

Kumkapı, Istanbul: Immigrant Waves and ‘For Rent’ Signs in the Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract

This paper presents new data from a third survey of ‘For Rent’ signs in the Kumkapı district of Istanbul conducted in June 2023. Kumkapı is gathering place and home for many of Istanbul’s transit and new-arrival immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, making this district a unique vantage point from which to document change in a dynamic language ecology. First, I review the earlier two linguistic landscape surveys of ‘For Rent’ signs; the first survey was completed in January 2017, the second 18 months later in July 2018. There were significant differences found across the two surveys, e.g., in the latter, representing a major shift in language regimes, there was a far greater proportion of Uzbek to Turkish signs compared to the first January 2017 survey. Meanwhile, between the second July 2018 survey and this third June 2023 survey period, there has been a consequential five-year interval: in addition to elections, immigration and refugee issues have intensified across Turkey, and the world has experienced a global pandemic, lockdowns, and geopolitical upheavals. The data from the June 2023 is evaluated in the context of the earlier surveys and events of the five-year interval. The questions this paper addresses are, (1) What changes in the Kumkapı signage are observed across survey periods? and, (2) How can the changes be interpreted and explained? What emerges from the new data is familiar, but at the same time, it brings to light surprising adaptations to the changes in Kumkapı’s rental market.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape, sociolinguistics, Kumkapı, Istanbul*

1. Introduction

Strolling around Istanbul’s neighborhoods, one cannot help but be impressed with the multitude of languages heard on its streets and seen on the city’s signage. A result of Istanbul’s unique geographical location, it has been and continues to be a crossroads for people from wide ranging ethnic and cultural backgrounds, now readily accessible by commercial airliners and cruise ships, but also as in historical times, by land – Istanbul has been a bridge connecting Europe to Asia. Though there is much to be said about recent anti-immigration rhetoric and tightening policies, consistent with its past, Istanbul continues to be an attractor city for people from all points of the compass, and has the dubious status of being a “global city”, a “superdiversity city” (Eryadin et. al. 2017).

Istanbul straddles the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus channel, it encompasses a huge area of 5,460 km² with a population officially at 15.4 million, though it is more likely to have a population approaching 20 million which includes sizable Kurdish and undocumented residential populations. (For comparison: Tokyo, 14 million people, 2,194 km²; New York City, 8.8 million people, 784 km²). While correctly characterized as a city of many languages, the districts within Istanbul have widely divergent language profiles (Wendel 2018a). A few districts such as Sultan Ahmet and Galata are heavily dependent on the tourist trade and English, Arabic, and major European and Asian languages are often heard, but the

Bagilar district in the northwest is predominately Turkish. In the Kumkapı district, the focus of this paper, Kurdish and Turkish are widely spoken, but there are many other language such as Uzbek, Uyghur, Turkmen, Russian, Arabic, Urdu, and a variety of African languages.

Kumkapı is located along the Sea of Marmara, down the steep slopes from the hyper-touristic Grand Bazaar. However, Kumkapı itself is not a tourist destination, rather it is a place tourists would avoid, being run-down, neglected, impoverished, and having none of the shine and glitz you find around Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, and Ordu Caddesi (Ordu Street). Formerly an Armenian enclave and the present-day seat of the Armenian Patriarchate, Kumkapı fell into decline after the Armenians were driven out during the several expulsions in the early years of the Republic, or squeezed out because of the wealth tax laws in the 1940s. Many of the abandoned properties were eventually taken over by Anatolian Kurds and Turks who moved into the district in the 1980s and 1990s. Zazaki (a language in the Kurdish formation) is heard along the streets as frequently as is Turkish in many parts of this district. This district has also become the destination for newly arrived central Asian and African immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, transit-immigrants, small-time traders, and unskilled laborers. Kumpaki, dubbed “Istanbul’s Mogadishu” and “Somali Street” by the Turkish press (Seibert 2011), was the most linguistically diverse of all the districts surveyed for the first 2016-2017 linguistic landscape study (Wendel 2018a) which documented ten districts around metropolitan Istanbul.

First, this paper will review findings from two past surveys of ‘For Rent’ signs in Istanbul’s Kumkapı district: the first survey was done in 2017, the second in 2018 (Wendel 2018b). I will present a brief summary of results (though the analysis is not yet complete) from the third survey conducted in June 2023.

