text (the design of a text), and the distributional aspect, i.e. the spatial and temporal array of a given text (where a message is placed and whether it has a recurrent character). The criteria are not to be seen as exclusive since some of the communication functions or styles might overlap, for example the referential function found both in graffiti and existential messages, and so might the design of the poems and that of some of the existential messages. In accordance with the criteria described above, the studied locations exhibit three types of vernacular street writing: *graffiti*, *existential messages*, and *poetry*.

The term *graffiti* covers all the forms of signage by which the so-called writers or crews (groups of writers) refer to their secret identities within a graffiti sub-community. Spraying one's nickname on a public property illegally functions as a means of public interactivity between the sub-community members. Writers leave their signatures on public properties, which allows them to mark their territory and thus to inform the other members that they have appropriated a particular object. The more properties writers appropriate, i.e. the more they tag, the better they can build up and maintain their position within the community (Charvátová 2010). On the other hand, graffiti also addresses outsiders, ordinary passersby who are exposed to this type of vernacular street signage while walking along the streets. Some writers admit that they like irritating the outsiders who do not understand the nature of graffiti (Os 10 2005a: 40). Timo, one of the best-known Brno writers who does not belong to any crew and whose pieces are appreciated by the majority of Brno residents thanks to their artistic values (see his fans' Facebook webpage), explains that people do not like graffiti because it indicates the failure of a system which is supposed to protect them (Palánová 2005). Considering the addresser-addressee relationship, graffiti represents a semi-anonymous type of communication because writers usually know one another and graffiti enables them to strengthen a position of a particular writer within the sub-community. On the other hand, the outsiders approach the signatures as nicknames of vandals, often as illegible scribbling, who like destroying public spaces. Following Jakobson's classification (1960), the interactivity within and outside the sub-community fulfils the phatic function, as if saying "Hi, it's me"; the appropriation of a property describes the situational context, the illegal appropriation of a property, as if saying "Now this is mine", and thus the referential function is performed. As far as the visual aspect is concerned, graffiti can be realized in

a number of styles and forms, ranging from amateur scribbling to professional chromes (see Figures 1-4). As written above, the more tags a writer create, the higher the possibilities of recognition within the graffiti sub-community, which means that graffiti represents a type of signage that occupies urban spaces very frequently.

Unlike graffiti, the other two types of signage, i.e. *existential messages* and *poetry*, are less conspicuous since they are distributed only sporadically. Borrowing Alonso's categorization, *existential messages* can be defined as inscriptions that "contain individual personal commentaries" (Alonso 1998: 7). Those inscriptions enable residents to express their personal feelings, stances, and attitudes towards issues of diverse characteristics such as love, race, sex, politics, philosophy etc. Existential messages do not function as a communicative means for a sub-community since their authors do not form any such community. Their creators are unknown individuals who do not intend to appropriate public space, but to release their emotions. Existential messages thus document the existence of real inhabitants that take advantage of public space to communicate their needs, such as to express one's love, to share one's ideology, to arouse social awareness about a particular problem, or to encourage the fellow residents to a type of activity that is specified in the message. Depending on the core of the message, such texts perform expressive, referential or conative functions. Unlike graffiti, existential messages are not stylized; they are short, impromptu texts handwritten both on walls and on objects of public space such as benches, lamps or trashcans. However, some of these messages are not created spontaneously, but can be prefabricated at home and then stenciled on a wall (see Figure 6). This is also the case of the third type of the analyzed signage, here simply referred to as *poetry*. A small sample of love poems stencilled in purple color on trashcans in the park area of Obilní trh were created and written by Timo. Even though we know the author's pseudonym, his real identity is hidden for a broader public, like in case of the Brno graffiti-community members. Due to the orientation towards the message itself and its positive effect on the addressee, the poetic function is the one that prevails in this type of vernacular street signage.

