

Human-animal relations in the linguistic landscape of a city: An ecolinguistic study of public signs across urban spaces in Białystok, Poland

Linguistic landscape research has typically focused on multilingualism in large cities, as represented in written texts on public signs produced by city authorities, institutions, private business owners, and graffiti artists (Pennycook 2024). Its intersections with ecolinguistics are relatively recent (cf. Yi 2019) and have primarily involved studies of how ecological principles are represented on public signs in urban contexts, for example in the German city of Essen (Kosatka 2024) and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (Maseko & Siziba 2026). The present paper contributes to the development of “ecolinguistic landscaping” (Yi 2019) by examining representations of human-animal relations in the linguistic landscape of Białystok, a medium-sized city of approximately 300,000 inhabitants in north-eastern Poland. City authorities and institutions attempt to regulate human behaviour towards non-human animals through the placement of signs in various urban spaces. Since the role of language in shaping interactions between humans and other species is a key concern of ecolinguistics (Alexander & Stibbe 2014; Steffensen 2025), public signs relating to animals can be considered a valid source of data for ecolinguistic analysis.

This study is based on a corpus of approximately 60 photographed signs collected across diverse urban spaces in Białystok, including green areas (parks), residential areas, educational settings (university campuses), areas surrounding cultural centres (opera house and theatres), and the city centre, with its restaurants and shops. The signs were collected between 1 January and 30 March 2026. The analysis is qualitative in nature and follows the principles of Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis as proposed by Blommaert (2013), examining signs in relation to their authors, intended audiences, locations, and communicative functions. The findings indicate that expectations regarding behaviour towards the same animals, and consequently their rights, vary across urban spaces. For example, in parks, visitors are instructed on appropriate ways to feed different species of birds, whereas in nearby residential areas, feeding birds is prohibited. Instructions regarding dogs also differ: on university campuses, dogs can move freely provided they are kept on a leash, while in some residential areas, they are not permitted on lawns. The forms of signage also vary across locations, with more creative and metaphorical content found around cultural centres, and more literal, less imaginative formulations in residential areas. These differences reflect variation in the linguistic competence and ecolinguistic awareness of the authors, as well as in their expectations of their audiences. These results support Pennycook’s (2024) argument that linguistic landscape studies should pay greater attention to the city as a complex, spatially differentiated entity, rather than focusing solely on the language(s) displayed on its signs.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, linguistic landscape, public signs, non-human animals

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