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Linguistic Landscape as Cultural Heritage: Reflection of the Multilingual History and Spatial Identity of Istria, Croatia—Late 19th–21st Century

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Abstract

The linguistic landscape is a significant aspect of the cultural landscape and heritage. Istria, a region and peninsula located in the Republic of Croatia, has experienced various influences over the years that have shaped language use, impacting the linguistic landscape and the identity of the local population. This paper aims to investigate how the linguistic and spatial identity of the people in Istria has been represented in the region's cultural landscape during two comparative periods: the turn of the 20th century (the local population's fight for their national language against the languages imposed by the European powers that governed this region—Italy and Austria) and the turn of the 21st century (the status of minorities in the present Croatian region of Istria). This diachronic research employs a cross-sectional method to compare findings and establish cause-and-effect relationships. This study involves analyzing linguistic data from historical postcards, conducting field studies, and using the pin placement feature on Google Maps to assess recent periods. This research identified Italian and Croatian as the dominant languages during different periods, with English being increasingly prevalent in contemporary times. The results demonstrated that the spatial identity of the Italian minority community is strongly reflected in the linguistic landscape, primarily due to bilateral interstate agreements.

Keywords: Istria; Croatia; Istrian County; turn of the 20th and 21st centuries; cultural heritage; multilingual, ethnic and linguistic minorities; toponymy; language signs; Republic of Venice; Habsburg Monarchy

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1. Introduction

Heritage includes the cultural and historical legacies that we use today and pass down to future generations. It is as diverse as the communities it represents and can exist at various levels, from local to global, encompassing all of humanity. However, for heritage to thrive, the community responsible for it must actively care for, use, and manage it sustainably. In our modern era, heritage preservation has become a pressing issue. This urgency arises not only from globalization—which often leads to cultural homogenization, eroding local identities and values—but also from the increasing human impact on the environment. While we should acknowledge the effects of globalization, we must also promote awareness and appreciation of heritage at all levels to ensure its continued existence and relevance.

Humans have continually shaped and influenced their environment. The traces of their interaction and the creation of early cultural landscapes first appeared in pictograms painted on cave walls and later in various inscriptions in the area where they lived. These traces are part of our identity and heritage. As a result, the materialization of language expression is considered a crucial component of the cultural landscape. It reflects both the linguistic and spatial identity of the local population, as their spatial identity is expressed through the linguistic landscape.

Landry and Bourhis [1] defined the linguistic landscape as the visibility and prominence of languages on public and commercial signs in a specific geographical territory or region. They highlighted the importance of studying the linguistic landscape, explaining that it serves significant informational and symbolic functions. Additionally, the linguistic landscape serves as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities residing within a given territory [1] (p. 23). Therefore, it can be concluded that the linguistic landscape refers to all the linguistic signs present in a specific geographical area.

In addition to documenting and archiving the linguistic landscape (the language heritage of a space at a given time), Shohamy and Gorter [2] (p. 7) highlight that this research also contextualizes public space. They emphasize how it relates to issues of identity, the majority's language policies, and various political and social conflicts. The linguistic landscape is not a neutral phenomenon; it must be understood in context regarding its meaning, form, and function. The necessity of contextualization becomes evident when we visit a new area for the first time as tourists. When we encounter a new language and culture, interpreting them is essential for understanding. Using a tourist guide—whether a person, a book, or an online resource—can greatly assist us in this process. This approach helps us better grasp the area's cultural heritage.

One way to understand this language materialization is to analyze the linguistic landscape within the broader cultural landscape, which involves examining written language (linguistic signs) in public spaces, both urban and rural. Backhaus [3] (p. 66) provided the best definition of the linguistic landscape to date, defining linguistic sign as any part of a written text within a spatially defined framework. Linguistic signs can be written but may also take multimodal forms, such as sound and images. Research on linguistic landscapes becomes even more intriguing when conducted in areas of particular ethnolinguistic significance. Such studies provide insights into the ethnolinguistic identity of individuals in the area and illustrate how minority languages interact with the surrounding linguistic environment.

The study of linguistic landscapes is thought to have started in 1972 with Japanese geographer Masai [4]. He discovered a significant number of English language signs, indicating that English culture had a strong influence on the urban linguistic landscape of Tokyo's Shinjuku district in the 1970s. Masai also identified a strong correlation between the language used and the type of business activity. Specifically, English was more commonly seen on signs in cafes and restaurants. Similar findings could be expected in any contemporary study, including ours, which was conducted over a comparative period in the 21st century. Masai's research demonstrated that public signs reflect a range of social, economic, and historical influences. His study is particularly noteworthy because it was conducted 25 years before Landry and Bourhis formally defined the research field in 1997. However, contemporary research in this field is now often conducted across various multidisciplinary areas. While language, political science, and cultural geography all play a role in linguistic landscape studies, this article primarily draws from historical geography as its foundation.

Research into linguistic landscapes offers an opportunity to explore various aspects of identity, including individual, collective, national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and political identities, as well as the associated awareness of these identities. Such research also allows

us to examine how distinct group identities may shape one another. For example, we can explore how a minority group interacts with the majority: whether it remains separate, is integrated, or is fully assimilated [5]. Moreover, this research helps identify how groups with differing identities cohabit a shared public space. In this context, space can be viewed as a competitive arena where each group has a voice.

The area of research is the region of Istria, a peninsula in the Republic of Croatia, which is administratively almost entirely within its county borders (the Republic of Slovenia has a smaller northern portion of the peninsula, comprising approximately 10% of the peninsula's total area). Istria is a notable example of an ethnolinguistically significant area because its territory has been ruled and divided by various political powers for centuries, notably the Republic of Venice (13th–18th century), Napoleon (Illyrian provinces, 1805–1814), the Habsburg Monarchy (the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century; 1814–1867), Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918), Kingdom of Italy (1861–1918), Yugoslavia (1945–1989) and Slovenia. Since 1991, Istria has become an integral part of the Republic of Croatia. Each of these rulers has left its mark on the region, influencing administration, culture, and the use of the official language, thereby shaping the linguistic and spatial identity of the population. The linguistic and cultural landscape of Istria is a valuable heritage, shaped by its multilingual and multicultural history. It serves as an important resource for understanding relationships of dominance and linguistic change that have occurred in this relatively small area. This landscape reflects the evolution of the region's identity over time.

Multilingualism in Istria has been the subject of research for some time, mainly focusing on the languages spoken by the local population, including aspects of heritage [6–11]. Research on bilingualism in Istria has been conducted online [12], and some of these studies [13] have explored the rights to bilingualism, specifically investigating which national minorities are entitled to these rights and how many exercise them. By reviewing the relevant literature, we found that interest in relationships of language and spatial identity is becoming increasingly important [14]. Interest in language landscape research is also increasing [15,16]. Additionally, some research has examined the geographical aspects of renaming places. In their research on place renaming, geographers examine mainly the processes by which governments rename locations to assert their authority over the landscape, often replacing the names from prior dominant regimes. Many places are renamed to erase the legacy of foreign rulers and restore recognition of local history, and some become bilingual as a result of bilateral agreements between states. Consequently, renaming reflects the ethnic makeup of the local population and serves as an expression of their identity. Following changes in political regimes in Croatian Istria, such research has contributed further insights into bilingualism in the region [17]. Some examined the role of language in shaping national identity in the Istrian region [18], while others examined the relationship between Istrian identity and language [19]. Several studies have studied the regional identity of the Istrian population [20–22]. Additionally, Istrian cultural heritage has been the focus of research by scholars from various disciplines. Noteworthy studies include investigations of the De Franceschi family [23] and the Habsburg family [24], focusing on how their relationship to language is expressed. One study examines the relationship between heritage and tourism activities in Istria [25]. However, no studies have yet addressed the Istrian linguistic landscape or its links to spatial identity and cultural heritage. This research gap serves as the incentive for the current study.

