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Bilingual Signs in Carinthia: International Treaties, the *Ortstafelstreit*, and the Spaces of German

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In 2002, the student activist group Unikum, affiliated with the University of Klagenfurt, was handing out leaflets with the slogan, “Haček (k)lebt!”<sup>1</sup> The sheets consisted of “v”-shaped stickers of varying sizes that were meant to be peeled off and placed above random words on public signs, where they would be read as hačeks. Hačeks (or carons) are diacritical marks typically used by Slavic languages written in the Latin alphabet, and in the Carinthian context of Klagenfurt they would have been associated with the Slovene minority. The haček stickers reveal how our public spaces are made up of signs, as is the language we use. While the meaning of the linguistic sign is based on the absence that structures the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, the public sphere’s shop signs, street names, and price tags are largely indexical, their meaning depending on their presence and the resulting “contiguity between signifier and signified” (Backhaus 7). The latter are studied under the rubric of “linguistic landscape,” a term denoting the visibility of language and used primarily for multilingual spaces with a potential for linguistic conflict. Landry and Bourhis have offered the basic definition: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (25). Despite its seeming transparency, however, the sign in the linguistic landscape will exceed the thing to which it is (often literally) attached, its signifier always transcending its locality and losing its referentiality to construct the sign’s signified in a performative act. The following will analyze the history of Austria’s southernmost province of Carinthia, which shares a border with Slovenia and contains an indigenous, Slovene-speaking minority that has been present in Southern Carinthia from the time of the first Slavic settlements in Central Europe. The case of Carinthia’s linguistic landscape, with its history of denial of any conflict – and thus a denial of any linguistic landscape to speak of – illustrates the materiality of

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<sup>1</sup> An animated image of the sticker sheet can be found here: [http://www.unikum.ac.at/hacki\\_FI/hacki\\_karte.html](http://www.unikum.ac.at/hacki_FI/hacki_karte.html).

public signage as the excess of meaning of, and sedimentation of its history in, the linguistic landscape's signifiers. Indeed, in the Carinthian case, with its bilingual topographical signs, the indexical value of the sign is arguably completely absent, and the (non-)translation of place names refers to Austria's unresolved language question, and to the larger question of the production of a monolingual nation-state out of a multilingual monarchy. While the literature on the historical, legal, and sociological angle of this topic is rich, I am approaching the *Ortstafelstreit* as an illustration of the performative character of national languages, the performances to which contested national languages give rise, and the destabilization of national languages in a transnational era.

The modern state of Austria is a comparatively young state, and in its reduced spatial extension has never before formed an independent political entity. Famously, or apocryphally, it was "*ce qui reste*" ("that which remains," or "what's left," in the words of Georges Clemenceau, the French prime minister at the Saint-Germain negotiations) after the successor states of the Habsburg monarchy had been established, and it was conceived as the ethnically and linguistically German element of the defunct multiethnic and multilingual empire. Despite the nationalist endeavor to create nation-states whose ethnic, linguistic, and territorial borders coincided neatly and accomplished sharp demarcations from neighboring nation-states, the new Austria's borders proved especially messy, and both armed conflict and democratic plebiscites subsequently re-arranged the preliminary outline that was first drawn up. The final shape of the state was established only in 1923, five years after the end of World War I and the abdication of the last Habsburg emperor. The Saint-Germain peace treaty included vague accommodations for minorities in terms of religion and language, but what are now called the *Volksgruppen*

(autochthonous ethnic minorities) were not enumerated in the treaty and thus did not exist in a legal sense.

The re-constitution of the Republic of Austria in 1955 by the Allied Forces resulted in a *Staatsvertrag* (State Treaty) that listed the autochthonous minorities of Austria and stipulated various measures for their protection as groups. The ethnic minorities that are recognized today, some of which were added later, are: the Slovenes in Carinthia, the Croats and the Hungarians in the Burgenland, the Czechs and Slovaks in Vienna, and (since 1993) the Roma and Sinti.<sup>2</sup> Expansive rights concerning a separate school system, dedicated radio and TV programs, and street signage in the respective minority language are guaranteed only for the two larger groups of the Slovenes in Carinthia and the Croats in the Burgenland. It is important to remember that these populations did not change location, but that the borders changed around them. The ethnic minorities only emerged as a category in need of definition after World War I, and again when they were explicitly constructed as “minority” in 1955. This is what differentiates them from minorities of migration, but what in the Austrian context also connects the two.

