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Microdiachronic Linguistic Landscape Analysis: A Case Study of a Repair Sequence of Transgressive Signs over a Four-Year Period

Melanie Steffens / Wolfgang Imo

Abstract
Transgressive signs in the linguistic landscape often have a short lifespan: not only are they worked upon by other unauthorized signers, but also by private or institutional actors who seek to reinstate the original status of, for example, a wall or a wastepaper basket by repainting or cleaning it. Many Linguistic Landscape analyses to date have been based on one-shot collections of transgressive, unauthorized signs at a particular point in time – or, at best, over a short period. What is missing from such approaches is a diachronic perspective. To address this lack of a diachronic perspective, our analysis is based on the *Microdiachronic Linguistic Landscape Corpus (MiLiLaC)*, which contains more than 4,500 photographs of transgressive signs collected over a period of five years. These data contain numerous instances of repair sequences unfolding over several years. Our central research question is how the system of repair developed by Conversation Analysis can be adapted to provide a useful framework for analyzing written interactions through transgressive signs.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape – microdiachronic analysis – sequence – repair – Conversation Analysis – Interactional Linguistics.

German Abstract
Transgressive Zeichen haben in der Sprachlandschaft oft nur eine kurze Lebensdauer: Sie können nicht nur durch andere unautorisierte Zeichenproduzierende bearbeitet werden, sondern auch durch private oder institutionelle Akteure, die beispielsweise eine Wand oder einen Mülleimer wieder in den Originalzustand versetzen wollen, indem sie die Zeichen entfernen oder übermalen. Viele Analysen innerhalb der *Linguistic-Landscape*-Forschung haben diesen volatilen Status transgressiver Zeichen bislang nicht systematisch erfasst, da die Datenerhebung in der Regel nur zu einem relativ kurzen Aufnahmezeitpunkt erfolgte. Ein dezidiert diachroner Blick auf die Daten ist damit nicht möglich. An dieser Forschungslücke setzt der vorliegende Beitrag an. Auf der Basis des *Microdiachronic Linguistic Landscape Corpus (MiLiLaC)*, das über 4.500 Fotos von transgressiven Zeichen enthält, die über einen Zeitraum von fünf Jahren erhoben wurden, sollen Reparatursequenzen untersucht werden. In diesem Rahmen wird ausgehend von dem durch die Konversationsanalyse entwickelten Reparatursystem ein speziell für die Analyse von schriftlichen, zeitlich stark zerdehnten Reparaturen angepasstes Reparatursystem vorgeschlagen.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape – mikrodiachrone Analyse – Reparaturen – Sequenz – Konversationsanalyse – Interaktionale Linguistik.

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1. Introduction

Transgressive signs[1] in the linguistic landscape often have a short lifespan: Not only are they worked upon by other unauthorized signers, but also by private or institutional actors who want to reinstate the original status of, for example, a wall or a wastepaper basket by repainting or cleaning it (see Karlander 2019:199 on the "often volatile" status of graffiti). This precarious and ephemeral existence is even commented upon by unauthorized signers themselves, as illustrated by the following photograph[2] (Picture 1) of a stencil with written text on the wall of a barber shop:



Picture 1: *They will eradicate us, won't they? – Nothing is forever!* (22.12.2022)

[1] Scollon and Scollon (2003:146) define a transgressive sign as "a sign which is in place but which is in some way unauthorized […]." One common example of transgressive signs are graffiti.

[2] All photographs of transgressive signs were collected by Melanie Steffens and form the database *MiLiLaC* (see Section 4 below).

Someone painted parts of the wall green and added a boy and a girl holding hands in the style of street art associated with Banksy. The girl asks the boy, "They will eradicate us, won't they?", to which the boy replies, "Nothing is forever!".

Many Linguistic Landscape analyses have been based on what Maly and Blommaert (2019:1) critically call "hit-and-run fieldwork", that is, a one-shot collection of transgressive, unauthorized signs at a particular point in time – or, at best, over a short period. What is missing from these approaches is the diachronic perspective: What happens to these signs? Are they repaired? Are they commented on by others? Are they eradicated?

To address this lack of a diachronic perspective, our analysis is based on the *Microdiachronic Linguistic Landscape Corpus (MiLiLaC)*, which contains more than 4,500 photographs of transgressive signs. These were collected over a period of five years by Melanie Steffens in the Hamburg district of Barmbek, "following the methodological principles of walking and visual ethnography" (Marshall 2023: 209)[3] and accompanied by fieldwork. Fieldwork included conversations with policemen, passers-by, postal workers, and others about the signs, their attitudes towards them, and their strategies for removing them – for example, asking postal workers about the procedure for initiating cleaning of the mailboxes.[4]

For the theoretical background, we take Blommaert and Maly's "Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA)" as a starting point (Blommaert and Maly 2019; Maly and Blommaert 2019).

This approach is particularly suited to our purposes because it explicitly calls for a historical, diachronic perspective in Linguistic Landscape Analysis (Section 2). For the sequential analysis of series of interactionally connected signs identified in our microdiachronic data, we draw on the concept of repair originally developed within Conversation Analysis for spoken interaction (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1977; Schegloff 1979). We have adapted this system to account for the more complex repair mechanisms found in written interaction, where the temporal and sequential unfolding of repairs coexists with the static, 'snapshot-like' states of ensembles of signs at any given point in time.

As an exemplary case, we selected an interaction that unfolded on the surface of a bike shed in Barmbek. This interaction emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and centers on the pros and cons of vaccination, thereby expressing different social and political positions during the pandemic.

In the following sections, we first outline our theoretical and methodological background (Section 3) and then focus on the repair system developed within Conversation Analysis (Section 4). Our central research question is how this system of repair can be adapted to provide a useful analytical tool for examining written interactions through transgressive signs. In Section 5, we present an in-depth analysis of an extended sequence of repairs centering on the COVID-19 debate in order to demonstrate the viability of our adapted repair system. The final section (Section 6) presents our conclusions.

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[3] Being a resident of this area with a keen interest in its social structure, Melanie Steffens worked in the ethnographic fashion outlined by Blommaert (2013:21): "My ethnographic engagement with this neighborhood, therefore, is in its most literal sense longitudinal and participant observation; it is, in fact, 'ethnographic monitoring' in the most immediate sense of the word."