#### 4.1 Graffiti

From a historical perspective, graffiti can be seen as a means of learning about the history of ancient cultures or about the history of writing (Reisner 1971 as cited in Alonso 1998; and Abel and Buckley 1977 as cited in Alonso 1998). However, urban society sees modern forms of graffiti as transgressive discourse (Scollon and Scollon 2003), the origin of which can be traced back to the 1960s when the legendary tag Taki 183 first appeared in New York City (Charles 1971) and which as a genre has been further developed and exploited by Los Angeles gangs marking territories (Alonso 1998), and more recently by hip-hop culture (Pennycook 2009).

From the point of view of those who create graffiti, the destructive element is a major motivator, because it enables the writer, the graffiti-maker, to build on

and maintain a position within a graffiti sub-community, and to simultaneously dissociate from the majority society and culture (Os 10 2005a, b, but compare to Bobby 2006). In making graffiti, the writer destroys property and thus achieves dominance over a public place. This appropriation is supposed to guarantee respect and recognition and to maintain status with other members within the sub-community. According to Meyerhoff's (2006) sociolinguistic perspective, a graffiti sub-community is a community of practice whose shared goal is to symbolically own public or state properties. Its social networking is maintained by direct contact that usually takes place in a club, by web pages where writers upload and share their graffiti pieces, and by specialized magazines such as the French *Xplicit Grafix* or the Czech *phtatbeatz.cz* or *bbarak.cz*. As Macdonald's ethnographic research (2001) demonstrates, graffiti-making is practiced by young adolescents, especially males, who are about to face the difficult transition from boyhood to adulthood. In their search for manhood, they construct their identity and career within a graffiti sub-community. The writer works hard on promoting their nicknames in order to be accepted, recognized, and appreciated by other members of the community. The recognition and appreciation then guarantee a higher status in the established hierarchy.

Brno's graffiti sub-community was established in the early 1990s when the first crews started tagging street walls (Gojná 2011). Despite the fact that in 2001 graffiti was defined as a crime, and despite the Brno mayor Petr Duchoň's (1998-2004) zero tolerance approach to graffiti and graffiti writers, the graffiti sub-community has survived and its members are very active and progressive, as shown by the latest issue of *Disgrafix* magazine mapping what was created in Brno between 2011 and 2014.

Like in other cities, Brno writers operate with three basic graffiti units: tags or tagging, throw-ups, and chromes, see Figures 1, 2 and 3.

As written above, all three units communicate the writers' or crews' nicknames in stylized letters; the difference is in the technique used. *Tags* can be defined as the simplest graffiti piece, sprayed on a wall in one go and in one colour. *Throw-ups* are unfilled contours of a tag done in one to three colours (Castleman 1982: 26–29). *Chromes* represent the most artistic form of graffiti – they are silver throw-ups with a colourful filling (Gojná 2011: 11). The execution of each piece depends on the writer's equipment and skilfulness, as well as on the temporal and spatial circumstances given for the process itself. While tags can be done really quickly almost anywhere, chromes require more time and space, as well as more artistic ability. Writers start with tagging on walls without considering the context of the space. Once they become more experienced with all the equipment they need for graffiti-making, they begin with chromes, which are usually displayed on panels or trains and thus represent a more time- and equipment-consuming process. Writers also have to think more about where they locate their chromes, both because of the security risks and because they also take the impact of the surrounding context into consideration (Os 10 2005b: 42). Even though quantity is less appreciated than quality, writers themselves admit that the more they tag, the





**Figure 1.** Examples of tags



**Figure 2.** An example of a throw-up



**Figure 3.** An example of a chrome

more their style improves, since the visual aspect of a tag determines the quality of writer's graffiti (Os 10 2005c: 48). The visual aspect encompasses the originality of the design of the chosen letters, the technical accuracy and precision, and the employment of other pictographic symbols to embellish the letters. A good illustration can be found in the figure below.