This research focuses on the period from the late 19th century to the present day. This initial period is particularly significant, as it marked a process of national revival in Croatia (1835–1848), during which efforts began to promote the public and official use of the Croatian language. This period marks the beginning of the intertwining of

languages, shifts in linguistic dominance, and the shaping of both the linguistic–cultural landscape and the population's cultural and spatial identities. The national revival laid the groundwork for the standardization of the Croatian language, and it began to appear more frequently (in culture, law, education, etc.). However, it was often used alongside the dominant official languages of the ruling powers—German and Italian. The second half of the 19th century was challenging for both the Croatian language and its speakers. There was ongoing pressure from the Kingdom of Italy's absolutist government and Istrian Italians to minimize the use of Croatian in public communication. This pressure affected everyone, but it likely had the most significant impact on Croatian intellectuals. Those who spoke Croatian during this period faced humiliation, were deemed less valuable, and felt a constant urge to succumb to the strong influences of Germanization from Vienna and Italianization from Rome. Although the Germanization pressure ceased with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, conditions did not improve for the local population. That same year, Italy annexed Istria, and throughout the 1920s, complete Italianization of the area was promoted, remaining in force until Italy's capitulation in 1943.

The research was conducted diachronically, focusing on events from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. It addressed the following research questions: How visible is the linguistic landscape in the cultural landscape? What are the characteristics of the linguistic landscape? Who is the linguistic landscape intended for? Who plans the linguistic landscape? How is spatial identity manifested?

The aim was to determine various aspects of the linguistic landscape during these two periods. Specifically, this study sought to identify the extent of multilingualism in the cultural landscape and the dominant languages. It examined the languages that prevail in the cultural context, how their prominence and prestige change over time, and their purposes, such as tourism and economic activities. Additionally, the research investigated how language policies are shaped by both individuals and local or state authorities. Ultimately, the objective was to assess whether the population's spatial identity is changing, and, if so, in what ways, as well as to explore the relationship between spatial and linguistic identity within the community.

The second part of this research analyzed the organization of the Italian community in the ethnically heterogeneous areas. This organization was reflected in cultural elements such as language, proper names, and toponyms, as well as in a shared sense of belonging and loyalty to the same national minority community. This part of the research aimed to determine whether the minority's mother tongue appeared in the local linguistic landscape and how it manifested.

2. Materials and Methods

According to the 2021 census, Croatia had a population of 3,871,833, which included 240,079 members of national minorities (22 of which are legally recognized). Istrian County is noted for its multicultural population, reflecting its historical and geographical development. The 2021 census [26] indicated that almost all national minorities present throughout Croatia reside in Istria, although their share of Istria's total population is relatively small; 17 of these national minorities account for less than 1% of the population. The majority ethnic group is Croats, representing 76.40% of the population. Among the minority groups, the largest populations are Italians (5.01%), Serbs (2.96%), Bosniaks (2.48%), and Albanians (1.05%). Additionally, a significant portion of residents identify regionally as Istrians, accounting for 5.13% of the population, indicating a multicultural past, as Istrianity is considered an identity separate from other specific ethnicities or minorities.

Croatian legislation allows for official multilingualism in two specific cases. The first case occurs when the national minority population in a given area exceeds one-third of the

total population. The second case concerns multilingualism through bilateral agreements between Croatia and the countries of origin of the minority populations in Croatia. In this instance, the minority population does not need to constitute more than one-third of the total population; it can represent a smaller percentage. Croatia has established bilateral agreements with several countries aimed at protecting national minorities. Notably, agreements with Italy (in 1992 and 1996), Hungary (in 1996), and Serbia (in 2004) apply to populations living in Istrian County. Another crucial factor influencing the realization of the national minority language in the region is the minority group's decision to assert its right to bilingualism. Currently, only six national minorities in Croatia exercise this right, and in Istrian County, only the Italian national minority does so. Figure 1 (map) illustrates the locations of the municipalities and cities in Istrian County where Croatian–Italian bilingualism is practiced.

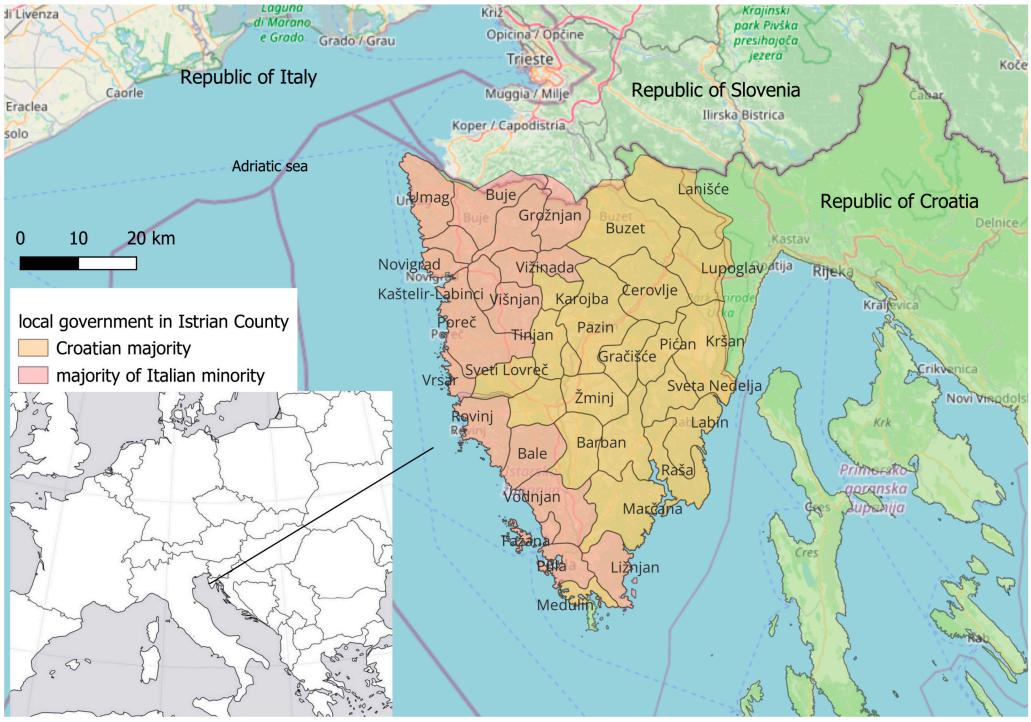


Figure 1. Local government units in Istrian County with official monolingualism or bilingualism (Croatian and Italian). Place names on the map are in Croatian only; otherwise, the map would be illegible. Full bilingual place names are provided in the text (the map was created by the authors using the QGIS program (Software No. 3.40.6); the source of information is the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, Government of the Republic of Croatia).

According to the Government's Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities [27], municipalities are granted the right to equal official use of the languages and scripts of national minorities for the Italian national minority in the following areas: Grožnjan–Grisignana, Bale–Valle, Brtonigla–Verteneglio, Funtana–Fontane, Fažana–Fasana, Kaštelir-Labinci–Castelliere-S. Domenica, Ližnjan–Lisignano, Motovun–Montona, Oprtalj–Portole, Tar Vabriga–Torre Abrega, Višnjan–Visignano, Vižinada–Visinada, Vrsar–Orsera. This right applies to the entire areas of these municipalities or individual settlements within them. Additionally, the cities of Poreč–Parenzo, Pula–Pola, Buje–Buie, Novigrad–Cittanova, Rovinj–Rovigno, Umag–Umago, and Vodnjan–Dignano also fall under this provision (see Figure 1).

The sampling was conducted by selecting a location with the highest concentration of ethnic minority populations within the ethnically diverse areas of Istrian County. For this purpose, the city of Poreč was chosen (see Figure 2). Historically, Poreč was an important

political center, serving as the seat of the Istrian Parliament and the provincial government (1861–1916). It was also a significant economic hub in the Austrian Littoral from 1816 to 1918, an area that largely corresponds to today's Istrian County.