[4] Stampoulidis (2016) applied a similar approach – though not systematically diachronic – to document Athenian graffiti in a central district of Athens during 2015.

2. Linguistic Landscape Analysis and (Micro)Diachronicity

What has long been established in Linguistic Landscape Analysis is the qualitative approach to data: In order to understand signs, it is necessary to consider the social and political discourses of which they are part (e.g., Auer 2010, Tophinke and Ziegler 2019), as well as the (alleged) motivations of the sign producers. Furthermore, the material, multimodal, and multimedial nature of public signs has to be taken into account. The materiality of signs concerns their physical nature – whether they consist of posters or stickers, or whether they are produced using stencils, crayon, chalk, and so on. Materiality plays a role in the longevity of signs – how quickly they become eroded or bleached out – and in their visibility – large posters versus small stickers, for example.

To make analyses even more complex, the (micro)diachronic changes occurring in a given linguistic landscape need to be considered. This is something that has so far only rarely been done, because it requires taking pictures of the same places repeatedly in order to document how signs erode, are commented upon by others, are repaired or destroyed, and, finally, renewed. As has been mentioned above, Blommaert and Maly (2019:1) criticize those practices in Linguistic Landscape research that restrict themselves to a "'snapshot' linguistic landscape analysis based on hit-and-run fieldwork": Researchers often collect their data for a single, usually short period, documenting the state of a locality at a given point in time. Such a procedure yields, according to Blommaert and Maly (2019:1), a "Saussurean synchrony as analytical outcome" that suggests a static nature of linguistic landscapes, while in fact they are better characterized by their "dynamic, processual character".

To counter this deficit, Blommaert and Maly (2016, 2019) and Maly and Blommaert (2019) developed a new approach, which they called "Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA)". Through a combination of "longitudinal fieldwork, detailed observations of changes in the landscape, and an ethnographic-theoretical framework in which landscape signs are seen as traces of (and instruments for) social action" (Blommaert and Maly 2019:1), a framework is proposed which ideally can take into account all factors relevant for a detailed, in-depth analysis. Maly and Blommaert (2019) developed the following outline of ELLA (or, rather, ELLA 2.0, their extension of the original ELLA approach, based on the analysis of the online-offline nexus of signs in public space):

First, the approach is empirically founded and based on the collection of signs and, ideally, the building of corpora of signs which provide data for detailed, qualitative analyses, or, as Maly and Blommaert (2019:1) express it, "a disciplinary concern with small details in concrete empirical cases of momentary events in the material world".

Second, both the collection and the analysis of the data have to take their historical character into account; they have to "historicize these unique cases" (Maly/ Blommaert 2019:1), and they do so in two ways. Taking into consideration the historical nature of signs means taking into consideration that they are part of social and political discourses which precede them, to which they refer, which they perpetuate, and which they keep alive and present. The historical perspective also means avoiding the above-mentioned "hit-and-run fieldwork" which restricts the collection of data to singular points or short periods of time and thus ignores all aspects of the sequential nature of the placement of signs and the subsequent

changes inflicted upon them, whether by nature (sun, rain, wind), by involuntary human intervention (e.g. the removal of a construction fence on which a stencil has been sprayed, or the demolition of a house with graffiti on it), or by voluntary human interaction with signs through commenting, crossing out, expansion, obliteration, reinstatement, and so on. These voluntary interactions with signs are the focus of this analysis.

The third aspect refers to interactional features. Implicitly, it has already been suggested above that diachronicity is closely linked to interactionality (see also Schmitz/Ziegler 2016 on visible dialogues in public spaces). By looking at the 'work' performed on signs by others, aspects of the interactional constitution of meaning can be observed. Maly and Blommaert (2019:10) define interaction as the process of "'making sense' of social order in concrete situations." This "interactional co-construction of social facts" means that the following statement holds true not only for spoken interactions, but also for written or picture-based reactions to previously placed signs in public space: "[W]hatever we do in social life is done in collaboration, response or conflict with others." (Maly/Blommaert 2019:10)

Repair sequences are a typical expression of such local processes of co-construction of meaning (see Section 4). Partial or complete erasures of existing messages, accompanying comments on their content, style, or imagined signer, and alterations of messages provide material that can be analyzed in a way that has been termed the "next-turn proof procedure" (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Imo and Lanwer 2019:137) in Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics. By analyzing how interactants react to the utterances of previous interactants, researchers can uncover their interpretation of the prior turn, which provides robust evidence for analysis. By focusing on the next-turn proof procedure, the analysis of the data need not rely solely on the analyst's interpretation but can also draw on that of the interactants (see also Feddersen, Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain 2024 for an analysis of "Turn-taking in the interactive Linguistic Landscape").

The fourth and final aspect of ELLA 2.0 is the online-offline nexus. When analyzing signs in public space, both obvious aspects of the online-offline nexus, such as URLs or QR codes, and more subtle aspects, such as information about memes or background discourses taking place on social media, have to be considered. We will not discuss this aspect here; instead, we focus on the diachronic and interactional aspects of sequences of transgressive signs in public space, as manifested particularly clearly in repair sequences.

3. Repair sequences as a diachronic phenomenon for Linguistic Landscape Analysis

The concept of repair was originally developed in the context of Conversation Analysis by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1977) and Schegloff (1979). Repair sequences were treated as an interactional phenomenon dealing with problems in spoken interactions: Spoken utterances develop in a temporal, step-by-step mode and are not reversible. Anything that is uttered is 'out there', cannot be erased, and is thus available for further interaction. In order to avoid problems in communication, a system of repair is available that consists of an initiation part and an execution part: If there is a repairable utterance, someone can initiate the necessity of a repair, and someone (not necessarily the same person) can initiate the execution of the

repair – that is, 'do' the repair itself. This yields four types of repair (based on Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1977):