**Figure 4.** Tags' typographic originality

Comparing the tags created by El' Nino (in the center) and Oliver (in the upper left-hand corner), it is obvious that they were each done in one go, but El' Nino's tag is more precise. The color does not drip; it stays where it is supposed to be. In Oliver's tag, the color drips, which devalues the tag. The rendering of El' Nino is unique, displaying a homogenous typographic style with alternating rounded and pointed shapes, and the embellishing spirals and the tiny smiley face in the letter *o* make it a more elaborate tag.

Although the stylistic visual aspect is perceived as the most evaluative criterion within a graffiti sub-community (Castleman 1982, Cooper and Chalfant 2015), this does not mean that writers adhere to one typographic style. On the contrary, experienced taggers play with their style, so a number of varieties in typefaces, letter sizes, letter spacing, and additional symbolic features can be found; compare e.g. LOW and FET crews in Figures 1-3. The various fonts, techniques, and details in the middle letters and in the variability of symbols illustrate these two crews' artistic ability to vary their visual styles. In other words, once a writer or a crew is established within a graffiti community and their nickname is highly recognized and appreciated, it becomes their brand name. Unlike in marketing, however, the visual identification of a graffiti brand name is often modified. The richness and variability thus reflect the writer's visual and typographic literacy, or as Conquergood (2014) says "counterliteracy".

Although the visual form seems to support the associations and connotations of a nickname, the semantic aspect is crucial as well. The name a writer chooses for defining themselves and for being accepted should reflect their personality. Therefore, a writer chooses a name that raises certain connotations and evokes certain feelings. For instance, the writer called El' Nino stated that he picked this name after watching a documentary on the climatic phenomenon that causes severe damage in the southern hemisphere. He appreciated that as this phenomenon has destructive consequences, people speak about it with respect, and that is what he wanted – to be respected (Os 10 2005b: 42). His chosen identity is thus intended to refer to the destructive elements of graffiti, and at the same time to be held in high regard. Abbreviations used by crews are also not necessarily chosen randomly. For example, the abbreviation CMR used by one Prague crew stands for the expression CaMaRádi (friends), with the letter C replacing the original K. This verbal creativity emphasizes the secret identity of the crew for the outsiders (Os 10 2005a: 40).

The nicknames of Brno writers are very often negatively loaded: El' Nino, Heroin, Rum, dark 161, LOW or FET. The references to climatic phenomenon or to addictive substances that can have fatal consequences are supposed to highlight the destructive nature associated with graffiti. Considering the visual form and the meanings of the chosen nicknames, Brno writers choose signs with a dual message. For the outsiders, a tagged nickname is supposed to incite fear, as if to say, "I'm the one you should be afraid of, since the system you are living in allowed me to destroy a public property, so I am a potential danger for the whole society." At the same time, for the audience of the graffiti sub-community

members, the message might be interpreted as follows: “I am the one who has appropriated this place, so hail me.” The space appropriation is also indicated by the use of the English genitive; see the picture below.



**Figure 5.** Genitive in WFG's tag

#### ***4.2 Existential Messages***

Existential messages are inscriptions the major intention of which is to express the “outward manifestations of personality” (Alonso 1998: 5). They are created by people who take advantage of public spaces in order to satisfy their overwhelming need to share their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings with their fellow residents via the medium of a public social construct. A wall, a street lamp, or the pavement can serve as an ideal medium for satisfying this need with a very low risk of being penalized. In order to keep the authenticity of those messages, the examples used in this subchapter are provided in the original wording. If necessary, an English translation accompanies the original. Unless otherwise indicated, the text was translated by the author of the paper.