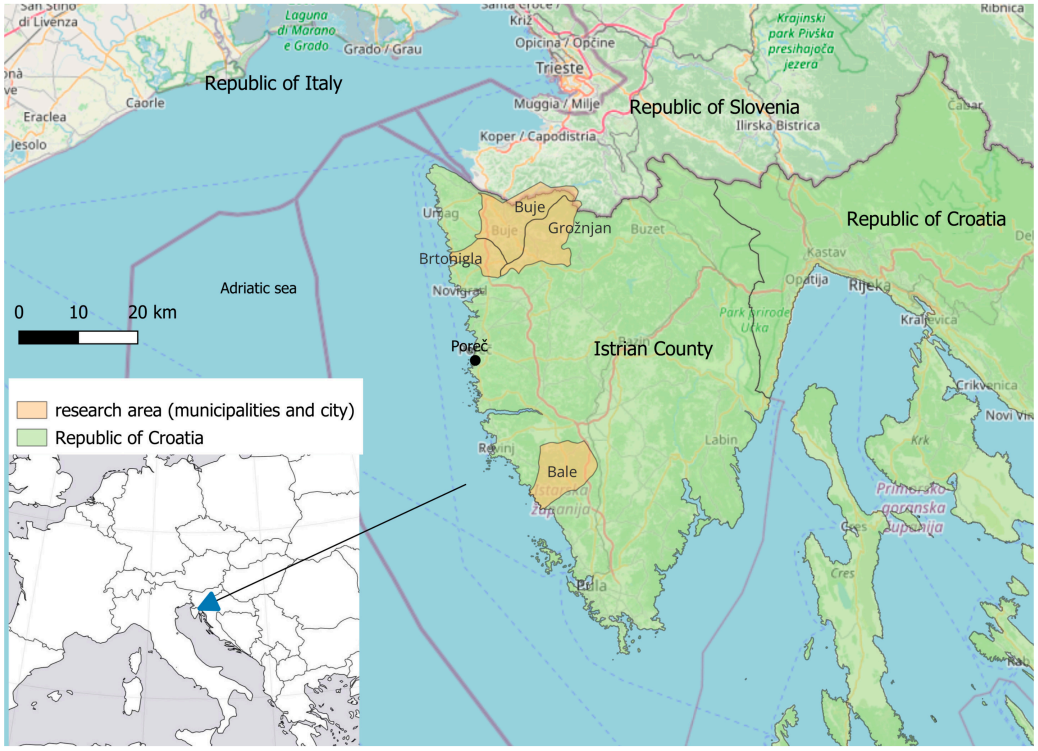


Figure 2. Research area—city of Poreč and municipalities Brtonigla, Bale, Buje, and Grožnjan (map created by the authors using the QGIS program).

In the cartographic part of the research, cartographic data on the contemporary spatial identity of the population were collected. The analysis of topographic material primarily used Google Maps, specifically its pin placement feature. Sampling of the area was conducted under conditions similar to those used in the first sampling but across a wider space. This included municipalities such as Grožnjan–Grisignana, Buje–Buie, Bale–Valle, and Brtonigla–Verteneglio (Figure 2), which were selected for their significant Italian minority populations. This phase of research was conducted in April 2025. The assessment involved identifying the presence of the minority language by analyzing toponyms to determine whether they stemmed from it. Furthermore, the search for ergonyms (names of companies, institutions, and associations) aimed to uncover connections to their spatial or ethnic identity [28]. This included looking for regional adjectives (such as Slavonian, Dalmatian, and Istrian) and national adjectives (such as Croatian, Italian, Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak), as well as the proper names of individuals relevant to the national minority under study. Through this analysis, insights were gained into the sociolinguistic context and spatial identity of national minorities within an ethnic majority environment.

This research is conducted diachronically and, as such, examines the development of language and spatial identity in the linguistic landscape over time. To focus on specific time periods, a cross-sectional method was employed, collecting samples of linguistic signs from two distinct eras: the turn of the 20th century—when Istria was under the rule of the Kingdom of Italy (1861–1918), the Habsburg Monarchy (the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century; 1814–1867), and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918)—and the turn of the 21st century (specifically from 2023 to 2026). The use of the cross-sectional method in this diachronic research provides insights into the developmental processes (continuity). It allows comparisons that define

the cause-and-effect relationships between the earlier and current states of the linguistic–cultural landscape.

The first part of the research involved analyzing linguistic data from historical postcards (dating from the 1890s to the 1920s) of the city of Poreč. Old postcards are excellent at illustrating the manifestation of language in space. They represent areas that attract public attention, typically the central spaces with the highest pedestrian traffic and the densest concentration of linguistic signs. Postcards from the turn of the 20th century often feature vedute, or panoramic views, that effectively capture the layout of a settlement. Additionally, a smaller number of postcards include aerial photographs that present a settlement from a bird's-eye view perspective. These two types of postcards are particularly important for reconstructing the appearance of a settlement, as they best convey its size and structure. Some postcards focus on specific parts of the settlement, such as streets or squares, while others highlight individual landmarks, including castles, health resorts, and various institutions. Regardless of whether a postcard depicts the overall structure of a settlement or a singular object, each serves as a valuable resource for historical–geographical research, contributing to a better understanding of the geographical development of areas over different periods [29–32].

The samples were collected from a corpus of old postcards preserved in museums and private archives, which were later published in various monographs. For this study, we drew on the works of Orlić [33] and Milaković and Strmotić-Ivančić [34]. Samples were taken exclusively from the front of the postcards. In total, 81 postcards were collected, yielding 119 linguistic signs (samples). The research and collection of these old postcards were conducted during November 2023 and November 2024.

In contrast, samples from the modern period were gathered through random, representative sampling of the area, specifically by photographing the modern linguistic landscape within a 500 m radius of the settlement's central area, including the square and the main street, as the latter displays the highest level of activity. During fieldwork, 62 photographs were collected, resulting in 114 extracted linguistic signs (samples). Field research on the contemporary linguistic landscape was carried out between February 2023 and December 2024. Following the collection, the linguistic signs were analyzed, and data were extracted from the linguistic composition of each sign. Each linguistic sign was coded according to ten variables (see Table 1) that addressed the research questions (see Table 2). After coding all the material from both contemporary samples and old postcards, a quantitative analysis was conducted using in-depth clustering (to group similar data), along with a semantic analysis of the resulting data.

Table 1. Coded language variable signs.

Ordinal Number	Variables	Ordinal Number	Variables
1	Serial number of the sign	6	Language of the sign
2	Types of signs (contemporary period)/specificity of the scene (postcard)	7	Number of languages on the sign
3	Types of representation	8	Order of language on the sign
4	Types of discourse	9	Whether there is language mixing
5	Sign placement source	10	Presence of features of collective spatial identity

Source: According to the research methodology in [35].

Table 2. Relationship between research questions and analytical categories.

Research Questions	Variable
How visible is the linguistic landscape in the cultural landscape?	Serial number of the signs (1) Language of the sign (6) Number of languages on the sign (7)
What are the characteristics of the linguistic landscape?	Types of signs (contemporary period)/specificity of the scene (postcard) (2) Types of representation (3) Types of discourse (4)
Who is the linguistic landscape intended for?	Number of languages on the sign (7) Order of language on the sign (8) Whether there is language mixing (9)
Who plans the linguistic landscape?	Sign placement source (5)
How is spatial identity manifested?	Language of the sign (6) Whether there is language mixing (9) Presence of features of collective spatial identity (10)

Source: According to the research methodology in [35].