The wording that gave the Austrian minorities a legal existence and that has since given rise to so much conflict and controversy is contained in Article 7, Number 3 of the 1955 State Treaty, which specifies that:

In den Verwaltungs- und Gerichtsbezirken Kärntens, des Burgenlandes und der Steiermark mit slowenischer, kroatischer oder gemischter Bevölkerung wird die slowenische oder kroatische Sprache zusätzlich zum Deutschen als Amtssprache zugelassen. In solchen Bezirken werden die Bezeichnungen und Aufschriften

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Baumgartner provides an overview of minority politics in *Österreich: Geschichte und aktuelle Situation der Volksgruppen*.

topographischer Natur sowohl in slowenischer oder kroatischer Sprache wie in Deutsch verfaßt.<sup>3</sup>

In the protracted negotiations for the State Treaty, Article 7 was caught up in the tensions between Joseph Stalin and Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, with the Western powers willing to support Yugoslavia's request for far-reaching protection of Carinthia's Slovenes and the Burgenland's Croats. Language referring to the minorities and the districts where their languages would have official status was contested, and the negotiators were aware that the phrasing that eventually entered the Treaty was abstract and left disputed matters unresolved.<sup>4</sup> While in the decades following Austria's independence the provisions for mandatory bilingual schooling caused friction between the Slovene- and German-speaking Carinthians, the bilingual topographical signage has emerged as the point of contention of minority politics in Austria today. By the early 1970s, it was glaringly obvious that as far as the bilingual signs were concerned, the state had not fulfilled the obligations of its constitution, and the majority of signs designating Slovene towns were monolingually German and lacked the Slovene equivalent. Realizing that the absence of such signage was a violation of an international treaty, the federal government under chancellor Bruno Kreisky proceeded to assemble a list of villages and towns with a Slovene population, and began erecting the proper bilingual signs. What happened next was unexpected and sparked a political crisis that in the years since has reached an ever-higher pitch. During the night of 20 September 1972, in what came to be called the *Ortstafelsturm* (run on the street signs), the local *Deutschkärntner* (German Carinthian) population took down the

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<sup>3</sup> The official English version runs as follows: "3. In the administrative and judicial districts [...] where there are Slovene, Croat or mixed populations, the Slovene or Croat language shall be accepted as an official language in addition to German. In such districts topographical terminology and inscriptions shall be in the Slovene or Croat language as well as in German." The treaty is on file with the United Nations and accessible here: [http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1\\_60000/6/16/00010771.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/6/16/00010771.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> In *Um Einheit und Freiheit* (157-160), Gerald Stourzh details the different versions brought to the table by the parties involved, and analyzes the considerable problems of translation between the languages in which the Treaty was written.

bilingual signs that had been put up during the day. In the decades that followed, political maneuverings, legal opinions, and the public's actions combined to render the *Ortstafelfrage* one of the most vexed, complex, and puzzling phenomena of post-war Austria.<sup>5</sup>

A crisis – a constitutional crisis, no less – that revolves around language might appear anachronistic, parochial, or even ridiculous to outsiders. But what Pieter Judson in his study of the late monarchy has identified as a “language frontier” remains alive and well in Austria, and the bilingual topographical signs are the battlefield of this frontier. The militarized nature that the language question acquires here is a direct consequence of the southern border's history: only with the end of the multilingual Habsburg Empire and the 1918-1922/23 border-drawings did concepts such as nationality, citizenship, and language become relevant as they attached themselves to territory. The armed forces of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) marched over the Karavanke mountain border and occupied large parts of Carinthia – including the capital Klagenfurt – in order to prevent Slovene-majority areas in the region from becoming part of the new Austrian state. The Carinthians were left to their own devices to fight back and regain the territory for Austria, as the weak government in Vienna was not in a position to officially endorse a military solution. Recorded in history as the *Abwehrkampf* (Defensive Struggle), this event forever tainted relations between the *Deutschkärntner* and the Slovene Carinthians, giving them a desperate, fatalistic tinge. Creating, and maintaining, a monolingual space is the self-imposed task of certain German-speaking Carinthians today, as they fashion themselves as latter-day descendants of those ancestors who successfully defended the borders of Carinthia, of Austria, and of the German language. The logoclastic violence unleashed in the