The messages that are associated with love-related aspects range from childish expressions, through friendship to the opposite pole, to hatred. Cejl is full of

love equations represented by initials, such as  $T+M = VELKA SVETOVA LASKA = VSL$  ( $T+M = GREAT WORLD LOVE = GWL$ ), or by using nicknames, e.g.  $KOKI + Pěta$ . The usage of initials and nicknames enables the authors to keep the individuals secret, but at the same time to share their emotions with their closest neighbors. In addition to love equations, instances of friendship confirmation are found as well, e.g. *Iveta a Pavla jsou navždy kámošky, forever (Iveta and Pavla are always friends, forever)*. The impulse for such inscriptions is the preservability of the text. Once a confession is written on a wall, and thus preserved, it achieves a higher communicative value than if it were just spoken aloud. Consequently, the whole friendship seems to be more serious and unbreakable. The occurrence of English expressions in emotional messages is quite frequent, probably owing to the fact that English as a lingua franca is also the language of love distributed around the world by Hollywood movies and love songs. A combination of English and Czech expressions together with a symbolic value of a heart as a predicator is illustrated in *i ♥ cikánky (i ♥ gypsy girls)*, also found on Cejl. Even whole sentences in English appear, e.g. *I love, I hate, I miss*, reflecting the conflict of a strong emotive state. The opposite pole, in which messages full of hatred are displayed, tends to be very abrasive. Quite vulgar expressions can be found in both investigated districts, e.g. *Stazina je kurva (Stazina is a whore)* on Cejl, or *PIČO ZDECHNI DO RÁNA (Cunt drop dead by morning)* on Čápkova. The positive aspect is that these uncultivated messages seem to be outnumbered by the ones expressing love and friendship.

Besides love confessions, there are inscriptions that address topics which might be taboo in a society, such as sex or graffiti itself. *Sex je dřina ale nekdo to delat musí že holky (Sex is a tough job but somebody has to do it, right girls)* is written with a blue marker on a number of benches in Denisovy sady, a small park on Petrov Hill often visited by couples in love. Situated in the centre of the city and overlooking Brno, the park is peaceful and quiet, and thus ideal for spending one's time with their partners and expressing their love while sitting on benches. Considering the location and its utility, the tag of the sex message addressing the female audience (*right girls*) strengthens its entertaining character. Graffiti as a practice prohibited by legal forces and disapproved of by majority of people is justified in Timo's *Graffiti = veřejně prospěšné práce (Graffiti = community service)* found in Bubeníčková street. By *graffiti*, Timo means any message, a tag or an inscription made by an ordinary resident, that is displayed illegally in a public space. He endeavours to convey that graffiti can serve as a channel of communication between ordinary residents and public authorities in a much more effective way than by using official channels of negotiation, since graffiti makes it possible to draw the authorities' attention to current problems that ordinary people suffer from or want to announce (Zabloudilová 2013). In other words, graffiti communication is much faster and more challenging than official communication. Timo's message is thus addressed both to the city authorities that tend to suppress graffiti-makers and to his fellow residents who are thus encouraged to utilize public space for expressing their wants and needs. This challenge was in

fact accepted by the author of *Po psech uklízet hovna! Hovada* (*Tidying up dog shit! Jerks* [translated by Filip Krajník – FK]). This message is written with chalk on the blackboard of an abandoned shop on the street Zábřdovická. The writer wanted to express dissatisfaction with dog-owners' ignorance about leaving their pet excrement on the sidewalk. The author thus exploited an empty surface of the blackboard to alert the neighbours that everyone is responsible for the tidiness and order of the public space they share with others. Since shop blackboards usually announce special offers, a certain degree of irony can be found in the *jerks* directive. The use of the infinitive form *uklízet* as a curt command is in the Czech language seen as a device that stresses out the urgency of the message (Grepel and Karlík 1998: 456). On the other hand, the command is barely visible, probably due to the fact that it was written with white chalk that has been slightly blurred by rain. As a result, its appearance seems to contradict its linguistic urgency. The ephemerality of an existential message and its urgency are subject to weather and to the interference of property owners or authorities, and thus to the ever changing character of street signage.

Another example of an appeal addressed to fellow residents is displayed at a butcher's shop at the corner of Jiráskova and Grohova streets. Unlike the previous one, however, this message does not tackle the topic of residents' responsibility for the shared public space, but rather for meat production and consumption. The author stenciled his or her opinion as *Jak ti chutná utrpení?* (*How tasty do you find suffering?* [translated by FK]). The question, which implies the imperative to think about suffering of the animals kept for meat consumption, is accompanied by a drawing of a pig's head; see the picture below.