The term "linguistic landscape" in this research refers to the totality of linguistic signs visible within a cultural landscape, specifically in the public places of a city or municipality. Private spaces were not included in the scope of this research. The basic unit of this research is a linguistic sign, which is defined as any part of a written text that exists within a spatially defined frame, regardless of its size. In the context of postcards, a linguistic sign is defined as any inscription that continues up to a punctuation mark; after each punctuation mark, a new linguistic sign begins. Therefore, if a linguistic sign is interrupted by a longer space or a period, it is counted as two separate linguistic signs. In this study, a linguistic sign from the modern period is understood to be any inscription within a clearly defined frame. Throughout this research, linguistic signs are frequently represented in various forms, including road signs, advertising signs, pedestrian signs, signboards (and other inscriptions on buildings), toponyms, and other inscriptions found on postcards. Using the top-down and bottom-up methods, it was determined whether the creators of language signs originated in a private (bottom-up) or an official (top-down) domain.

The analysis results were processed statistically, explained in a cause-and-effect manner, and presented in a map format.

3. Results

3.1. Study of the Historical Context

The earliest postcards depicting Istria date back to the 1880s, serving as a witness to the linguistic development of the cultural landscape. An analysis of the languages used on these postcards (Figure 3) revealed that 98.4% of the inscriptions were written in Italian, indicating that linguistic signs on the postcards were predominantly monolingual. The remaining 1.6% included bilingual combinations: 0.8% in Italian and German and 0.8% in Italian and Latin. This finding accurately reflects the political situation in Istria during that period. The Republic of Venice and the Kingdom of Italy had long asserted their claims to ownership of all or part of the Istrian region. As a result, much of the population came to regard Italian as their mother tongue. Following Austria–Hungary's capitulation on November 3, 1918, the Kingdom of Italy annexed Istria and the nearby Kvarner Islands. This annexation was formalized by the Treaty of Rapallo on 12 November 1920 and subsequently confirmed by the Law on Annexation on 19 December 1920. From 1922 to 1929, a series of denationalization laws regulated political, cultural, and social life. These laws addressed

the use of the official language in public offices, toponyms, and school and educational institutions, and mandated the restoration of surnames to their Italian forms. The process of national assimilation oppressed Croatian and Slovenian institutions. Since 1929, any organization of cultural or political life outside the state had been abolished [36]. Since Istria was under Italian rule until 1943, it is clear that Italian dominated the linguistic and cultural landscape during that period. This dominance is particularly evident in the city of Poreč, which served as the center of provincial government at the time. A postcard from Poreč dated 1926 exemplifies this situation, featuring the Italian inscription: "Leone S. Marco, dono della Provincia di Venezia a Parenzo fedele Copia in bronzo della Lupa Capitolina donata dai Duce a *Parenzo romana*." (Translated: "Lion of St. Mark, gift of the Venetian province to Poreč, faithful bronze copy of the Capitoline Wolf that the Duce donated to *Roman Poreč*."). The political power of the Italian language was so strong that there was no linguistic trace of Croatian in Poreč during this period. All signs were either in Italian or in some bilingual combination with Italian. However, this does not imply that there were no speakers of Croatian, Slovene, or other languages in Istria at that time. Due to the confusion introduced into census statistics by various official Italian and Austrian sources, accurate data on the ethnic structure of the Istrian population from that era is rare. The ethnic composition was not enumerated directly but inferred from other categories, such as spoken language. Nevertheless, the consensus suggests that the Istrian population was more Croats than Italians. The Croatian language was likely relegated to the family sphere and used for everyday, unofficial communication.



Figure 3. A selection of sampled old postcards of the research area, city of Poreč (source: facsimiles from Milaković and Strmotić-Ivančić [34]).

The analysis of the materialization of linguistic signs revealed that the most common types of signs in public spaces include toponymic signs (place names, comprising 34.4% of samples), advertisements (24.4%), and representations of traffic (18.5%) or construction objects (14.3%). The prominence of toponymic signs was anticipated, as each postcard featured the location's name. There was also a significant presence of advertisements, which serve as messages to inform the public about commercial offerings. Their primary purpose is to promote various economic activities. Advertisements reflect a settlement's economic vitality, with commercial and craft shops prominently displaying their messages in shop windows. These advertisements need to be recognizable to stand out among others. Additionally, they often carry an evaluative aspect; shop owners consciously or unconsciously choose names and types of advertisements that resonate with their target

audience. Thereby, they aim to enhance their business's success, as these choices often reflect the feelings and aspirations of the local population. Consequently, consumers play a direct role in defining what is termed ergonyms. Their selections contribute to establishing a system of shared values. Analyzing this system of ergonyms can provide insights into the ethnic, economic, cultural, and linguistic composition of the population.

A significant number of linguistic signs indicate traffic regulations, likely because the port and landing stage are frequently featured on postcards of Poreč. Additionally, many signs depict various objects, such as the fish market, churches (such as the Church of Our Lady of the Angels and the Euphrasian Basilica), hotels (such as the Riviera and Venezia), and inns and pubs catering to tourists. Numerous institutions, including the provincial institute, the boarding school palace, the Teachers' Institute, the Provincial Government, the Agricultural Institute, and the almshouse, are also commonly highlighted on these postcards. Poreč was the center of provincial government, which explains the variety of objects represented in the linguistic signs. However, it is surprising that there are relatively few linguistic signs featuring street names. Those that do exist in the sample were predominantly written during and after the 1920s, and they repeatedly feature the same main streets and squares in the area.

At the turn of the 20th century, the planning of the linguistic landscape in Croatia was predominantly influenced by external forces, chiefly Rome and Vienna, as Istria was divided between Italian and Austrian rule, which strongly promoted the use of Italian and German. Although it would have made sense for some of the linguistic landscape to reflect local characteristics, especially in Poreč—the then center of provincial government—this did not occur due to the overwhelming Italian influence from outside the region. During this time, local businesspeople lacked the opportunity to express their identity and sense of belonging through their language choices. An analysis of *discourse types* revealed that most signs in public spaces conveyed commercial messages, accounting for approximately 60% of the total. These signs were primarily placed by business owners, typically as store signs, although other forms of advertisement were also present in public areas. Additionally, publishers contributed significantly to the number of commercial signs found on postcards. City-regulatory signs, placed by authorities and representatives, accounted for a substantial share of the signage, making up 37% of the total.

Inscriptions in public spaces often include notices and warnings, as well as names of institutions, companies, sports teams, cultural associations, and other groups. These inscriptions are essential for maintaining an orderly flow of urban information. However, their presence is expected to be lower than that of commercial signage, as demand for urban regulatory information is lower than that for commercial information. Linguistic signs that serve a transgressive purpose—often reflecting social protest—are the least represented in public spaces. This is understandable, as transgressive inscriptions aim to express dissent. While graffiti did not exist in its contemporary form at the turn of the 20th century, similar expressions still appeared in messages on building walls. This part of the research is supported by findings regarding *the sources of sign placement*. The data indicate that 61.4% of signs were placed by individuals or private entities (i.e., bottom-up signs). In contrast, 38.6% of the signs were placed by official sources, such as local and national governments (referred to as top-down signs because they come from the top). This indicates that the language policies of that era were shaped more by individual linguistic identities than by government influence, which was notably weaker.

One aspect of a population's collective identity is spatial identity. The majority of people living in a particular area share similar experiences (living histories and individual or collective memories), which foster a sense of belonging to that place. As a result, spatial identity influences how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings. This

identity is inherently heterogeneous, as it varies among different groups. Spatial identity can manifest on several levels, including local, regional, national, and supranational [37]. An individual may feel a sense of belonging to multiple territorial affiliations simultaneously, and these feelings can change in response to external stimuli, such as political conflicts. Local identity often derives from daily experiences within a specific space, while regional and national identities are shaped by broader experiences tied to larger spatial units. Our research showed that in historical samples, local identity was not prominently represented. Regional identity, however, was evident in the naming of public spaces—such as squares and streets—after individuals of regional or national significance. In Istria's specific political context, national identity was less pronounced, but regional identity emerged, especially symbolically linked to November 3, 1918, the date of Italy's annexation of Istria, which imposed a regional identity on the area. Supranational spatial identity typically reflects the naming of public spaces after notable figures from larger political rulers. Given Istria's strong ties to Italy, numerous important figures exclusively from Italy have been commemorated in the region. These include the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, the writer, poet, and philosopher Dante Alighieri, the composer Giuseppe Verdi, and the lawyer Giosuè Carducci. Apart from Dante Alighieri, the others were contemporaneous.