1. Self-initiated self-repair: The producer of the utterance also repairs it. If I say "Yesterday I went to the- erm, no- the day before yesterday I went to the cinema.", I initiate the repair by breaking off the utterance, using the hesitation particle and the negation particle, and I execute the repair by replacing "yesterday" with "the day before yesterday".
2. Self-initiated other-repair: The producer of the utterance initiates the repair, but someone else executes it. If I say "Yesterday I went to the- erm, no, when was it?" and some interactant answers "The day before yesterday!", I initiate the repair by marking the temporal adverb as a problem, and someone else repairs it.
3. Other-initiated self-repair: Someone else initiates a repair, but the speaker executes it. Taking the same utterance as above, I can say "Yesterday I went to the cinema.", someone else then incredulously asks "Yesterday?", thus marking a communicative problem and initiating a repair, and I can execute the repair by "I meant the day before yesterday."
4. Other-initiated other-repair: Someone else initiates and executes a repair. It is the most dispreferred type because it removes control of the utterance from the speaker. If I say "Yesterday I went to the cinema." and someone else responds "You mean the day before yesterday.", then both the initiation and the execution of the repair are performed by someone else. In the other three types of repair, by contrast, I retain either the initiative for initiation or for execution (or both).

The focus of these examples was on a special type of repair: the correction. Corrections are repairs in which something that is actually wrong (in the example above: a wrong piece of information about the time something happened) is rectified. But repairs need not have a wrong piece of information as their starting point. In fact, many repairs do not. Often, repairs happen in spoken interactions in the context of formulation processes ("Yesterday I went to the- erm, no, well, yesterday I went to the cinema"), where the correct utterance "Yesterday I went to the" is replaced by the same words. Other repairs happen in arguments, e.g. when I say "I was too stressed to do the washing-up" and someone initiates and executes the other-repair "Too lazy!", replacing "stressed" with "lazy". Repairs then *include*, but are not *restricted to*, corrections; rather, they have to be defined as *work on a previously produced utterance*.

In spoken interaction, the four types of repairs listed above suffice analytically. In written signs in the public landscape, however, other types are needed:[5] Although in some cases, such as sprayings, self-corrections can sometimes be seen, most signs like stencils or stickers are already finished products with no need for self-repair. Furthermore, repair sequences in transgressive written signs have a multidimensional life:

[5] Research on interactional written repair sequences is still rare. For repairs in written chat/ messenger communication, see Mostovaia (2021). Firoozkohi, Hossein, Feddersen, Liebscher, and Daily-O'Cain (2026) analyzed what they term "multimodal repair" in the linguistic landscape. However, their study is based on a "one-shot" analysis – i.e., it examines only already repaired signs rather than documenting the repair process.

a) On the one hand, they exhibit the temporal, step-by-step mode of repairs in spoken language, where one utterance follows another; the only difference is that there is (usually) no co-presence of the sign producers and that the turns follow each other not more or less immediately, but with a time lag of hours, days, months, or even years.

b) On the other hand, at each given moment – and unlike in spoken interactions – the results of each step in a repair sequence can remain as a static snapshot or layering, so that one can see all previous steps at once.

c) Unlike in spoken interactions, where an utterance once spoken is 'out' and cannot be eradicated, signs can be completely eradicated and removed from the public landscape (stickers can be removed and thrown away; writings or stencils can be scratched off or painted over, and so on) and effectively taken out of the discourse.

A decisive difference in written interaction is the potentially permanent character of written signs and the fact that they form a static[6] visual surface rather than an acoustic temporal sequence. Steffens (in prep.) therefore developed an inventory of repair activities specially designed to capture the broader range of possibilities the visual surface of written signs offers (a full description, including the different functions of these activities, can be found in Steffens in prep.):

1. *complete erasure*: By a complete erasure, a sign is eradicated, e.g. by coating it with paint or other materials or by removing it.[7]
2. *complete crossing* or *overwriting*: By a complete crossing, a sign is overlaid graphically by dashes or crosses, but the original sign is still legible. A complete overwriting is similar to a complete crossing, but here the sign is overwritten with another message while remaining legible.
3. *partial deletion*: Parts of a sign are deleted, usually yielding a different proposition.
4. *partial crossing*: Parts of a sign are crossed, but still legible, while others are not worked upon.
5. *revision of a partial deletion*: Someone restores the original sign.
6. *partial revision of a deletion*: Someone restores parts of a deleted sign.
7. *substitution*: Parts of a sign are replaced by other parts, e.g. a word is replaced by another.
8. *additions to an utterance*: Additional signs are added to an existing one with a recognizable connection to this sign. This can happen in four places with written signs: (1) *Utterance-initial addition*: A word or some words are added in front of an existing utterance. (2) *Utterance-medial addition*: A word or words are inserted in a message. (3) *Utterance-final addition*: A word or words are added at the end of an utterance. (4) *Utterance-accompanying addition*: A word

[6] Static, of course, applies only to a given, more or less restricted time span. Over longer periods, the dynamic nature becomes more apparent, but this is only visible through successive static snapshots of the signs.

[7] Examples are omitted here, as the repair activities will be clearly demonstrated in Section 5.

or words are written in close proximity to the existing sign. The reference to the existing sign is usually established by textual means of cohesion or coherence.

It has to be stressed again here that *repair* does not mean *correction*. Following the definition of repair in Conversation Analysis, we define repair as any visible 'work' by interactants on a previously placed sign. Our interest lies in the analysis of the traces of the documented repair activities. These reveal the interpretation of the original sign by the 'repairers' and provide the necessary intersubjective data for the researchers regarding the signs‘ meaning and function (and, in an endless chain, the meaning and functions of the repairs, when these are repaired in turn…). In Section 5, we will illustrate most types of repairs listed above in an exemplary analysis of an extended repair sequence documented over a timespan of four years on a private bike shed at the side of a road.

4. The Data

The data were collected by Melanie Steffens during an extended fieldwork session over a period of five years. In Barmbek, a middle-class residential neighbourhood in the northern part of Hamburg, more than 4,500 photographs of transgressive signs in the public landscape (stencils, graffiti, stickers, handwritten notes, etc.) were documented by means of at least weekly visits to the sites where transgressive signs appeared. Once a transgressive sign appeared, the site was visited regularly again and again in order to document potential works on this sign by others. It quickly turned out that there were several 'hotspots' in the area, ranging from rather obvious places such as the walls of subway stations to rather unexpected ones, such as some bike sheds in quiet residential parts of Barmbek.