Figure 6. How tasty do you find suffering?

The original drawing showing a close-up of the animal's head is supposed to suggest the closeness between the object depicted and the addressee (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 124). Moreover, the closeness is also found in the choice of the personal pronoun in its dative form *ti* (*you* addressing an individual). The choice signals the author's intention to establish the friendly or informal relation with the addressee, which would be lost if the formal *vám* (*you* addressing more individuals) were used. The choice of an indirect speech act presupposes an intelligent addressee who is able to infer the author's intended meaning. The impact of this witty combination of both visual and verbal signs on those who enter the shop can be much higher than that of the *jerks* imperative. Simply speaking, while the direct speech act might be perceived as ridiculous, so people will ignore the message, the indirect one has a higher potential of making people think about the way animals are slaughtered.

Even though Brno streets have legal hoardings where the upcoming concerts are advertised, some local musicians or maybe their fans exploit Brno public space as a channel of unofficial marketing communication. *To žluté co máte na kalhotkách* (*The yellow that you have on your panties*) sprayed on a craft shop on Cejl or *Zbožňuj ňuňu* and *Poslouchej ňuňu* (*Adore ňuňu and Listen to ňuňu*) sprayed through a stencil on the pavements of the district of Střed promote the very existence of the bands illegally. At the same time, the atypical names of the bands located on non-promoting objects challenge the dominant discourse and thus enhance the attractiveness of the music they perform.

Although existential messages can be found in both of the studied location, it can be concluded that the residents of Židenice are mostly occupied by expressing their love and friendship, while those of Brno Střed prefer drawing attention to social-, taboo- and community-driven topics (such as killing animals for food, sex as a dirty job for girls or the promotion of one's artistic projects). Concerning the functions, existential messages are multifunctional with one of the functions being dominant. Those messages that intend to make passersby think about a particular problem are governed by the conative function while love confessions stem from the expressive function. The messages that spread one's ideology, like Timo's *Graffiti = veřejně prospěšné práce* (*Graffiti = community service*), are driven by the referential function, since they matter-of-factly describe what their authors believe to be true. The visual image of the messages helps to enhance the appropriate function if necessary.

### 4.3 Poetry

The last type of signage is represented by short poems that are exhibited on trash-cans in the park called Obilní trh. Even though the poems are not signed, their author is Timo, whose poems can be found even outside the studied area as documented by his fans' Facebook webpage, his exhibitions in cafes and galleries, for instance in the Off Format gallery (Indoor Adventure 2014), and by the publication *Během chůze Brnem* (Daniel, Šešulka and Timo 2010). Considering their

artistic value, in terms of both the visual forms and the poetic content, Timo's poems can be perceived as a form of street art; see the figure below:



**Figure 7.** A poem by Timo on a trashcan

The translation of the above poem is: *One glass of wine / And in your lap / I'll take a nap. / Hidden in your cozy den: You'll be my donut, I your jam* [translated by FK]. Unfortunately, the scope of the paper does not allow for a stylistic analysis of the documented poems. Nonetheless, this is a potential topic for further research focused on the artistic varieties of Brno vernacular street signage. The medium that Timo chose for the distribution of his poems is worth mentioning. As the picture demonstrates, the poems are placed on trashcans. A trashcan is a container that enables people to keep the neighbourhood clean by 'consuming' residential littering; its primary function is definitely not to give people anything. However, since Timo has shifted the disposal function of a trashcan into a communication function, he has managed to alter it into a medium carrying a poetic text consumed by passersby. Now the trashcans in Obilní trh offer poems to



