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## **CITY AS A TEXT**

*Cities are powerful with human beings,  
not with walls or houses (Polish proverb)*

### **1. City as space**

Given the complexity and heterogeneity of an entity symbolized by the specific nomination – city, I ask myself the following question: *What is a city?* I also assume provisionally the sociological definition of space, as presented by Raymond Ledrut, who claims that

space is an empty form. An acting human being or an acting human community gives a specific meaning to this form. The space, >animated< by a human being becomes the social space (Ledrut 1984: 40).

According to Hall (1997: 32), *space* is one of the ten human communication systems (so called PSP). City space, however, has its own specific

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character. It is the space shaped in a highly “human way”, “given a city dimension”, and therefore *urbanized*.

From the perspective of linguistics, the urbanized space creates a widely understood context for language use. Nevertheless,

it must be pointed out that context is a theoretical construct. When determining it a linguist disregards the actual situation and acknowledges as contextual all the factors which consistently determine the form, adequacy or meaning of a text by its influence on the participants of the language event” (Lyons 1989: 187).

The *widest context* is certainly created by various “thematic” spaces. For this reason, from the perspective of language use, I distinguish official and unofficial spaces in the urbanized area. The former would include, for instance, public or central spaces, while the latter would comprise primary or peripheral spaces. Both formality and the lack of formality of space determine, in turn, types (kinds) of texts – for instance, toponyms and advertising texts appear exclusively in official areas, while graffiti texts (lately also artists’ sticker texts) always fill unofficial spaces.

A *narrower context* is created by diverse components of the urbanized space—architectural forms, means of transport, vertical and horizontal surfaces, green areas etc. Among them, certain components are of a dynamic character (for example outdoor mobile ‘informers’, in other words: means of transport); the majority, however, are of a static character. Texts, placed on these unusual ‘carriers’ constitute a communication entity with them, which is semiotically and structurally complex (composed of signs of different codes).

## 2. Text in urbanized space

In view of the relationship (or perhaps better – complementarity) between language texts and places where they are displayed in the urbanized space, an approach to texts, adequate for this communication situation must be considered.

The most accurate linguistic approach to a text is formed on the basis of communicative grammar. It assumes that “a text is the outcome of verbalizing the sender’s intention. Also, it comes into existence only when there is a possibility of its interpretation by the addressee” (Habrajska 2004: 15). The authors of this idea – Aleksy Awdiejew and Grażyna Habrajska – claim that the separation of text production from text understanding is not possible. As far as criteria are concerned, they assume (Duszak 1998: 39-42)

that a text must always be “about something”, “with some purpose” and “in some way”.

The above approach to the notion of a text and its parameters may be, in my opinion, used for determining the text unit used in the urbanized space. It is worth noticing that this kind of communication does not display an interactive character. The sender (who may be a physical person, legal person or, for instance, an artist) is aware of the fact that they may not produce the effect which they assume while creating the “text”. This stems from the fact that the addressee is collective, unknown, it is an anonymous, heterogeneous crowd which, as Gustaw Le Bon (1994: 100) maintains, “has no sense of responsibility whatsoever”. Further to this, the observation of the behaviour of the representatives of various social groups which belong to such a crowd provides numerous proofs for the lack of understanding, negligence, provoking question, and only occasionally accepting both communication and its intention.

In the urbanized space it is possible to find texts which are units composed of language elements and an artistic/visual code, combined with fixed or mobile carriers. It is only the combination of the above three levels which constitutes a text. Creating such a “text” is the outcome of a conscious, intentional choice made by the sender both of the means and the place which is appropriate for the communication. A street ‘text’ (similarly to a linguistic text) comes into being only when there is a possibility of interpreting it by the addressee – in this case, however, a certain difference from a linguistic text arises – the latter is a potential text to a greater extent, awaiting its interpreting person; in some cases, it may not obtain its interpretation. Furthermore, certain features which are characteristic of a linguistic text, namely that a text must always be ‘about something’, ‘with some purpose’ and ‘in some way’, are found in street texts as well. I therefore maintain that in the urbanized space we can assume the existence of a specific kind of a ‘text’ – the one which is multi-coded and with the non-typical sender and addressee.