Through this procedure of longitudinal fieldwork – sites were visited at least once a week but photographs were taken only when new signs appeared or when repair activities could be observed – we avoided what Blommaert and Maly (2019: 1; see above) criticize as "snapshot linguistic landscape analysis". As a result, we obtained a more or less consistent (micro)diachronic corpus.

Of course, a complete documentation of all turns is impossible, because turns sometimes follow each other in very quick succession overnight. Only continuous camera surveillance would have yielded a full documentation of each and every turn. Nevertheless, even when some turns could not be documented step by step, the regularly taken photographs were sufficient to reconstruct the temporal unfolding of the interaction, as our analysis below will show.

All photographs have a time stamp and include information about their geodata. They are tagged as part of a PhD thesis project (Steffens in prep.) according to a range of categories, including material, topic, and the repair categories presented in Section 3, among others, and are hosted in the *MiLiLaC* (*Microdiachronic Linguistic Landscape Corpus*), which is part of the *LAuDa* database[8].

[8] https://uhh.lingdata.de/

5. Analysis

For our analysis, we chose a sequence of repairs at one single location, centering on the initial stencil "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" ("Don't get vaccinated"), originating from the COVID-19 discourse, because this long sequence allows us to illustrate as many repair types as possible. The first picture was taken on June 8, 2021, the last one on September 29, 2025. A total of 14 pictures were taken, which will be analyzed below. The stencil first appeared on a private bike shed built for the inhabitants of a large house in a quiet residential street in the south of Barmbek (at the corner of Imstedt and Flotowstraße). In line with our combination of linguistic landscape research and Conversation Analysis, we chose to present a detailed, in-depth analysis of the data. In the style of a sequential analysis in CA, we will now reconstruct the prolonged interactional sequence of positionings in the context of COVID-19. According to Auer (2010:295), the public space is "colonized" by legitimized public and private signs (e.g., traffic signs, advertising, shop signs). Transgressive, unauthorized signs are provocative already merely because they do not accept and respect this colonization but appropriate public space for themselves. In the case of COVID-19, this provocative aspect is even stronger: Vogel (2020: 20; our translation) analyzed public discourse during the COVID-19 crisis and found that "public language was used as a means to establish social discipline". Critical positions towards measures decided upon by political actors temporarily became "almost invisible" (Vogel 2020:21; our translation). This socio-political situation forms the background for the repair sequence we chose to analyze, in which critical, provocative positions were expressed via transgressive signs. Ziegler (2023:48; our translation) lists "calling for civil obedience" and "fighting specific political measures" as typical aims of political graffiti.

In the case of the COVID-19 graffiti, the initial positioning is made by signers protesting against government and mainstream-media consensus, feeling that their positions are ignored or not taken seriously.

5.1. The start of the sequence (08.06.2021)

On June 8, 2021, the initial turn "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" (lit. "Not vaccinate let"; "Don't get vaccinated") appeared on the right-hand side of the bike shed located at the crossing of Imstedt and Flotowstraße. The left-hand side had already been written on with the unrelated message "Liebe ist ein Tuwort!" ("Love is a word of doing")[9] and an added heart.

The stencil appeared in the middle of the heated debate in Germany about the pros and cons of compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 and the general social pressure to get vaccinated, coupled with regulations restricting access to public places such as restaurants for non-vaccinated persons. As Androutsopoulos (2022:145) states in his analysis of mask requirement signs in the early stage of COVID-19 in 2020, most COVID-19-related signs were more or less official and regulatory. This changed in the year 2021: "During 2021, transgressive signs related

[9] In German primary schools, basic word classes are often introduced not as grammatical categories, but as prototypical semantic categories: nouns are presented as "words of naming," adjectives as "words of properties," and verbs as "words of doing."

to Covid-19 witnessed an upsurge and radical shift of sentiment in Germany, as early signs of encouragement and social cohesion […] were replaced by anti-vax' protest stickers and graffiti." (Androutsopoulos 2022:145)



Picture 2: First turn

Typographically, the anti-vaccination stencil in Picture 2 is written in capital letters to ensure the readability of the words. This is typical for stencils (Ziegler 2023:49). Morphosyntactically, the utterance "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" forms a so-called "deontic infinitive" (Deppermann 2006), a type of imperative that uses the infinitive form of the verb. This is often used in public communication – either in official communication such as "Rauchen verboten" / "No smoking" (lit.: "(To) smoke forbidden") or in protest slogans such as "Atomkraft abschaffen" / "Abolish nuclear power" (lit: "Nuclear power (to) abolish") – because it expresses a normative stance that suggests general applicability. The impersonal form of the infinitive of the verb (here "LASSEN" / "(to) let") profiles this general applicability: in this case, it presents the stencil sprayer's position regarding not getting vaccinated as generally valid advice. This stencil appeared all over Barmbek (the documented instances of this stencil are still being annotated; an exact overview of the number of occurrences and places will be provided in Steffens in prep.), not only on this bike shed, indicating that someone intended the message to be spread and read widely.

5.2. The first repair appears (27.06.2021)

The quick reaction to this stencil is an indicator of the heated debates at that time: soon after the stencil have been written, someone had placed sticky tape above the stencil, effecting a repair type of a complete erasure according to the repair typology presented in Section 3:



Picture 3: First repair

As Karlander (2019:199) states, "graffiti are often volatile. Erasure – removal, annihilation – is part and parcel of their conditions of existence". The complete erasure in this case was not permanent, however, due to the choice of material. It is very probable that the stencil was erased by someone who was not used to writing transgressive signs themselves and who did not want to be caught painting the bike shed, fearing legal procedures and the costs of cleaning. By using sticky tape, no permanent damage was done. One special feature of written repairs is that the range of possibilities permitted through the material affordances is much broader: One can choose invasive or non-invasive repair strategies, large-scale (obliterating) or small-scale (changing only parts of the message) repairs or different repair substances (stickers, tape, permanent markers, spray color, etc.). Here, the differences to official "anti-graffiti regimes" (Karlander 2019:200) become obvious: If authorized actors such as town officials or owners of houses or bike sheds want to erase graffiti, they can do so effectively and legally by painting over it. Non-authorized actors, in contrast, make themselves liable to a fine if they do so, even when their intentions are good – for example, when they erase racist graffiti. Barmbek is a middle-class residential area, which could explain the repairer's respect for property and their care not to become liable to prosecution.