people who can read them while passing by. Moreover, by placing the poems in a crowded area where people are invited to rest, poetry is distributed to a wider audience, even to people that do not normally read it. From this point of view, the poems fulfill Timo's *Graffiti = community service* ideology, since his poems brighten the neighborhood both visually and verbally, thus performing a type of community service that is intended to make cohabitation more congenial.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper introduces the author's pilot project recording vernacular street signage in the city of Brno. The term vernacular street signage refers to all the unofficial texts that are sprayed, encrypted, or inscribed in public spaces illegally by ordinary residents. The paper outlines the possible categorization and classification of the signage documented in the selected districts of Židenice and Střed, representing areas of contrasting reputations: a dangerous Bronx full of gypsies and a fancy and safe city core, respectively. The documentation consisted of fieldwork in which the author photographed the signage and then created a corpus of 268 photographs. Due to the focus on anonymous writing, the author's corpus does not include officially displayed public notices, billboards, or street signs placed in public spaces by legitimate authorities. The paper does not provide a deep analysis of all the texts found on the documented streets, but tries to summarize the types and their functions. It is obvious that more fieldwork and analysis must be done in order to cover the whole area of Brno.

The typology is based on Jakobson's model of language functions, on the visual rendering of a text, and on its distributional character. The investigated signage is divided into three major types. The first is represented by graffiti, of which tags, the writers' stylized nicknames sprayed in one go on a public space, can be found in both areas. Placing one's nickname on a public space results in the destruction of property and in its symbolic appropriation, which is intended to gain acceptance for the writer within the graffiti sub-community. The more tags a writer creates, the higher his or her probabilities to enhance their position with the sub-community. This is the reason why tags have recurrent character. FET and LOW crews' nicknames are distributed in both areas, noazz recurs in Židenice district, and dark 161, Heroin, and Rum appropriate properties in Střed. The dominance of these crews and writers do not reflect the district's reputation but rather the writers' social connection to the neighbourhood where they live or come from. Writers tag wherever they can, in order to own the whole city. On the other hand, it must be said that writers avoid tagging buildings that are highly appreciated for their architectural style, such as churches. This is an unwritten rule of those who truly believe in the power of graffiti, but ignored by those who consider graffiti be a trendy business (Palánová 2005). Since graffiti addresses both the sub-community members as well as the outsiders, two Jakobson's functions overlap here – the phatic function is dominant within the community-of-practice

communication, while beyond the sub-community, the referential function is the primary one.

The second type of signage conveys existential messages. Unlike graffiti, they represent texts that are usually displayed only once. They can be easily overlooked as they are usually small and placed on objects such as lamps or trashcans. Since they express the authors' stances and ideologies, they range from love messages addressed to a concrete person, through philosophical reflection to appeals and commands addressed to co-residents. Depending on the content, the existential messages are driven by expressive, referential or conative function. They appear in both of the studied locations. The emotional messages of love and friendship appear in the area known as Brno's Bronx, which might be interpreted as rebutting its bad neighbourhood reputation. Other existential messages draw one's attention on philosophical issues, community-driven problems, or on local bands, thus promoting them in an untraditional way. The ones found in Střed are less direct, offering choice for the addressee's active participation in understanding the author's intended meaning. It can be concluded that people in both areas are thrilled by public spaces and the anonymity that allows them to expressing their urgent needs and ideological beliefs.

The last type of signage is represented by poetry. A couple of love poems dominate the neighbourhood of Obilní trh, enhancing the location of a park as a place of relaxation. Since all the poems are stencilled on trashcans, the trashcans thus become a medium of communication, addressing a wider audience of all the various demographic groups, thus helping the poetry to achieve wider readership than poetry printed in books. Their visual design helps to enhance the poetic function of the text.

Regardless of character, all the texts participate in designing the social construct of the selected areas which are permanently being reconstructed and redesigned. This contributes towards the dynamic nature and progressiveness of Brno urban spaces. The signage types and their functions indicate that Brno has a very diverse scale of vernacular street writing with a very diverse scale of communication functions. Nevertheless, in order to map all forms of vernacular signage found on Brno streets, more fieldwork and research must be done.

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