This third June 2023 survey covers an expanded territory in Kumkapı not included in the previous two: whereas only signs along one continuous street (with two names, Molla Tasi and Katip Casim Cami Sok) were surveyed for the first and second surveys (solid arrows in Figure 1); all streets of lower Kumkapı were canvassed for ‘For Rent’ signs for the June 2023 survey (dotted arrows in Figure 1). I decided to expand the territory covered in order to obtain a comprehensive sociolinguistic profile of the district, insofar as ‘For Rent’ signs are concerned. Also, an important consideration after a five-year interval, I wanted to find out if the center of the ‘For Rent’ sign advertising market had shifted to another street or another part of the Kumkapı district.



Figure 1. Map of Kumkapı district. Solid arrow indicate the 2017 and 2018 survey streets; broken arrows indicate the June 2023 expanded area.

At its most superficial level, a linguistic landscape (LL) study is a procedure for evaluating language use in urban environments (Calvet 1994/2011, Ben Rafael 2009). Documentation of the signage gives insights into the language situation on the ground, it connects language, space and language users. A surface level analysis addresses such question as:

- How many languages are used?
- Which languages are used?
- What are the relative importance of languages?
- Who are the intended audiences of the signs?
- Were the signs public or private? On what authority? Who put up the signs?
- What functions do the signs serve?

But an LL study is not merely a cartographic exercise. Subsequent levels of analysis are interpretive and include historical and ethnographic background to determine, for example, the relative strength of top-down and bottom-up factors at work in the sociolinguistic environment. Also, for example, based on demographic records and documentary materials, we may be able to learn how past sociolinguistic regimes have shifted to present day regimes.

Using the evaluation of the linguistic landscape as a point of reference and a point of departure, the objective of any LL study is to understand, in terms of the broader social, cultural and historical contexts, how and why languages are used in the district, their roles and functions, and the relationships between the languages and the speakers of the languages in historical time-space (Blommaert 2013). Among other considerations, such an analysis involves notions of power and subordination, autonomy and dependence, competition and cooperation. In effect, this is an ecological endeavor, much as a biologist would seek to understand why a species, for example, has ceased to exist in a particular environment. The biologist must learn about the niches the species once occupied in the habitat, the interdependencies and structural relationships with other species and the physical characteristics of the environment in which the species had thrived. We do not want to reduce this endeavor to a Darwinian spectacle, on the other hand. Humans are hyper-social creatures, there is always agency and agenda that must be factored into any analysis.

Obviously then, one cannot limit oneself to a statistical analysis of the signs themselves, one is obliged to go beyond the signage, the statistical findings that are jumping-off points in the analysis. Additionally, it is vital to understand that the signage is not a mere reflection of the present day historical moment in time (i.e., a synchronic or ‘event-based’ historical approach), rather the signage (the languages on the signs, the signs’ targeted audience, the information on the signs, the placement of the signs, on whose authority the signs were placed, the ‘personality’ of the district, all this and more) is a manifestation over historical time (*la longue durée*, in Ferdinand Braudel words: Braudel 1958/2009) of a multitude of currents and cross-currents involving cultural, social, demographic and historical phenomena. This is the interpretive task that lies ahead.

2. Two Kumkapı surveys: January 2017 and July 2018 – a review

This paper will consider, with some exceptions, one particular type of sign: the ‘For Rent’ signs in Kumkapı. The explanation for this is as follows. In fact, the first survey (January 2017) documented all the visible signage in the linguistic landscape along the streets indicated above (solid arrows in Figure 1). Simplifying things a bit, there were commercial signs (put up by owners of stores, shops, and restaurants), and official/public signs (put up by the municipality including street signs of various sorts), and then, to my surprise, there were these ‘For Rent’ signs, dozens of them (and a few other A4 paper signs which I will talk about later). The commercial and official signs were interesting in their own right (e.g., with few