5.3. Two further steps in the repair sequence are added (03.07.2021)

Of course, the downside of such a cautious and non-invasive form of repair is that the erasure can easily be removed. The next time the site was visited to document changes – almost a week later – two further steps had taken place: First, there was a type 5 repair, a revision of the erasure of the sign (i.e., the removal of the sticky tape, which was easy due to the repair material used). Then, there was a type 8

repair with an utterance-medial verbal addition, creating a comic meaning and thus mocking the original message and intention:



Picture 4: Second and third repair

After the removal of the sticky tape, someone expanded two words of the original message with hand-written white permanent marker: The negation particle "nicht" ("not") was added to "-en", yielding the plural noun "Nichten" in German ("nieces").[10] The verb "impfen" ("to vaccinate") was expanded word-initially with "sch", yielding the verb "schimpfen" ("to rant"). The new message – "Let nieces rant" – is, on the one hand, nonsensical and simply a play with words. "Nieces" are an arbitrary selected section of the population, chosen just because the negation particle could be transformed into "NICHTEN" / "nieces" relatively easily. On the other hand, it can also be understood as an act of positioning that does not take the original message seriously. A distancing, critical stance[11] is thus expressed.

In Androutsopoulos' (2022:133) classification of types of public signs with COVID-19 as a topic, it belongs to "transgressive signs that communicate affect, such as calls for solidarity, curses against the virus, expressions of gratitude to public workers who sustain basic services and other expressive acts." On a very general level, the verb "SCHIMPFEN" / "rant" is linked to the vaccination discourse because pro-vaccination campaigns used the slogan "Impfen statt schimpfen" / "Vaccinate, not rant" (https://impfen-statt-schimpfen.de/start-de.html; 26.09.2025). Whether this link to the pro-vaccination slogan was intended or whether, just as

[10] The shift of the word class from negation particle to noun was facilitated by the fact that the stencil is written in capital letters. In orthographically standard written German, nouns are characterized by an initial capital letter ("Nichten"), whereas other word classes – such as negation particles – are written in lowercase ("nicht").

[11] We draw on Du Bois' (2007) definition of stance-taking: "Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field." (Du Bois 2007:163)

with "nieces", the verb "impfen" simply offered itself as material for this transformation cannot be determined.

In any case, this creative remodeling of the original directive action into the nonsensical one shows that "action is determined partly by composition – the linguistic and embodied format of the directive – partly by position, that is, its place in the sequence of turns and actions." (Svennevig 2021:167) Only as an expansion of "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" does "NICHTEN SCHIMPFEN LASSEN" acquire its comical value.

5.4. Four further steps in the repair sequence emerge (13.07.2021)

Ten days later, four further steps in the repair interaction had taken place, which can be reconstructed in the following picture, where an exhortation to get vaccinated ("IMPFEN LASSEN" / "Get vaccinated") is the intermediate result of the 'repair wars' occurring here:



Picture 5: Fourth to seventh repair

The first step is constituted by a partial deletion (type 3), whereby the utterance-medial additions ("-en" and "sch") were rubbed away by someone to restore the original message "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" / "Don't get vaccinated". The second step involved a partial crossing (type 4) of the word "NICHT" ("not") of the stencil with a black pen, temporarily resulting in "IMPFEN LASSEN" / "Get vaccinated". Then someone produced an utterance-initial addition (type 8) by writing the negation particle by hand in white above the previously deleted negation particle

("NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" / "Don't get vaccinated"). The fourth step was the partial crossing (type 4) of the hand-written "NICHT" / "not". In terms of the "practices of crisis management" ("Praktiken der Krisenbewältigung") which Reershemius and Ziegler (2021:263) analyzed when contrasting reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic in a rural and an urban area in Germany, this is a decidedly simple practice of a yes-and-no game.

5.5. Two further steps appear (17.07.2021)

This rather childish game of adding and deleting the negation particle "NICHT" / "Not" was not over yet. Four days later, a revision of the deletion (type 5) was added by someone who first covered the previously blackened "NICHT" with more black paint in order to create a background on which to write "NICHT" again in white handwritten letters (partially visible below the two stickers). The person who wrote "NICHT" attempted to reconstruct the materiality of the original stencil: They used the same typography, although the word was clearly written by hand and not with the help of a stencil:



Picture 6: Eighth and ninth repair

Blommaert (2013:50) not only treats "space as an arena of human social and cultural action" but he also sees space as "a complex and layered repository of traces of such action". These layers of human action are visible very clearly in Picture 6. The next repair – adding another layer – was carried out by one or several persons placing two stickers over the reinstated "NICHT" / "not". Those stickers were probably not chosen randomly for their covering purpose alone. Instead, they can be understood as acts of positioning against the message "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN": The sticker on the left in Picture 7 shows a unicorn with a rainbow mane vomiting a rainbow – a symbol associated with queer/anti-racist activism. The words at the bottom read: "Fuck racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, transphobia, fascism, conspiracy theories". Especially the latter can be interpreted as an

act of positioning the message "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN" within the realm of conspiracy theories, which are listed alongside fascism on this sticker.[12] The sticker on the right-hand side is even more clearly a comment on the original message: it demands "Impfstoff für alle" / "Vaccines for everybody" in black letters and "Socialize pharmaceutical firms" and "Abolish patents" in white letters. The anarchy sign in the top left corner of the sticker indicates a left-wing position.

Interestingly, however, in our data no dedicated 'repair stickers' could be found. Instead, the stickers used for repair purposes were simply used for covering, regardless of whether their content was related to the repair action in one way or another (political stickers, as in Picture 7) or not (e.g. football stickers as in Picture 11):



Picture 7: Detail of the stickers

In his analysis of official and unofficial signs promoting distancing during the COVID-19 crisis, Marshall (2023:209) noticed the increasing visual complexity: "[T]he signs and artefacts combined a number of communicative modes in different ways: colors and shades were combined to emphasize key content and messages, written text in different sizes and fonts was used for the same purposes, and images were used to catch attention and create impact." These patterns can also be detected in signs relating to the vaccination discourse. Colors (as the combination of white with rainbow colors or the combination of black, white, and green), pictures, and typography (as the 1980s-style early computer typography of "sick of it all") create attention and help convey the messages.