Spatial identity is reflected in the naming of toponyms (geographical names) and the classification of individual spatial units, such as hodonyms (street names) and horonyms (region names) [38]. Toponyms carry certain connotations that can be either spatial or social, depending on whether they convey information about the natural features of an area (names of places, regions, and areas) or the social aspects of the local population (such as ergonyms and institutionalized regional organizations like associations, clubs, and schools) [39]. In the sample studied, toponyms, hodonyms, and horonyms primarily represent local identities, with less emphasis on regional identities. Horonyms are relatively rare and typically appear as names of regions (for example, Istria). Toponyms are more common, often found on postcards, and variations in the spelling of place names can be seen; for instance, the toponym "Parenzo" (the Italian form of the name for Poreč) may also be spelled as "Parenso". Hodonyms are the most numerous and can be classified into 4 categories, depending on whether they are named after: a prominent person (e.g., Garibaldi Square, Euphrasian Basilica), a historical event (e.g., 3rd November, Annexation Square), a landmark (e.g., Venetian House Square, Main Square, Postman Street, Main Street), a geographical name (e.g., Poreč, Milan, Rome, Venice, the island of St. Nicholas, the ruins of Biela, Viali, Cimare) or some other descriptive feature (the pine forest of the Holy Spirit in Poreč).

Renaming public city spaces often signifies drastic political changes and is a phenomenon observed worldwide. A clear example of this can be seen in the waterfront name changes documented on postcards from Poreč. Until 1918, the city's waterfront was known as Riva Dante e Venezia. It was later renamed Riva 3 Novembre and Riva Venezia in 1927. The date November 3rd held significance in Italian politics, as reflected in its frequent appearances on postcards and its placement in the city's central square. Namely, the Kingdom of Italy occupied Istria on November 3, but this process was formally regulated on 12 November 1920, when it signed the Treaty of Rapallo with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The annexation's importance was further underscored by the local street names and the establishment of a city square known as Annexation Square. Following the new political shift with the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the waterfront previously known as Obala 3 Novembar was renamed Obala Maršal Tito to align with the new political landscape.

After World War II, specifically in 1947, approximately 210,000 Italians were repatriated, mostly from Istria but also from other areas that had been under Italian rule. The

majority of these emigrants were Italians, although some Croats sought better economic opportunities in Italy. The remaining Italian population in Croatia, particularly in Istria, was granted the right to use both languages.

3.2. Study of the Current State

3.2.1. Field Research

Recent field research indicates that the linguistic landscape is composed of nearly equal parts monolingual and multilingual signs, with approximately 50.8% being monolingual and 49.2% multilingual. The distribution of languages on monolingual signs has shifted significantly over time. The English language has now overtaken Italian as the most prominent language, making up 74.13% of monolingual signs. Other languages featured in monolingual signs include Croatian (20.69%), Italian (3.45%), and German (1.73%). Among multilingual signs, the most common combinations are trilingual signs featuring Croatian, Italian, and English (42.85%), followed by bilingual signs that include Croatian and Italian (19.64%) and Croatian and English (16.07%). Other multilingual combinations, such as Croatian, English, and Italian, make up 14.15% of multilingual signs, while other languages account for a significantly smaller share of 1.78%. The lower the occurrence of a language, the less important it is held in the landscape. The high proportion of multilingual signs, whether they feature multiple languages on a single sign or varying translations, indicates that the society is polyglot and embraces a multilingual identity. The dominance of the English language can be attributed to globalization, which is influenced by both political and economic factors. The Croatian language, as the national language, is more prominent in multilingual combinations (91.07%) but is less represented on monolingual signs (20.69%). In the County of Istria, the Italian language is protected under Croatian legislation, particularly through bilateral Croatian–Italian agreements and the Act on the Use of Languages and Scripts of National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia (2000). Article 8 of this law states that in municipalities, cities, and counties where bilingualism or multilingualism has been established, the nameplates of representative, executive, and administrative bodies, as well as those of legal entities with public authority, must be bilingual or multilingual. Additionally, Article 10 mandates this requirement for written traffic signs, other traffic signage, street and square names, and place and geographical location names, ensuring they are displayed in the same font size. The preservation of traditional names and signs, as well as the naming of settlements, streets, and squares after significant figures and events in the history and culture of the Italian national minority, is governed by statutes in the Istrian County. This includes the municipalities of Fažana–Fasana, Funtana–Fontana, Grožnjan–Grisignana, and Motovun–Montona and the cities of Buje–Buie, Novigrad–Cittanova, Rovinj–Rovigno, Umag–Umag, and Vodnjan–Dignano. Given this context, the low representation of the Italian language in the linguistic landscape of Poreč is surprising, especially since Italians in the area actively exercise their right to bilingualism.

Multilingualism is evident in the linguistic landscape as a combination of various languages (see Figure 4). It includes translated signs in multiple languages as well as instances of language mixing. While some linguistic purists may view language mixing negatively, it has become increasingly common in today's cultural context. A great example of contemporary multilingualism can be seen in signs that use different languages to enhance understanding. For instance, the English–Italian combination in the sign "Candy Shop Fratelli" conveys the message of a shop that sells sweets. Since it primarily attracts children, the term "fratelli," which means "brothers", perfectly complements the shop's purpose. Language mixing is also present in establishments such as "Grano Duro, Restaurant, Pizzeria," where "Grano Duro" refers to durum wheat, indicating that it is used to

make the pizza flour. Similar examples can be found in "Wine Bar Đardin" and "Konoba Ćakula," both of which convey messages through their names. In a tavern (Croatian: konoba), people typically engage in lively conversations (ćakula) [40], while in a garden (Croatian: đardin, a term commonly used in the Čakavian dialect and in certain Dalmatian Štokavian dialects, meaning garden or park, originating from the Venetian/Italian term *giardino*), people can enjoy the outdoors while sipping wine [41].



Figure 4. A selection of contemporary linguistic signs of the city of Poreč (source: private photographs from Melem Hajdarović and Fuerst-Bjeliš).

The analysis of *the variable language mixing* revealed that mixing occurred in 13.2% of linguistic signs. This mixing is typically manifested in the linguistic landscape in the following forms: Novak Watch Service and Sale, Veritas Jeweler, Old Saloon, Restaurant and Pizza, Gold Antonio Trade, Sinteza Art Studio Atelier, Parenzo Christmas Shop, Fine Art Antique Shop, and Decumanus Street. The presence of *translated linguistic signs* is slightly higher, occurring in 31.6% of samples. Examples include: Stjepana Konzula Istranina Street/Via Stjepan Konzul Istranin; Decumanus Street/Strada Granda Decumana; Round Tower, 15th century/Torre rotonda, XV sec./Round Tower, 15th c.; Mira Jewelry Store/Jewelry store; Peškera Tower, 15th century//Tower Peschiera, 15th c.; Euphrasian Basilica, 6th century/Basilica eufrasiana, VI sec./Eufrasius Basilica, 6th c.; and St. Maurus, martyr and first bishop of Poreč, 3rd century/Via San Mauro Martire e primo vescovo parentino, III sec. From the analysis of the linguistic signs with translations, it can be observed that they primarily consist of ergonyms, hodonyms, and objects represented on brown signage intended for tourists. Thus, we can conclude that brown signage in the contemporary linguistic landscape serves as a significant source of translated linguistic signs.