exceptions, most signs were in Turkish, targeting Turkish or Kurdish residents; and I note again in passing, not one sign was found in Kurdish, and the only Armenian signs to be found were a handful of historical or religious markers around the Armenian Patriarchate). But most all of the commercial and official signs in the LL environment were permanent, immoveable fixtures constructed with metal, glass, electric bulbs, neon tubing, and weather-resistant paints, mounted with iron and steel to cinder-block or metal surfaces -- fixtures that could last for years to come. Whereas the 'For Rent' signs were fragile sheets of paper of very short half-life. In this sense, the two types of signs struck me as being somewhat like the difference between a Russian novel and a Japanese haiku. These short-lived 'For Rent' signs spoke to me in the language of immediacy, of the unconstrained present. They breathed, they were signs of thriving human life, as much about adventure as misadventure, hope as tragedy. They were, more than any sign one could imagine, about the present moment and present human needs: shelter. In the midst of this chaotic mega-global city which is Istanbul with all its densely packed human energy and politically charged fractious divides, a shelter is a kind of oasis, a place of refuge, as vital to life as water. These 'For Rent' signs pointed to the stories that people on-the-go, who have 'no-choice-but-to-go', have to tell. They are about displacement, dispossession, searching and survival. From an LL perspective, these signs implied a mid-point in an immigrant's journey, another chapter in their life's trajectory. The signs' very impermanence and fragility were emblematic of their role in the journey -- perhaps it is an old person, a young person, a couple, a family, a sister, a grandchild; perhaps a refugee, a transit-immigrant, or asylum seeker, or person of uncertain visa status, perhaps a state-less person. From a sociolinguistic perspective then, these signs represented a point of reference that reached back into a difficult past and forward into an uncertain future. I believed that they were foundational data for a uniquely focussed LL study.

	January 2017	July 2018
Total signs	73=N	133=N
Turkish	65 (89%)	49 (37%)
Printed	63	35
Hand	2	14
Uzbek	3 (4%)	83 (63%)
<i>Uzbek, Latin</i>	0	37
Printed	0	33
Hand	0	4
<i>Uzbek, Cyrillic</i>	0	46
Printed	0	9
Hand	3	37
Russian (hand)	4 (5%)	0
Arabic (script)	1 (1%)	1 (<1.0%)

Table 1. Results for Kumkapı 'for rent' signs across two survey periods.

So, continuing along, in the first 2017 survey, I documented in the district, apart from the fixed commercial and official municipal signs, a large number of signs advertising rooms or apartments 'For Rent'. These were paper signs of the A4 size, either printed or hand written. Most were written in Turkish (89%), a few in Uzbek (4%) and Russian (5%) (see Table 1). Eighteen months later, the July 2018 survey of the same streets in Kumkapı showed a shift in both the number of for rent signs, and the languages used on them (Table 1). In this instance, the majority of the 'For Rent' signs were written in Uzbek (63%) while Turkish signs had dropped to 37%. What was also striking were the scripts found on the signs. Of the 83 Uzbek signs, 46 were written in Cyrillic, 33 in Latin script; 37 of the Cyrillic signs were hand-written. The differences found across the two surveys (18 months apart) raised many questions.

I find it useful to review results of the 2017 and 2019 surveys of ‘For Rent’ signs of Kumkapı along several themes: non-permanence, information content, authorship, audience, authorship, printed vs. hand-written, and purpose.

Non-permanence

The ‘For Rent’ signs are never permanent fixtures in the LL. They are A4-size sheets of paper, taped or stapled to a surface usually a eye level or just above. They cannot last more than a few months before the elements (rain, wind) or a human rips them off the wall or places a sign over them, covering them (Figure 2). The information on the signs may be short-lived as well: as soon as a room or apartment is rented, the sign has lost its use. The ink on paper will blur or run when in contact with rain water, eventually the signs will fade and disintegrate, or be replaced by a new signs. Why use sheets of paper instead of more permanent signs? (1) Because the information is hot or useful only for a short while, and as soon as the vacancy is filled, the sign has no further use, or (2,) in order that the residential and fee arrangements between parties are not taken notice by the authorities.



Figure 2. Kumkapı ‘For Rent’ and community notice board (July 2018).

Information

All ‘for rent’ signs announce a room or apartment for rent, by the day, week or month; for single man, woman or family. Often the signs will announce that the units are rented by the owner or ‘*sahibiden*’ meaning “from the owner” (as opposed to being sublet), and will always include one or two telephone contact numbers. Several signs also offered a job or work opportunity along with a unit. Whereas the information on most of the signs in the 2017 survey were Turkish, the 2018 survey showed a far greater number of Uzbek signs. The obvious explanation is that Uzbeks had moved into the district, most likely first-time immigrants to Turkey of uncertain work and/or visa status. One reason for their presence in Kumkapı may be because of the proximity of the Immigration Office at the end of Molla Sok. It has been said that the authorities allow new immigrant arrivals the freedom to move about so long as they remain in the district. Another reason is that minority populations often form communities in order to better protect themselves, to promote a sense of solidarity in a foreign environment, to more easily exchange information, to help with getting work and day to day survival. In their study comparing Uzbek communities in Moscow