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Gstettner provides a lucid account of the *Ortstafelsturm*'s political context and gives evidence countering the alleged “secrecy” of the government's preparations as well as the celebrated “spontaneous” character of the local population's protest.

1972 *Ortstafelsturm* is a remainder of the violence that surrounds the imposition of a national language in the proclamation of a nation-state.

The 1919 Saint-Germain treaty founding the Republic of Austria was only the first in a series of legal texts producing the minority. In Carinthian nationalist practice, it is not the treaty but the plebiscite of October 10, 1920, that is ritually commemorated. This event is marked annually, reproducing Carinthia as German territory. In that plebiscite, administered by a U.S.-led commission and accompanied by fierce propaganda, a majority of Slovenes voted to retain the territorial integrity of the old province of Carinthia and to remain part of the new state of Austria. In her 2005 article on the state of Carinthia, Allyson Fiddler calls for a theorizing of the date for a deeper understanding of Austrian national identity (195). When inserted into the context of foundational legal documents, the plebiscite complicates much more than national identity: it also intervenes in the order of the national space.



Fig. 1 Abstimmungsgebiete für die Volksabstimmung in Kärnten am 10. Oktober 1920

The map drawn up for the 1920 plebiscite, with its division of Southern Carinthia into a Zone A and a Zone B for the purposes of voting to either remain with Austria or join Yugoslavia have entered the national visual unconscious; the map is reproduced in textbooks and is immediately recognizable to Austrians with the crude font of its captions and the hatching that marks lost territory (see fig. 1). The later State Treaty that effected the legal construction of the minority groups is linked to the plebiscite's disruption of national space in that the treaty wrote into existence, together with the minority groups, not merely two other languages, but also other territories within the larger territory of the nation-state that were to be demarcated by signs in another language. This intervention performed by the Treaty and the constitution ran, and runs, counter to all other nationalist ideology that had brought the First and Second Republic into being by acknowledging at their foundations the impossibility of isomorphic ethnic, linguistic, and nation-state borders. The Slovene spaces within the ostensibly German-language nation-state are the site where the heretofore merely discursive recognition of the minority becomes real. They are an instance of what David Delaney calls a "nomosphere" – a space produced by the peculiar materializing effect of normative orders. The nomosphere, as he defines it, "is irreducibly discursive, performative, *and* material" (26; emphasis original). The cumulative force of international treaties and ratified constitutions conspires to discursively construct territories within the jurisdiction of the nation-state, which then act as permanent reminders of restrictions on national sovereignty. The bilingual topographical signs mandated in the Treaty are the visible marker of these territories and are the representation of the law in the public sphere. The distinctive feature that distinguishes these signs from all the others used throughout Austria and that renders them able to produce a minority space is the other language imprinted on them. The sign translating the place name does not indicate the place but performs it.