The materialization of language in the linguistic landscape reflects the current spatial organization. The analysis revealed that the most common types of linguistic signs include signboards, which make up 60.6% of the total, followed by advertisements at

29.8%. Hodonyms account for 7.0%, and posters make up 2.6%. Signboards primarily represent institutions (such as the Italian Community of Poreč and the Islamic Community of Croatia), tourist facilities (such as the Gothic Lion House from 1473), and companies (including the Gold Antonio Trading Company, the Central Poreč Catering Industry, and Atelier Art Kruno). Advertisements continue to play a significant role in the linguistic landscape. At the same time, other types of signs—such as street signs, toponymic signs, object signs, and traffic signs—are much less prevalent, with some not appearing at all. The lower frequency of toponymic signs suggests less need to indicate locations in central areas of the contemporary cultural landscape, unlike on postcards, where toponyms hold significant importance. However, in the linguistic landscape, the toponyms Parenzo, Poreč, Italy, Brioni, Sarajevo, Casablanca, and Vukovar are present, primarily within ergonyms. Some of these toponyms are expected, while others are surprising. The unexpected ones, like Casablanca, indicate the cosmopolitan attitude of the local population, while Sarajevo may reflect the community's origins. Hodonyms appear relatively frequently because they are essential for spatial organization. Traffic signs, however, are mostly found on the outskirts of the sampled areas (the settlement's central parts), resulting in their low representation in the samples. Object signs are less common now than in earlier research periods, but they still exist at the beginning of the 21st century.

The analysis of building types in the area revealed that the most common structures are companies (36.9%) and institutions (22.8%). While reconstructing the economic situation of the sampled areas in the modern period is important, it is less significant than analyzing the past. Historically, former settlements were much smaller, which allowed postcards to cover a wider area than they do today. Currently, because of the settlement's size within the sampled 500 m of its central area, obtaining a clearer economic picture is harder, especially in urban areas where economic zones are typically located on the outskirts of the city. However, some economic insights can still be gained, particularly regarding the crafts and financial sectors, which are generally found in the narrow center of the settlement. In the sampled area of Poreč, businesses and crafts in the central part include a gallery (MMI), studios (Amina Art, Gomida), goldsmiths, hairdressing salons, boutiques, jewelry stores (Pandora, Natali), a candy shop (Captain Jack Sparrow), a photo studio (Bruna), pubs (Papabirra), and pharmacies. The associations and institutions in this area are the Islamic Community in Croatia, the Majlis of the Islamic Community, the Italian Community of Poreč, the Poreč Regional Museum, the City Library, the theater, and the cinema. In comparison to the historical part of the research, the contemporary cultural landscape includes a greater extent of tourist facilities (22%), cultural institutions (7.9%), and religious sites (1.7%), while sports facilities, though present, are not included in the sample. Furthermore, private facilities are not part of this analysis, as they no longer exist in the same form as in historical research.

Today, language policy planning in most developed countries is primarily governed by national legislation, accompanied by implementation action plans. In Croatia, the legislation supports the dominant position of the Croatian language while also ensuring that national minorities have the right to express their identity in various ways, including their languages in the linguistic and cultural landscape. An analysis of discourse types in public spaces revealed that language signs predominantly reflect urban-regulatory discourse (65.8%), while commercial discourse accounts for 34.2% of the samples. Poreč, as a tourist resort, has more brown regulatory signs. In addition, there are numerous signboards and notices with the same regulatory intent. However, transgressive inscriptions, often described as "protest texts," were not observed. Most city-regulatory information is provided by local government (placed from above, which is why it is called *top-down*), while the majority of commercial information is created by individuals (placed from below, which is

why it is called *bottom-up*). Therefore, the results of this analysis support the initial thesis that government representatives primarily plan the linguistic content in public spaces.

Spatial identity is evident in the modern cultural landscape, although it is not very prominent. It primarily manifests through toponyms and ergonyms (see Table 3).

Table 3. Sample selection of spatial identity materialized in the linguistic landscape of Poreč–Parenzo.

Materialization Category	Materialization Subcategory	Appearance Form
Ergonyms	Dining establishments	Old Saloon, Restaurant and Pizza, Wine Bar Đardin, Konoba Ćakula, Papabirra
	Businesses	MMI, Amina Art, Gomida, Pandora, Natali
	Associations and institutions	Islamic Community in Croatia, the Majlis of the Islamic Community, the Italian Community of Poreč, the Poreč Regional Museum, the City Library, the Theater, the Cinema
	Retail businesses	Sinteza Art Studio Atelier, Parenzo Christmas Shop, Fine Art Antique Shop, Candy Shop Fratelli
	Historical landmarks	Torre Peschiera, XV sec.
Hodonyms	Street names	Poreč, Parenzo, Brioni, Italy, Sarajevo, Casablanca, Vukovar, Decumanus
	Antroponyms	Matthias Flacius, Stephen the Consul of Istria, St. Maurus, Vladimir Nazor, Josip Voltić, the Manzolin family, St. Eleuterius, Bacchus, Euphrasius, and the noble families of Lion, Zuccato, Peškera, de Vergottini, Gonan, and Sinčić.

Source: This research.

Toponyms can be observed in various forms; they are mainly regional, but there is also evidence of globalization (Casablanca). Additionally, some toponyms reflect the ethnic composition of the local population, as in Sarajevo and Vukovar. On the other hand, hodonyms represent different levels of spatial identity, ranging from local to national significance. They often bear the names of important historical figures, highlighting society's selective memory, which preserves the legacies of notable individuals. In Poreč, these individuals, whether of Italian or Croatian descent, have made significant contributions to the Istrian region through their work.

The significance of a prominent individual shapes the spatial identity associated with them. Locally influential families include the Manzolin family and several Istrian noble or bourgeois families such as Lion, Zuccato, Peškera, de Vergottini, Gonan, and Sinčić. Due to their semiotic position, these families are linked to the local identity. In contrast, individuals who hold significance for a larger region convey messages about national identity. Examples include Matthias Flacius, Stephen the Consul of Istra, Vladimir Nazor, Joseph Voltić, and St. Eleuterius and St. Maurus. Some of these figures symbolize multiple identities because they are important at both local and national levels, such as Matthias Flacius the Illyrian, Stipan the Consul of Istra, and Vladimir Nazor. Identity is also reflected in the names of ergonyms. Managing identity is essential for successful market presence; an advertising sign or logo often embodies a company's identity and shapes public perception. However, contemporary ergonyms typically lack spatial identities. Instead, they are more often associated with personal names. In the cultural landscape, ergonyms appear in various forms, such as: Maja Friseur, Commercial Trade Gold Antonio, Atelier Gomida, Atelier Amina Art, Hair Salon Đurđa, Zlatarska Radnja Mira, Art Kruno, Natali Handmade Jewelry, Foto Bruna, Eva Boutique, and Klezinger-Štefanko Pharmacy. These ergonymous

names exhibit a low level of identity that cannot even be considered local. The cultural landscape also reflects a clash between traditional and modern identities, influenced by the increasing pressure of globalization and the dominance of English. Examples of this include Italia Restaurant & Pizza and Candy Shop Captain Jack Sparrow.

3.2.2. Cartographical Research

A search for toponyms and ergonyms in Bale, Buje, Brtonigla, and Grožnjan (Figure 2) revealed frequent links to the Italian national group. Research in the Bale municipality area identified 53 linguistic signs written in Italian on the map. Moreover, these linguistic elements are functionally diverse and can be found in various aspects of local life (see Table 4).

Table 4. Spatial identity materialized in the linguistic landscape of Bale–Valle.

