

Beyond Signs in the City – language learning through city signs

LEVENTE DÓSA

SOROS Educational Center Foundation
Miercurea-Ciuc, Romania
Full Member QUEST Romania

Abstract

"Beyond Signs in the City" is a methodology targeted to visitors to a new city. The project involves photography of specific signs, writing a city language guide and promoting the idea to a wide public by using a variety of marketing and information means.

The underlining objective of "Beyond Signs in the City" is to convince a city's visitors to take a moment to observe and be interested in the language of the city. The trigger for their interest would be an illustrative guide including photos from your city that say something about the spoken language of the city.

The project will meet the objective by producing a language city guide and organizing events and other promotional activities for the city.

Key-words: sign, city, language, learning, guide, project



Language promotion and city promotion

We all love our cities and want to tell the world about them. Let's tell them in our language.

City councils take every opportunity to tell their visitors what makes their city so special. Ideas often range from promoting a city's famous people and history, its architectural heritage and surrounding landscape to the city's local culture, food and leisure. Information most frequently comes in leaflets and brochures or through the city's tourist office and local guides.

It is quite rare for a city council to promote its language to the same extent as it does for its buildings, people and activities. Visitors who would like an introduction to the local language and a chance to speak to the locals will either have to buy a language book or content themselves to some 'hellos' and 'thank yous' included in the city brochure.

What most city councils' promotional strategies lack is an introduction to the local language along with the presentation of the city's past, present and future. This is where this booklet becomes useful.

Beyond Signs in the City offers a methodology for language promotion through a city's culture. The concept is based on the use of photography of a city's signs as a means to learn about the city's language. City signs can range from street signs and shop names to what is written in front of a building, on a menu, at the train station or on a wall.

The underlining objective of the booklet is to convince you, the people involved in the promotion of your city, that talking about your city's language by using your city signs can trigger further interest in your city's profile.

How the concept evolved: art, education and travel

Veni, vidi, vici. I came, I saw, I conquered...a new language

Think of someone coming to your city for the first time. Or rather, think of yourself visiting a city for the first time. If you are a visual person you will be looking at inscriptions on buildings and street signs in an unknown language (and sometimes even strange alphabet). If you are an audio person you will be listening to some new and strange language spoken by the locals. In all cases, you will have one thing in mind: how to learn a bit about this language in order to understand and communicate.

The interest of the average visitor in the language of your city is a given. It would be a missed opportunity if the city council failed to introduce the city's language in a similar way it does for its history, heritage and culture.

The concept of *Beyond Signs in the City* emerged from a visitor's need. Four years ago, on a holiday to London, a visitor not speaking English at all started looking at all those city signs that were part of the city's culture. Whether it was a 'mind the gap' sign written on the floor of a London underground station or a 'look left' at the traffic lights, the visitor started asking himself what the use of language in the street meant for the city's culture and indeed its past, present and future. All the inscriptions that have invaded the city made our visitor interested in finding out what each sign meant both linguistically and culturally for the city's identity. In an explorer's mood our visitor took several photos of signs of London and went in search of a 'project'.

Four years later, partners from European cities with the supportive interest of their local councils (Alcala de Henares and Barcelona in Spain, Birgu in Malta, Dobrich in Bulgaria, Gdansk in Poland and Nafplio in Greece, Miercurea Ciuc in Romania, Bad Ratkersburg in Austria, Gornja Radgona in Slovenia, Izmir in Turkey) joined the concept. Signs were picked and photographed and five city and language guides were produced. The guides included photos of each city signs along with information about the city's language, history and culture. The project resulted in an original and innovative tool to learning about a cities' language and culture

How it works (objectives and methods)

Beyond Signs in the City is a methodology targeted to visitors to a new city. The project involves photography of specific signs, writing a city language guide and promoting the idea to a wide public by using a variety of marketing and information means.

The underlining objective of *Beyond Signs in the City* is to convince your visitors to take a moment to observe and be interested in the language of your city. The trigger for their interest would be an illustrative guide including photos from your city that say something about your language.

You will meet the objective by producing a language city guide and organizing events and other promotional activities for your city.