The imposition of foreign-language spaces on Carinthian territory has provoked the strong reactions of the *Ortstafelsturm*, but the more damaging strategy has centered on the language of the Treaty determining the extent of those spaces. While the Treaty created the minority as a legal entity, the exact extension of the minority spaces – the material manifestation of the minority – was not specified in the constitution, and thus was, and is, available for competing constructions. The formulation of Article 7, “administrative and judicial districts [...] where there are Slovene, Croat or mixed populations,” leaves open the threshold percentage above which a mixed-population locality would warrant a bilingual sign. In the wake of the violence of the 1972 *Ortstafelsturm*, legal action on the matter intensified, and representatives of the concerned parties attempted to reach a consensus on the threshold and enact, with great delay, the provisions of the 1955 constitution. The most important are the 1976 *Volksgruppengesetz* (Ethnic Groups’ Law) and the 1977 *Topographieverordnung* (Topographical Regulation), which assembled long lists of towns and villages with a Slovene population and posited official translations of the place names. Near countless reports and studies by fact-finding missions and committees followed, all claiming to represent the lay of the land on paper and in language. No further bilingual signs were ever put up. The requisite threshold for minority members in each settlement that would require a bilingual sign ranged in these texts from 5% to 25%, and the sources to be consulted for determining the percentage included a pre-war census, any one of the later, official census counts, and a current, specially designed population count to be conducted expressly for the purpose of deciding the exact number of Slovene Austrians living in Carinthia. The latter suggestion especially was perceived as offensive by the minority, who protested against the need to be counted in order to prove their existence as a group. The number of bilingual signs suggested by these texts varied wildly, from a few dozen to up to 800.

The local population understands very well the performative power of language to shape reality, which is why the language's visible presence has to be prevented, or demanded, by the respective parties. The contest over space, over language, over which language belongs to which space, and the resulting decades-long delay of the bilingual signs has had a detrimental outcome for the minority. Official denial of the presence of the Slovene language has contributed to its disappearance (from roughly 25% of the population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 2.3% today)<sup>6</sup>. By its sheer existence, however, the autochthonous or "old" minority performs a vital intervention: it intervenes in the spatial order, disrupting the complacent inertia of the majority population that unthinkingly conceives of its nation-state as one possessing isomorphic ethnic and linguistic borders. Furthermore, in its linguistic difference, the minority population by definition disrupts the national code, displacing the relation between the German-language signifier and the Austrian spatial signified in its contestation of the government-issued official, monolingual, street signs. The national relevance of the bilingual signs renders them, in a literal sense, "national signs" that narrate the nation; their translation acts as a "supplementary strategy" that "interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative [...] by radically changing their mode of articulation" (Bhabha 305). In Homi Bhabha's model, the pedagogic (here, the monolingual) is always countered by the performative, an articulation of the national that escapes the discourse of homogeneity. In the *Ortstafelstreit*, the performative becomes a complex matter that involves *Deutschkärntner*, Slovene Carinthians, and the government in remote Vienna tasked with mediating this conflict. None of these three interested parties can represent the national on its own; national space is constructed and contested in the play of the collective of the individual parties' utterances.

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<sup>6</sup> The last available census figure is from 2001 (*Volkszählung*, 17 f.).

The highly performative nature of Carinthia's bilingual street signs has given rise to performance art that often expresses frustration with the political system which is clearly incapable of enforcing constitutional law. The most successful contestation so far of the monolingual regime represented by the *Ortstafelsturm* engaged precisely the government's responsibility in guaranteeing compliance with the law when issuing street signs. Dissatisfied with the inaction of the government and the state's procrastination regarding its constitutional obligations, Slovene Carinthian lawyer and activist Rudolf Vouk one day drove through the town of St. Kanzian/Skocjan at high speed. He turned himself in to the authorities, and when he received the speeding ticket, appealed it on the grounds that the sign, since it did not include the Slovene name of St. Kanzian (Skocjan) was not in compliance with the government's own rules and thus did not properly signify reduced speed (which is automatic once one enters the limits of a city or town). Vouk's roundabout method, which resulted in a test case that went to the *Verfassungsgerichtshof* (VfGH), or constitutional court, was necessary because the state was in a legal stalemate: in the face of the local authorities' refusal to carry out the constitutional demand for dual-language street signs, and in absence of an executive order by the federal government, there was no instance in which an individual citizen could sue for compliance with the constitution. The VfGH issued an opinion in 2001 that ended the 34-year-old *Topographieverordnung* (which had listed all the Slovene settlements warranting dual-language street signage) on the grounds that its threshold of 25% of minority population in any given district was too high. This ruling created a legal limbo in that the law reverted back to the constitution (which did not specify territories or population percentages) – the sole legal basis for Slovene territories had thus been declared unconstitutional, and legally speaking, there were now no more Slovene spaces extant.