Materialization Category	Materialization Subcategory	Appearance Form
Ergonyms	Dining establishments	San Rocco, Restaurant La Grisa, Borghetto, Albachiara
	Accommodation facilities	Villa Valencano, Casa Istriana, Casa Farfalla, Villa Vallese, Villa Flores
	Businesses	Perdisacca Extra Virgin Olive Oil
	Retail businesses	Bembo Olio D'Oliva, Meneghetti Hotel and Winery
	Hiking trails	Mon Grego
	Other social spheres	Female Klapa Castrum Vallis
	Historical landmarks	Caluzzi Fort, Benedetto Fort, Fort Paravia West
Hodonyms	Street names	Castel, Camp Colone
	Antroponyms	Sant'Elia, San Zuian, Domenico Cernecca, San Nicolo

Source: This research.

The region also features entirely Italian toponyms (e.g., Oliveto). Additionally, the phenomenon of language mixing is noteworthy, with names that include multiple languages. Interestingly, the most mixed linguistic signs combine Italian and English (e.g., Premium Villa Giuseppe, Mulini Beach Bar, Meneghetti Wine Hotel and Winery), while others blend Italian with Croatian (e.g., Utvrda Caluzzi, Utvrda Benedetto) and even Italian with German (e.g., Ferienhaus Villa Bale). The presence of English and German in the linguistic landscape of this region does not reflect the national origin of its population. Instead, it should be seen through the lens of globalization, which promotes the English language worldwide. Similarly, the presence of German is linked to Croatia's status as a prominent tourist destination (Ferienhaus–holiday house), attracting many visitors from Germany.

A search of the Buje walking map revealed significantly fewer linguistic signs in Italian in the area. In total, 20 Italian toponyms and anthroponyms were identified. Some of these are part of the street nomenclature, and others are associated with ergonyms (see Table 5).

In Buje, both monolingual and multilingual sign combinations are present. Among the multilingual combinations, the pairing of Italian and Croatian is the most common (e.g., Buie Park, Dentista Croazia Buje). Some instances even include a trilingual combination of Italian, Croatian, and English, such as in the name of the Zigante Tartufi shop.

The Brtonigla map reveals a total of 26 Italian toponyms and anthroponyms. Some of these names pertain to street nomenclature, and others are associated with ergonyms (see Table 6).

Table 5. Spatial identity materialized in the linguistic landscape of Buje–Buie.

Materialization Category	Materialization Subcategory	Appearance Form
Ergonyms	Dining establishments	Villa San Servolo, Trattoria da Sergio, Stacion
	Accommodation facilities	Apartman Mercede
	Businesses	Acquedotto Istriano, Tera Buje, Bujska pivovara San Servolo, Dentista Croazia Buje
	Retail businesses	Zigante Tartufi
	Pedestrian trails	Buje Strada Longa 5
	Education system	Edmondo de Amicis Elementary School, Scuola Media Superiore Italiana Leonardo da Vinci
	Historical landmarks	Ex Stazione Ferroviaria di Buie
Hodonyms	Street names	Cornio, Vlavia, Belvedere
	Antroponyms	Dante Alighieri, Alessandra Manzonia, Giuseppe Garibaldi

Source: This research.

Table 6. Spatial identity materialized in the linguistic landscape of Brtonigla–Verteneglio.

Materialization Category	Materialization Subcategory	Appearance Form
Ergonyms	Dining establishments	Capo Winery, Veralda, Primizia Food and Wine
	Accommodation facilities	Boutique resort Cattunari di Valle, Villas: Leon, Stellar, Covri, Margarethe, Estate, Elorea, Sole, Primavera, Amoena; Casa Bella Vita, Monte Marzari Central Villa, Casa Scala Street, Apartments Casa Garibaldi Street
	Retail businesses	Franco olive oil and potatoes
	Other social spheres	Brtonigla Italian Community Street
Hodonyms	Street names	Via del Giardini
	Antroponyms	Marconi Street, Guglielmo Marconi Street

Source: This research.

Monolingual Italian names appear on the map, such as Casa Scala Street, alongside multilingual combinations where Italian plays a key role. Common bilingual combinations include Croatian–Italian, exemplified by Capo Winery Street, and English–Italian pairs, like Gesthouse Pino Street. Additionally, there is an unexpected English–Greek combination, Pure Eidos Luxury Villa, likely a result of tourism efforts aimed at attracting international visitors to this accommodation.

A search of the walking paths in Grožnjan revealed 13 Italian hodonyms and anthroponyms (see Table 7). Some of these names are part of the street nomenclature, and some others are ergonyms. In this area, we also encounter monolingual names (like Casa di Graziella) as well as multilingual combinations of Italian with another language. Notably, Croatian–Italian combinations are found (such as Ulica Braće Corva), as well as English–Italian (Town Loggia) and Italian–English combinations (Villa Smile).

Table 7. Spatial identity materialized in the linguistic landscape of Grožnjan–Grisignana.

Materialization Category	Materialization Subcategory	Appearance Form
Ergonyms	Dining establishments	Restoran aModoMio
	Accommodation facilities	Casa Margherita, Villa Smile, Studio Apartman Belvedere, Villa Torrecorta, and Casa di Graziella
	Businesses	OPG Mikele Kalcina
	Historical landmarks	Ex Stazione Ferroviaria di Grisignana and Town Loggia
Hodonyms	Street names	Parenzana, Grisia, and
	Antroponyms	Brothers Corva

Source: This research.

4. Discussion

Research on the linguistics of Istrian County clearly shows strong Croatian–Italian bilingualism [5–18]. However, due to the different topics and aim of this research, which target the linguistic landscape and the lack of similar studies in the area, the findings cannot be directly compared to other research. Studies on linguistic landscapes in Croatia are still relatively uncommon. Geographic analyses of linguistic landscapes differ significantly, as geographers not only assess the factual situation in each space—which is usually the focus of linguistic research—but also contextualize it by linking it to factors such as education, economics, and the ethnic composition of the local population [30].

The research effectively addressed the research questions. It indicated that political changes in Istrian County have had a greater impact on the linguistic landscape than the local population's ethnolinguistic composition. According to the 2021 census, the Italian national minority remains the largest minority in Istrian County. However, it no longer meets the legal requirement for bilingualism in the area, which stipulates that at least one-third of the population must belong to a national minority. Consequently, Croatian–Italian bilingualism in this region currently relies on bilateral agreements between Croatia and Italy. Historical research has shown that the enforced monolingualism in Italy was also a product of political efforts. Furthermore, recent studies reveal an increasing presence of English, and to a lesser extent German, reflecting the impact of globalization and the area's tourist appeal rather than the ethnolinguistic structure of the population. While Italian was formerly the lingua franca, today Croatian has taken that role, with Italian and English playing smaller roles.

Interestingly, German has not become a significant part of the population's identity in Istria. Its presence in the linguistic landscape is more noticeable today, primarily due to tourism, than it was in earlier periods. One might expect that the long-standing influence of the German language would have left a more substantial impact on the region's linguistic landscape than it does today. However, it is evident that the enduring influence of the Venetian Republic and the Kingdom of Italy was more significant and lasted longer than that of the Habsburgs and, later, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Statistical data in contemporary cartographic research do not explain why Bale has the highest occurrence of linguistic signs in Italian. It would seem more logical for such signs to be most prevalent in Buje, given its greater functional significance in the region and its attraction of a larger number of residents. It serves as a node for the surrounding gravitational area by providing services, creating jobs, and developing infrastructure. Furthermore, Buje, with its administrative area, has the largest population among the researched locations. In 2021, Buje had a population of 4441, of which 1059 (23.85%) were Italian [26]. In contrast, Bale, Brtonigla, and Grožnjan are municipal centers that lack large

populations. In 2021, the municipality of Bale had 1170 inhabitants, of whom 240 (20.51%) were Italian [26]. The municipality of Brtonigla, on the other hand, had 1523 inhabitants, of whom 484 (31.78%) were Italian, while Grožnjan had a population of 656, with 235 (35.8%) being Italian [26]. Therefore, Bale does not present the most favorable demographic landscape; in fact, it has the smallest proportion of Italians in its overall population among all the municipalities studied.