### **3. Texts in various types of the urbanized space**

In my research I assume, being inspired by the view of Libura (1990: 11-15), that the urbanized space is filled with urban forms which possess three dimensions. The spatial dimension, which comprises architectural objects with specific shapes that ‘cut’ the space, for they have their length, width and height. Umberto Eco (1996: 233) claims that the architectural

expression performs a persuasive function since it persuades the addressee to a specific type of affirmation:

I will live this way because you suggest it to me on the basis of certain spatial forms, evoking associations with others, already familiar to me, and because you prove it to me that by relating the forms to each other the way you do it, I will be able to live even more conveniently and even more comfortably (Eco 1996: 233).

Eco goes further, treating architectural objects as expressions, which are not only denotative (and persuasive) but also connotative. He writes:

Each genuine architectural work brings something new – not only due to the fact that it is a good ‘machine for living’ or that it connotes a given ideology of dwelling, but also due to the fact that thanks to its very existence it connotes previous ways and ideologies of dwelling (Eco 1996: 235).

In this way, he emphasizes the durability of an architectural expression, thus resembling the durability of language-created works – literary works.

The physiognomical dimension, the quality of which is determined by the city substance: whether it is old or new, characteristic for a given city or unique; in this very dimension a proxemic code begins to matter, the code which uses intimate, personal, social and public aspects of space, which determine the place for texts. It is in this dimension that cultural differences are displayed through texts, for instance, cultures differ as to “labeling” space, in the form of, determining the number of square meters of a “living space” per person (see Eco 1996: 249). In addition, “labelling” space is carried out by operating a system of colours, a code which is complementary to the proxemic code.

The social dimension, whose the character is affected by people and social processes; in this very dimension there exist both escaping spaces and the so called attracting ones. The above spaces originate as the outcome of socio-political factors, determining both already existing and newly originating texts. Signs – architectural expressions, similarly to linguistic texts, originate and “are alive” on the basis of a certain system of social relations – primary and secondary (Eco 1996: 253). ‘Attracting’ spaces seem to express the following: *I have something extraordinary to offer to you, so I invite you*. Escaping spaces comprise all niche places which become “texts”, they are hidden in lanes and “forgotten” areas of a city.

#### 4. The linguist and texts of urbanized space

Given the above discussion, a question arises: In what way can a linguist examine urbanized space? A linguist can examine urbanized space as a *context for language use* (written), investigating the following factors:

- various ‘thematic’ spaces and their functions,
- diverse components of the space, creating a communication entity with language forms placed on them,
- the process of ‘familiarizing’ the space by giving names and meaning to places and objects,
- language varieties (e.g. stylistic variety, social variety) present in the space, determining the socio-cultural character of a city,
- types of texts and other language forms distributed in this space, as well as their functions (which once intuitively distinguished may be empirically verified),
- specificity of a communication situation in which the process of using a language in the urbanized space takes place; with the focus on its determinants: text types, kinds of senders (and their intentions) and addressees, etc.

A linguistic analysis may enable, by implementing the above language aspects in the context of the urbanized space, the *reconstruction* (or creation) of the *picture of the world* in which the community of a given city lives. A comparative analysis of the language of the urbanized space of various cities – both in own and foreign cultures – may lead (perhaps) to discovering paradigms, characteristic of the cultures in question.

I provisionally assume that the language in the urbanized space is:

- a guide (it informs, facilitates orientation, performs the function of identifying objects),
- an integrating factor (it connects the community of a given city to a society, e.g. through regionalisms, toponyms/urbanonyms),
- a disintegrating factor (it introduces language ‘novelties’: lexical, syntactic, word-formation, borrowings etc.).

The way I see it, however, is that, first and foremost, the task which should be embarked on before describing city texts in the urbanized space is creating their typology. The author considers this stipulation to be the most urgent research action in this subject.

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**ABSTRACT**

City as a Text

**Key words:** urban discourse, city, communication

The present paper concerns the semiotics of a city expressed via language texts scattered around city space. The author focuses on a dynamic relation existing between the human being and space, viewing city space as a social place moulded by the human being. A city is a product of culture which is interpreted as a form of communication. The author treats city space as a context for language usage. Urban space is believed to contain texts which consist of complex elements of language together with a vivid visual code (e.g. architectural objects) or of mobile carriers (e.g. vehicles/markings). However, only a conflation of the three levels of communication makes a text. Such a text results from a conscious and intentional choice made by a message sender concerning the means and place of communication. The analysis of city texts presented in other publications by the author has encouraged her to postulate that city texts should be first classified and, as a consequence, a methodology of research into city texts can be proposed.