and Istanbul (Urinboyev & Eraliev 2022), the authors found the Moscow Uzbeks were widely dispersed around Moscow and not forming a physical community (although they kept in touch with various SNS), whereas the Istanbul Uzbeks had formed physical communities in “Kumkapı, Laleli, and Zeitenburo”. There were five Russian signs in the 2017 survey, but none in the 2018 survey. It is well known that Uzbeks also speak Russian, so it could be that Uzbeks were the target audience for 2017 survey. It could be that the absence of Russian signs in 2018 was because landlords switched to making the language of the signs from Russian to Uzbek.

Who authored the signs?

It should be obvious that Turkish landlords or their proxies authored the ‘For Rent’ signs. Are their criminal networks behind this enterprise? It is known that Laleli and Kumkapı both have been neighborhoods where prostitution and drugs are found, so it is likely that criminal gangs are involved in one way or another. In any case, the rental market is an unregulated, underground market. Landlords or their proxies do not ask for permission to display the signs. Further, they are not required to rent accommodations which meet any given standard or are rented at a fair price.

Audience

It might seem obvious to say that there is a one-to-one relation between language and intended audience: e.g., Turkish for Turks, Uzbek for Uzbeks. But this relation is never straightforward, no matter where you are around the planet. In this case, it is not at all likely that Turks are the target of these signs. They have other means of renting units and would not need to resort to an underground market such as we find in Kumkapı. In any case, many of the Turkish signs include language identifying “Uzbek” or “yabancı” (meaning ‘foreigner’) as the intended target. Clearly, however, the Uzbek ‘For Rent’ signs are intended for Uzbeks. On the assumption that foreigners and especially Uzbeks are the targeted groups, then we must ask what is the difference between advertising in Turkish and Uzbek. As mentioned above, Turkish and Uzbek are in a very close genetic, cultural and historical relation. They are members of the Turkic language family, share the same SOV sentence organization, same vowel harmony, and a similar agglutinative morphological structure. An Uzbek speaker can easily acquire conversational Turkish, and the reverse is true as well. Many Uzbeks I have spoken to tell me this is so. In addition, Uzbeks can read both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets (the Uzbek government is slowly shifting away from Cyrillic: see Tolipov 2017). Advertising a ‘For Rent’ sign in Turkish is likely informationally effective, but doing so in Uzbek is more than effective. It is conveying the feeling that, “You are welcome. We speak your language.” Most effective, I suggest, is writing a sign in Cyrillic, as this is the traditional script used in Uzbekistan, despite government policy.

I note in passing that there are absolutely no signs in Kurdish language (not one, not even a shop sign) in spite of the fact that you hear Kurdish spoken everywhere on the streets of Kumpapi. It is de facto if not de jure illegal to write, display or publish texts in the Kurdish language. The Kurdish population of Istanbul, by some accounts, exceeds two million.

Printed vs Hand-written

Many of the Cyrillic signs from the July 2018 survey are hand-written. There may be several reasons for this: the most likely reason may be that the authors have no access to Cyrillic word processing equipment. The very unsteady hand of several of these signed suggest that they were written by non-native writers. As for the hand written Turkish signs, it may be that the writers of these signs simply didn’t have the time to print their signs.

Purpose

The purpose of the ‘For Rent’ signs is for the landlords to broadcast their vacancies and make money. But we can assume, however indirectly, that the signs also serve other functions as well, such as connecting transit and new-arrival immigrants with a community, with work opportunities and, possibly, with criminal networks. These are exploitative networks that can be very disadvantageous for immigrants leading to

blackmail and other unpleasantnesses, ultimately to deportation. This raises many other questions. Everything so far indicates that the ‘For Rent’ market is targeting foreigners, especially Uzbeks. Why is there such a concentration of immigrants in Kumkapi? Immigrants often form neighborhoods for mutual support and security, but another reason offered, as above, is that the Turkish authorities allow new arrivals and transit immigrants to roam freely so long as they remain in the district (Ozkul 2015).