Selecting your places of interest

Once your team is up and running the next step is to identify places of interest and to select which places you will need to photograph. There is a large number of signs you can

photograph that will tell you a lot about your city's language. They can range from transport signs (a train station, a ticket price list, bus timetables, etc) to places of worship (a sign outside a church, mosque or temple, people praying).

You should consider photographing signs of everyday activities (such as going to the bank, shopping at a local market, buying stamps at the post office) but also extraordinary events such as your local festivals, celebrations and feasts.

You will be surprised by how many signs already exist in your city that can tell you so much about your language. You want to teach your visitors words like welcome and thank you? Check for signs in a bank or a shop. Would like them to be able to order at a restaurant, take pictures of a menu or signs outside a local café. Want them to learn a bit about your local history? Shoot museums, heritage buildings and local attractions. And do not forget to be innovative and look for graffiti, art work in the street, signs on people's T-shirts or prices of tomatoes in the local market. The more original your approach is, the more interest you will get.

Beyond the Signs website (www.signsinthecity.net) includes an indicative (but not exhaustive) list of places you should consider adding to your list.

Writing the guide

As partners of *Beyond Signs in the City* we came up with specific chapters for the city language guide. These include the so-called:

Social relations

Signing the way

Signing the needs

Signing the places

Signing the atmosphere

Social relations uses photos of city signs to teach visitors words and phrases around family, names and surnames, greetings, days of the week and times of the year.

Signing the way uses photos of city signs to reflect traffic in the city, transport, street signs and circulation.

Signing the needs focuses on signs around services (banks, post offices, hospitals, etc), shops and restaurants.

Signing the places is about heritage and historic buildings, statues of famous people, museums and art galleries, places of worship, libraries and cultural centres.

Signing the atmosphere is about getting a feeling of the city. Signs can range from

evening festivals to people playing a local instrument or sport. This section could include leisure activities and hobbies or anything that is unique about the specific city.

All chapters would include a large number of photos. We have calculated around 60-80 per book. The photos would be accompanied by words and phrases in the targeted language often with support on pronunciation via a CD or in written format. The words in the targeted language would be translated into English, French or any other language your visitors are mostly familiar with. Finally, short and clear cultural information about the city would be included, but this should not be too detailed or 'heavy'. Remember the guide is about the language of your city and not an encyclopedia of your city's history and heritage.

You should also allow for a short introduction on your language and its alphabet as well as a message about the city. Ideally you would include a welcome from the Mayor.

Overall, the writing style should be light, fun and humorous. The friendlier the approach, the more interest it will receive. Most of your targeted audiences will be tourists spending time to explore your city. They will need something easy to read, beautiful to look at and fun to keep as a souvenir.

Beyond the Signs website provides a list of already existing language guides you can use as an example.

Promotion and funding

We can share a large number of promotional activities we did for the project. These include:

- presenting the language guides to education, cultural and book fairs
- organizing photo exhibitions where the books were presented and short language courses took place
- producing an interactive website
- producing a film with the story of the project
- talking to the media and press and getting articles published about our work

We are now looking into further opportunities to promote the project that include:

- liaising with publishers to explore the potential of branding the guides
- talking to local authorities to spread the word to a larger number of cities
- training local guides or volunteers to become language guides of their city

Funding of cultural and education projects that are not made for profit is always a difficult task. Apart from EU and local authority support (which was our case) you might want to explore looking at private sponsors (such as a travel agent, an international publisher or a

large language school) or national funding from Ministries of Culture and Tourism. For the most entrepreneurial ones, there is definitely a market for every innovative project and *Beyond Signs in the City* is definitely about innovation.

Good luck with & on your language journey!

Beyond Signs in the City partners

- [Chamber of Commerce and Industry, BG](#)
- [European Cultural Interactions unlimited co, EL](#)
- [English Unlimited, PL](#)
- [JFdeK Ltd., UK](#)
- [Auxilium pro Regionibus Europae in Rebus Culturalibus, AT](#)
- [Soros Educational Center Foundation, RO](#)
- [Izmir University of Economics, Tr](#)
- [Sonicas, ES](#)
- [Birgu Local Council, MT](#)

<http://www.signsinthecity.net>

Levente Dósa is a program coordinator at Soros Educational Center Foundation.