The consequence of Vouk's (and in his wake other Slovene Carinthian activists') strategy has been a piecemeal reclamation of space for the Slovene language through legal activism. In the present legal situation, no comprehensive solution is possible outside of this village-by-village fight to the VfGH. But Vouk's already famous (or infamous) actions were then topped with an admittedly highly original performance piece by then-governor of Carinthia Jörg Haider, who gathered the media for an official *Ortstafelverrückung*, a repositioning of contested street signs. His legal logic (and he was, before becoming a politician, a legal scholar) consisted of moving a sign by a meter or two, claiming that he had thus rectified the sign that the court had found in violation of the law. Later, Haider did decide to allow for the translation of a few place names. Another publicity stunt, the act of nailing small-font Slovene names onto the existing signs under the German names, was an obvious insult to the minority, making visible their inferior status, and a perversion of the law.

Artists have seized on the theatricality of these political acts and organized their own *Ortstafel* events in imitation of Haider's *Ortstafelverrückungen*. When Haider bought space in Carinthian newspapers and claimed in full-page ads that "Kärnten wird einsprachig" (3 September 2006), performance artist Klaus Pobitzer wrote in his blog that "Kärnten wird dreisprachig." Pobitzer and his crew designed a font that resembled bananas being laid out in a made-up alphabet, had a sign printed, and showed up in costume and with TV cameras running to raise a trilingual (German, Slovene and "Banana") sign to the Banana Republic of Austria, where the law is obviously powerless and where the constitution is not respected.<sup>7</sup> A less polemical performance piece that accomplished a stealthy infiltration of the code of public signage was "Steiermark x 25 – Grenzen der Steiermark" by artists Michael Schuster, Brigitte

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<sup>7</sup> The performance was curated by the Kunsthalle Wien, which published the press release on its website: <http://www.karlsplatz.org/events/499>. A video of the actual performance in Bleiburg is available on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zARkn41xybI>.

Kossek, and David Auner.<sup>8</sup> This public art project consisted of signs that in design conformed to the highway patrol regulations, but which listed the name “Styria” in 25 languages spoken within the province of Styria. These signs were installed along roads at the borders of the province and, despite their height, blended almost seamlessly into the streetscape.

The “border that was written in blood” (a line in Carinthia’s official anthem)<sup>9</sup>, and that is still being defended by a considerable portion of its *Deutschkärntner* population, is for all intents and purposes obsolete, as Slovenia has become a member of the European Union and joined the Schengen Agreement. And while nationalists insist on the Germanness of Austrian land and language, the liberalization of the labor market has brought large guest worker populations into the country, many of them speaking the languages of those established minorities protected in the constitution and hailing from parts of Europe that the wars and treaties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century worked so hard to keep separate from each other, and from Austria. The bilingual signs of Austria’s linguistic landscape refer to the pre-nation-state past, and inscribe a history of violence. The performative force that inheres in the translation of place names, however, points to the cosmopolitan future of Europe, in which multilingual signs indicate spaces hospitable to speakers of many languages.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The publicly funded art organization “Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Steiermark” maintains a web archive of the project, which also includes photographs and a video:  
<http://www.oeffentlichekunststeiermark.at/cms/beitrag/10927220/28284261/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Wo man mit Blut die Grenze schrieb” is a line in the fourth stanza, which was added after the *Abwehrkampf*.

<sup>10</sup> On April 26, 2011, representatives of all groups concerned signed an agreement to raise the number of bilingual street signs to 164. This figure covers villages and towns in which Slovene Carinthians make up at least 17.5% of the population – a compromise between the 25% ruling of the earlier *Topographieverordnung* and the 10% suggested by the VfGH. Hailed as a historic breakthrough and as the end to 56 years of *Ortstafelstreit*, proof will lie in the long-term acceptance of the bilingual signs themselves by the local population.

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