The stickers also show that different groups can be addressed not only by choosing different places – for example, Reershemius and Ziegler (2021:287) show that by choosing a transformer building in a park rather than a lively shopping street, different groups such as casual strollers, shoppers, or commuters can be targeted as primary addressees – but also by choosing different overall formats (stencils vs. stickers, typography, and symbols such as the anarchy sign or the unicorn). We

[12] In terms of the "membership categorization" framework developed by Sacks (1995) and Schegloff (2007), the stencil is treated as a "category-bound activity" by this sticker – i.e., the sticker implies that spraying anti-vaccination slogans is a typical, category-bound activity for followers of (right-wing) conspiracy theories.

assume (admittedly speculatively) that these stickers are more likely to 'speak to' a younger, left-oriented public than to older or right-wing passers-by.

5.6. Three further steps are added (31.07.2021)

During the next two weeks, three further steps in the repair sequence took place. As in the first step of the repair sequence, the revision of the deletion (type 5) was easy because the stickers could be removed as easily as the sticky tape. Following the removal of the stickers, someone added an utterance-final (type 8) "tötet" / "kills" with a red paint marker. Similar to the removal of the negation particle, the proposition of the utterance could thus be reversed: "NICHT IMPFEN LASSEN TÖTET" / "Not getting vaccinated kills".

The final step in this sequence was a partial crossing (type 2), which was not very successful, because someone tried to cross out the verb "TÖTET" with white chalk, which did not effectively efface the red paint marker. As can be seen very clearly in Picture 8, the material used for the repairs plays an important role in their effectiveness: While paint (liquid paint or spray paint) affords effective obliteration of previous text, chalk or crayons only afford weak attempts and lend themselves more to the repair types of crossing and addition instead of deletion or erasure.



Picture 8: Tenth to twelfth repair

At this stage, the repair sequence came to a preliminary end: nothing new was added or removed for more than a year.

5.7. The final step: an almost blank slate is created (15.10.2022)

In October 2022, after the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted and compulsory vaccinations were no longer needed and were no longer being discussed, someone painted the whole repair sequence over with brown paint.



Picture 9: Complete erasure

As Karlander (2019:207) states, "[p]ainting over graffiti-covered surfaces is a standard technique of semiotic regimentation. It is furthermore an accessible technique, which requires neither hazardous chemicals nor specialized machinery." But painting often is not effective at erasing a message: Ghostly traces of the original stencil can still be seen through this coat of paint. Referring to Baudrillard's (2007) question, "Why hasn't everything disappeared already?", and applying it to attempts to erase graffiti, Karlander (2019:207) states that fragments of disappeared graffiti may "seep back into our lives". And, indeed, if anyone thought that painting over this publicly documented interaction would close the matter, they were ultimately disappointed.

5.8. The show must go on: new messages appear (24.02.2023)

For four months, only non-political graffiti was added. Then, in February 2023, a new initial turn appeared, both in form – a stencil in white – and in content – an act of positioning against vaccination – mirroring the first stencil (albeit on another part of the shed; the materiality of the unpainted part of the shed seemed to be more inviting than the painted-over part):



Picture 10: A new anti-vaccination statement appears

Two panels to the left of the original repair sequence, the message "NIE WIEDER GIFTSPRITZE" / "Never again lethal injection" appeared. The compound noun "GIFTSPRITZE" has a strongly negative semantic connotation, as it is generally used to refer to lethal injections, for example, in the United States (Gelinsky 2006). By implication, anti-COVID-19 vaccination is therefore equated with capital punishment by lethal injection. It is unclear whether this stencil was intended as a first turn or whether it tried to pick up on the previous sequence. The position it represents is the same in any case. Unlike the directive "Don't get vaccinated", however, "Never again lethal injection" is based on a stronger claim to authority. In his analysis of directives, Svennevig (2021:181) found that the producers of these directives often try to bolster the legitimacy of their demands (Svennevig 2021:181):

> Entitlements to perform the directive may also be claimed by the use of accounts invoking external sources of authority and legitimacy. The analysis has shown that in such accounts claim entitlement either by reference to pre-existing rules, norms or conventions, or by strengthening the author's deontic authority in that it grounds the directive in more general and socially established norms.

The latter strategy is used here: while vaccination in general is broadly accepted and a socially established norm – hence the appeal not to get vaccinated constitutes a violation of that norm – the use of lethal injections is both forbidden and socially condemned in Germany. Calling for a stop to lethal injections therefore rests on the authority of a socially established norm and cannot be contested on its own. Only the rhetorical equation of a COVID-19-vaccination with a lethal injection can be contested.

5.9. The repair actions become sluggish (14.04.2023)

The fact that the social debates about COVID-19-vaccination had by then cooled down and that most people wanted to move on from the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen in the slow uptake on this positioning. This provides a good illustration of Blommaert's (2013:33) concept of interaction order, which he adapts for the specific conditions of Linguistic Landscape analyses: "The interaction order is an effect of the dialectics between the historical body and historical space. It is the actual order of communicative conduct that ensues from enskilled bodies in a space inscribed with particular conditions." The conditions have changed; COVID-19 was already becoming a historical incident, and the motivation to position oneself was waning. Only two months later, someone effected a partial crossing (type 4) by pasting a sticker above the stencil:

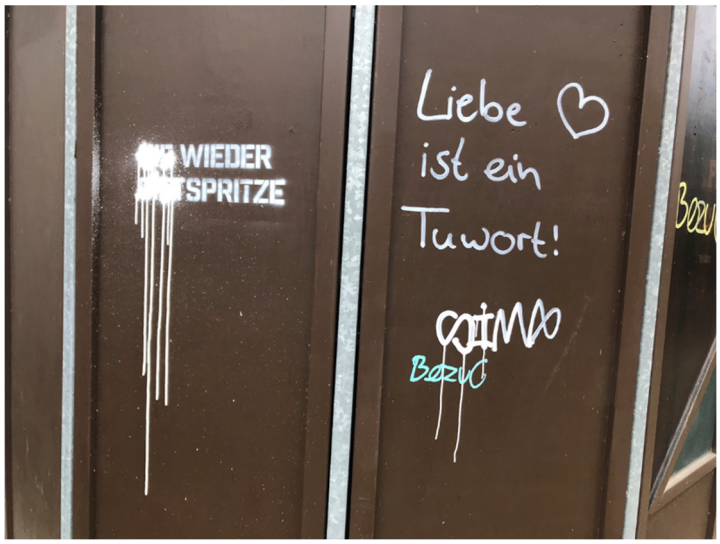


Picture 11: First repair of the new sequence

The type of sticker used for the repair is another indicator for the low public interest in the topic of anti-vaccination discourse at that time: unlike the stickers in Picture 7, this sticker does not relate to the topic of vaccination. It is a football sticker posted by fans of the St. Pauli football club, with the text "WIR SIND DERBY SIEGER SCHEIß HSV" / "We are derby winners fucking HSV".[13]

5.10. Repair activities pick up again (20.04.2023)

Four days later, two steps in the new repair sequence were added. First, someone effected a revision of the deletion (type 5) by removing the sticker. Then, a partial deletion was added by someone using white spray paint to eradicate the negation adverb "NIE" / "never" as well as the first part of the compound noun "GIFTSPRITZE" / "lethal injection":[14]



Picture 12: Second and third repair

This partial deletion reversed the meaning of the original stencil from "Never again lethal injection" to "injection again".

5.11. The last repair in the vaccination debate (11.08.2023)

Four months later, in 2023, the last step of the repair sequence centering on COVID-19 – at least until this article was written (spring 2026) – was carried out through a partial revision of the previous deletion (type 6).

With a violet-colored permanent marker, someone restored the negation particle but not the first part of the compound noun, resulting in a more general anti-vaccination positioning: "NIE WIEDER SPRITZE" / "Never again injection". No one

[13] Hamburg is home to two rival – if not outright enemies – football clubs. FC St. Pauli has many left-wing fans, so the sticker implicitly carries a left-wing stance, which in turn positions the stencil "NIE WIEDER GIFTSPRITZE" / "Never again lethal injection" as right-wing.

[14] In German, "lethal injection" is rendered as a compound noun consisting of "Gift" ("poison") and "Spritze" ("syringe"). Literally, this yields "poison-syringe."

seemed interested in continuing this debate about vaccination afterwards. Instead, new political and social topics – as well as unpolitical tagging – took over.



Picture 13: Fourth repair

5.12. Changing political and social debates become visible (15.12.2023)

The partial crossing (type 4) that took place in December 2023 effaces parts of the anti-vaccination message. In all likelihood, however, this was not intended as a direct comment or reaction to that topic, but rather as an accidental effect: the sprayer merely wanted to produce a large message:



Picture 14: Partial crossing, unrelated activity

The words "FREE GAZA" refer to Israel's attacks on Gaza following the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas in October 2023 and open a new political discourse, suddenly using the full affordance of the bike shed by writing in large letters – unlike the rather small written artifacts discussed so far.

5.13. The start of a third repair sequence (10.05.2024)

Unlike the COVID-19 discourse, the public discourse centering on the Israel/Palestine conflict appeared to invite fewer reactions. For five months, nothing happened. Then, someone finally added an utterance-accompanying element (type 8) by placing a small sticker with the words "FREE GAZA FROM HAMAS" next to it:



Picture 15: Placement of sticker



Picture 16: Sticker in detail

The reason we treated this sticker as a repair activity is that we found several "Free Gaza" sprayings in different places of Barmbek, which were expanded by another sprayer or by someone using a permanent marker merely with "from Hamas". This bipartite pattern is actually taken up in the sticker itself, where "Free Gaza" and "from Hamas" are printed in different colors. It seems to have incorporated the whole repair sequence in itself (but, interestingly enough, no stickers with only the repair "from Hamas" were used).[15]

At that stage, it seemed that the time for political and social debates publicly mediated through other-repairs had come to an end, and that non-political tagging took over instead: The tag "GANG" at the top of the panel of the bike shed (Picture 15, top) is an example of such tagging that appeared in different places in Barmbek at that time. Here, we have no insider information about the motivation of this tag – whether it is "directed 'outwardly' to intimidate out-group members or to (re)claim territory" or whether it belongs to the less aggressive type of graffiti with which sprayers merely "advertise themselves" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010:22).

5.14. Nature takes over (26.09.2025)

As can be seen in the following picture taken in autumn 2025, both political debates slowly faded out:



Picture 17: 26.09.2025: Ivy taking over

A range of non-political graffiti were added. The spot of the first repair sequence that was painted over in brown at the end (Picture 9) is now covered by a large

[15] Incidentally, our ethnographic insights – gained by regularly watching and documenting public signs in the Barmbek area – suggest that pro-Palestine positionings were only very rarely erased or otherwise reworked, unlike pro-Israel positionings. A thorough analysis of written Palestine/Israel interactions would require an in-depth investigation of its own, however, and cannot be presented here.

yellow tag and several small white tags (right-most panel). The sprayed "FREE GAZA" message was crossed out by a large tag produced by a prolific tagger in Barmbek ("GOINS"): on the left-most panel, the "S" of "GOINS" can be seen.

6. Conclusion

To address the question of what happens to transgressive signs posed in the introduction, the image of the two children is still visible three years after its first documentation, although it has suffered some changes, as can be seen in Picture 18:



Picture 18: *They will eradicate us, won't they?* II 24.08.2025

While the picture itself has not been tampered with by other unauthorized signers (who restricted their work to the green background of the painting or used the adjacent white wall of the fast-food shop), an institutional alteration has occurred, which is not part of the repair typology cited above because it was not – most likely – intended to work upon the painting. Someone installed an electric cord on the outer wall of the shop, using the traditional rectangular routing of cables. As a result, the cord now crosses part of the writing.