The presence of language in public spaces has changed significantly. In historical research, toponyms accounted for 34.4% of the samples, but they have since been largely replaced by inscriptions, which now account for 60.6% of the current landscape. This shift is understandable, as toponyms are crucial for postcards and are not as prominent in the modern landscape. Instead, the linguistic landscape now prioritizes inscriptions from various institutions, companies, establishments, and tourist facilities. Throughout both historical and contemporary periods, advertisements maintained a substantial presence, amounting to 24.4% in the historical context and 29.8% in contemporary times. Other types of objects are less frequently observed. This research indicates that linguistic signs are valuable for reconstructing the economic image and vitality of the studied areas.

Changes have also been observed in the planning of the linguistic landscape. While political decisions have historically had the most significant impact on how language is represented—from past (imposed) language policies to present efforts aimed at preserving the mother tongue and providing opportunities for national minorities—the nature of the discourse conveyed by linguistic signs and the contexts in which these signs are placed have evolved. In the past, commercial messages dominated the linguistic landscape, accounting for 60% of samples, but this has decreased to 34.2% in more recent observations. Conversely, city-regulatory discourse has surged, increasing from 37% of samples to 65.8%. This shift is logical; although commercial messages remain prevalent and important today, the city of Poreč's role as a tourist destination is even more crucial. Previously, a large portion of commercial signs were dedicated to advertising tourist (hotel) accommodation. Now, city-regulatory discourse primarily consists of brown signage that serves tourism purposes. The influx of tourists necessitates effective spatial information organization, which is facilitated by the increased presence of city-regulatory signs. The prevalence of private-domain language signs posted by individuals (often referred to as bottom-up signs) has decreased over the years, from 61.4% of samples to 36.8%. In contrast, the prevalence of official domain language signs posted by authorities (also known as top-down signs) has declined from 38.6% to just 3.2%. This trend indicates that business owners (from the private domain) were originally the main drivers of language policy, creating advertising messages for shop windows. In contrast, today, it is the local government that leads the way with its city-regulatory discourse.

This research serves as a practical example of conducting multilingual landscape studies. It provides theoretical insights into linguistic landscape research and presents a methodology for carrying out such studies. Additionally, it offers a coding system for analyzing and contextualizing each linguistic sign [35]. The findings of this research can serve as a foundation for studying the linguistic landscapes of other national minority languages, allowing for data comparison and enhancing our understanding of multilingualism in Croatia.

Some research has shown [9] that individuals today can be multilingual to the same extent as they are in their mother tongue. This is particularly evident among national minorities, such as Italians in Istria, who, as research has shown, demonstrate Croatian–Italian bilingualism even through a dual spatial identity. Some research [42] indicates that speakers in multilingual communities possess the flexibility to use different languages, allowing them to adjust their identities to evolving circumstances and environments.

Findings of this research show that individuals in these multilingual settings often embrace multilingualism and mixing practices as essential aspects of their cultural identity [43]. This research has revealed language signs that are not only written in one or more languages but also incorporate mixed languages within the same sign. Such individuals identify with linguistic pluralism rather than being tied to a single language.

Political changes influence the identity options available to individuals at specific moments in history, as certain ideologies may legitimize and value particular identities over others [44]. In contemporary Istria, political arrangements have enabled the choice of languages such as Croatian and Italian. However, the social and economic processes of globalization have also introduced additional options, including English. This is supported by this study and many others (e.g., [45–47]). It is interesting to note that, even in Zadar, where Italian was traditionally spoken (sharing a similar historical background with Istria), the majority of language signs are written in Croatian. The second most numerous are those in English, while signs in Italian rank third place. According to this research's findings, only the signs in English show an increasing trend [45–48]. This research also supports these findings.

Since no research on linguistic landscapes has been conducted in Istrian County to date, the findings of this study can only be compared with similar studies conducted in Croatia. Particularly interesting are the various degrees of expressed spatial identity among national minorities in Croatia. Analyzing the findings of other minorities in Croatia, particularly in areas with the highest concentrations, such as Poreč for Italians, revealed intriguing results [49]. Unlike Italians, who are granted the right to bilingualism (primarily in Istria) through bilateral agreements between Croatia and Italy, Hungarians have the right to bilingualism by virtue of their representation of more than one-third of the total population. In the municipalities of Bilje and Kneževi Vinogradi, where Hungarians are the majority, their right to bilingualism is not fully utilized. While all signs posted by local or national authorities (a top-down approach) are bilingual, signs placed in the private domain (a bottom-up approach) are mostly not bilingual. Czechs and Slovaks, for example, have the right to bilingualism in Western Slavonia, Croatia. However, Czechs mainly express their linguistic identity in the private sphere within their national center, which includes a kindergarten, a cultural center, and a publishing house. In contrast, the presence of Czech in the city of Daruvar's public space is limited, with only one or two linguistic signs. Slovaks do not express their linguistic or spatial identity in either the public or private spheres. In fact, if there were not two signs written in Slovak in the municipality, which consists of three settlements, one might not even realize that Slovaks live there at all.

There are still numerous areas to explore regarding the Istrian region. Potential studies could examine the historical linguistic landscape across various regions of the country and/or focus on the contemporary linguistic landscape in areas with other national minorities. This is relevant regardless of whether these groups actively use their legal rights to bilingualism. Furthermore, diachronic research is particularly important, as it offers a cause-and-effect context for the development of the linguistic landscape.

5. Conclusions

Research into the linguistic landscape should consider more than just visual elements; it should adopt a holistic approach to uncover its deeper symbolism and semiotic codes. This means that it is insufficient to merely describe the landscape; it must also be interpreted as a text. The goal of this research was to explore how language is represented in the linguistic landscape of ethnically mixed areas, such as Istrian County, a paradigmatic area. Specifically, it aimed to examine the relationship between Croatian and other languages

that served as lingua francas during the observed period and how this relationship has evolved over time and influenced the spatial identity of the local population.

Research has demonstrated that multilingualism in the linguistic landscape is evident through linguistically diverse signs, including those translated into multiple languages. Both historical and contemporary forms of multilingualism appear in signs that enhance understanding between languages.

The findings of the cartographic research show that Italian toponyms and anthroponyms appear within hodonyms and ergonyms. In the case of hodonyms, these Italian names are typically found in central municipal areas, while other settlements within the municipalities use hodonyms and anthroponyms that are of Croatian origin. The research indicates that multilingualism in toponymic and anthroponymic nomenclature (both street and ergonymic names) is a result of globalization and the area's tourist appeal, rather than a reflection of the spatial or national identity of the Italian minority residing there. One important and interesting finding is that the German language has not become a significant part of the identity of the population in Istria. The Italian language was historically more dominant in Istria due to over five centuries of Venetian and Italian political presence and rule, which shaped the region's culture and language far more deeply than the Austrian administration did during its roughly one hundred years.

Spatial identity can be observed in the linguistic landscape during both research periods, although its overall presence is relatively limited. It has been demonstrated that the ethnic composition of the population reflects its spatial identity through the linguistic landscape, often manifesting in toponyms such as hodonyms, horonyms, and ergonyms. All levels of spatial identity were identified, and their definitions were shaped by the semiotic roles of prominent individuals within the community's collective consciousness. Notably, the renaming of hodonyms was particularly interesting amid shifts in the country's political climate.

This research examined how the linguistic–cultural landscape of the selected case study is influenced by the ethnolinguistic composition of the local population. Preserving linguistic heritage requires a combination of practical measures, institutional support, and everyday practices. The effort to preserve linguistic heritage and maintain one's identity has motivated many individuals, local communities, and state institutions to explore and celebrate the richness of their language in various ways. Institutional protection of cultural heritage cannot begin without documenting both historical and contemporary linguistic landscapes. This approach fosters continuity, allowing this vital aspect of identity to be passed down from older generations to younger ones. This research hopefully contributes to that important goal.

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