Apart from this, the picture already has a comparatively long lifespan, given the typical short-lived character of many other instantiations of transgressive signs. This can be shown by the analysis of the 'discourse wars' centering on COVID-19 at the bike shed. Here, signs often lasted only a short time: repairs (and counter-repairs) often occurred overnight. On the other hand, though, long stretches of time could elapse until the next turn was taken. It could be shown that repairers made use of a wide range of possibilities offered by written signs. Spoken language is volatile, and word play is therefore restricted to quick reactions and depends on the repairable being still in the memory of the interactants. Written language, by contrast, is much more stable and therefore affords techniques such as (partial) crossing or deletion, overwriting, as well as word-initial, -medial, and -final additions – along with repairs that merely accompany the original utterance.

As demonstrated, the inventory of repair developed for spoken language needed to be expanded. We developed a set of repair types that hopefully proves useful for further research on written interaction.

Furthermore, aspects of varying types of medium and materiality play an important role in the analysis of the repairs discussed here: Some materials, such as chalk or stickers, can be added easily – and especially in the case of stickers, rather unobtrusively.[16] But of course, they can also be removed again just as easily. By contrast, using permanent markers or sprayed paint (with or without a stencil) is more conspicuous and also more permanent.

What is particularly interesting in our corpus is that there are no repair activities that make use of the mass production affordances of written signs: There were no instances of a dedicated 'repair stencil' in our corpus, even though the 'repair wars' around "(nicht) impfen lassen" could easily have led the initial sprayer to use a "nicht" stencil in order to reinstate a painted-over "nicht". This did not happen. Nor did people print dedicated repair stickers. Instead, they made use of whatever stickers they happened to have in order to cross out unwanted messages.

Thus, while some affordances of written text – the two-dimensional space that allows repairs to be placed at different positions in relation to the repairable; the possibilities of crossing or painting over; the possibilitiy of changing individual letters to create new meanings; the use of different colors or sizes (for example, small additions to existing messages as opposed to massive painting-over) – were used abundantly and creatively. Other affordances, such as the potential for mass production, remained unused.

The repair system developed by Conversation Analysis is fine-tuned to the temporal enfolding of spoken language. In written language, the temporal structure is slower, and the utterances together with repair activities can remain visible for a long time. This opens up new and different ways of repairing utterances, which do not exist in spoken language, and these, in turn, serve different functions. Therefore, we need a more detailed set of repair activities to capture these functions. For example, the two-dimensional visual surface of written utterances affords the repair activity of addition: it can manipulate the original utterance by adding material before, after, or anywhere in the middle. In this way, a wider range of creative word play becomes possible than in spoken language: the addition "Nichten schimpfen lassen" (Picture 4) would not really work in spoken language; it relies on the written format.

The repair activities of partial deletion and crossing, for instance, have to be treated as separate types because they have different functions. A crossing leaves the original utterance visible and creates a palimpsest. It also creates strong sense of positioning, conveyed through the crossing as a clearly perceptible statement of the repairer. A partial deletion, by contrast, hides part of the original utterance and, depending on how the deletion was carried out, the original utterance cannot be reconstructed by passers-by after the repair.

In our exemplary analysis, we could only show a small number of repairs and their functions. In Steffens (in prep.), the entire corpus will be analyzed, and the

[16] The authors once accidentally witnessed such a casual act in broad daylight: all they could make out was an odd swing of the person's left hand towards a lamp post as they walked past, and from one second to the next a football sticker appeared there.

repair types will be contrasted quantitatively to show which repair types are most common and what functions they fulfill.

To sum up, the microdiachronic approach proposed by Blommaert and Maly (2019) and Maly and Blommaert (2019) has several advantages: it captures the lively transformations of publicly enacted political and social (unauthorized) discourse and shows the step-by-step unfolding of interactive turns in which the signs get altered, expanded, commented upon, or even eradicated. Without successive documentation of these turns, whole interactions are lost – as can be seen in Picture 9, where the interaction centering on whether or not to get vaccinated was eradicated when someone painted everything over with brown paint.

One problem of a microdiachronic approach, however, is that it is nearly impossible to capture all interactive steps. One would need constant documentation – for example, by a surveillance camera (which is legally more than doubtful) – in order not to miss single steps in the repair turns. Nevertheless, the regular documentation of hotspots of written interactions usually yields enough information to reconstruct missing steps.

However, the great advantage of the microdiachronic approach is not exhausted by the mere fact of comprehensive documentation of interactional turns or speech acts of unauthorized signers. Turn-by-turn analysis provides insights into the temporal unfolding of sense-making by interactants. This approach is known as the next-turn proof procedure in Conversation Analysis. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) developed this method in their paper on the organization of turn-taking. They show that each turn in an interactional sequence displays the speaker's understanding of the prior turn, and that this understanding can be used by the analyst to interpret what is going on, thereby avoiding over-interpretation. Meaning is what the co-interactants display.

The same holds true for written repair sequences: The repair activities (e.g. partial deletion, erasure, addition) and the reactions to these repairs help us to understand the meanings and functions of signs and lay bare the positions held by interactants in political and social debates. These debates present themselves semiotically in public space and transform it into a kind of bulletin board featuring changing positions, which in turn reflect changing political landscapes and changing relevance of political and social topics.

It has to be said, however, that the advantage of focusing on observable, authentic data is limited by the need to obtain observable reactions by other signers. If there are none, or if these reactions are left open to interpretation, it is difficult to access the meanings constructed and presented by the signers. Other approaches are needed to focus specifically on signers' intentions – for example, approaches that take different theories of motivation for public signing as their starting point and are accompanied by different methods such as questionnaires or (narrative) interviews (with their respective methodological advantages and disadvantages).

GPT-5.4-nano and GPT-5.4-mini (provided by the University of Hamburg) were used for style and grammar checking.

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Melanie Steffens
Prof. Wolfgang Imo
Universität Hamburg
Fachbereich Sprache Literatur Medien I (SLM I)
Institut für Germanistik
Von-Melle-Park 6, Postfach #15
20146 Hamburg

melanie.steffens@uni-hamburg.de
wolfgang.imo@uni-hamburg.de

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