3. Third June 2023 survey: Results and discussion

As of this writing (20 June 2023), the June 2023 survey data was recently collected, thus the presentation and interpretation of results reported in this paper will be incomplete. I followed the same procedure in earlier surveys for documenting the June 2023 ‘For Rent’ signs. All signs were photographed and are being catalogued for characteristics including language (Turkish, Uzbek), script (Latin, Cyrillic), and print (hand written, machine printed). With very few exceptions, every ‘For Rent’ sign documented was, as in previous surveys, a sheet of white A4-size paper, taped or glued to wall surfaces on buildings or aluminum fences, or taped to utility poles, doors or shop windows. The results of the June 2023 survey are presented in Table 2.

	January 2017	July 2018	June 2023
Total signs	73=N	133=N	155=N
Turkish	65 (89%)	49 (37%)	142 (92%)
Printed	63	35	111
Hand	2	14	31
Uzbek	3 (4%)	83 (63%)	13
<i>Uzbek, Latin</i>	0	37	5 (8%)
Printed	0	33	
Hand	0	4	
<i>Uzbek, Cyrillic</i>	0	46	8
Printed	0	9	
Hand	3	37	
Russian (hand)	4 (5%)	0	0
Arabic (script)	1 (1%)	1 (<1.0%)	0

Table 2. Results for Kumkapi ‘for rent’ signs across three survey periods.

Before looking over the results, however, we must take note of events occurring during the five-year interval between the second and third surveys that may have impacted the conditions for migrant and minority populations in Turkey, specifically in Istanbul. In short order these events include, the Syrian civil war bringing millions of refugees fleeing the conflict into Turkey; large numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, transit-immigrants, and undocumented persons entering Turkey from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Africa, and especially recently several hundred thousand people fleeing Russia and Ukraine; the continuous, low level Turkish military action against Kurds in eastern Turkey and along the Syrian border; the deportation of refugees and immigrants during and following the pandemic (e.g., see the recent BBC account of Syrians deported from Turkey and Lebanon: Michaelson et. al., 2023); the ever-present threat of terrorist attack targeting civilians in Turkey and Istanbul, recently a bombing in Istanbul next to Taksim square on 13 November 2022 killing six and injuring scores; the precipitous fall in value of the Turkish lira leading to spiraling inflation; the recent elections (May 14 and 28, 2023) during which the both major party candidates made promises to end the immigration crisis.

All told, these events have caused a backlash against migrants and minorities that is evidenced in anti-immigration laws, unfavorable rulings, menacing political rhetoric, and unwelcoming attitudes among

the public. The waves of immigrants arrival over the years have stretched what few immigrant and refugee support systems exist and have made a difficult life for migrants even more perilous, uncertain and costly. For immigrants in Istanbul, there is always the threat of arrest, and judgements are swift, arbitrary and unfavorable. (At the same time, as happens everywhere, other life forms keep in step: the Turkish government attracts international tourists with alluring videos of Istanbul's historic landmarks and the gorgeous beaches on the Aegean coast resorts. And tourists answer the call.)

The results in Table 2 suggest that, despite a grim five-year interval, the underground market renting rooms in Kumkapı continues to thrive at roughly the same level as before: the number of signs documented, N=155, representing the total for the entire expanded area covered. But even if we limit the coverage to the same streets as the two previous surveys, the number stands at 106 (while 49 'For Rent' signs were found in the expanded area minus the main street; which included 8 signs in Uzbek, of which 7 were written in Cyrillic script, 1 in Latin script). Recall that I surveyed the expanded area believing that, after five years, the center of the 'For Rent' signs market might have shifted to another part of the Kumkapı, but that was not the case. Another notable result from this third survey is the large percentage of Turkish signs (92%), greatly outnumbering the Uzbek signs (8%). The figures for the Turkish and Uzbek are closer to those of the first January 2017 survey. That said, it is clear that the signs collected in this third survey targeted the same audiences, i.e, Uzbek and foreigner ('yabancı'), as did the earlier surveys. A third feature from June 2023 survey is that the 'For Rent' signs have not deviated from the earlier format: A4 size, black-and-white computer printed (or a few hand-written), taped or stapled to surfaces at eye level on walls, solid aluminum fencing, telephone poles. As before, there are no 'For Rent' signs using color, or using stronger materials such as cardboard, or in a larger size paper. In other words, there appears to be little change except for the language used on the signs shifting to Turkish.

I note that in addition to the 'For Rent' signs, I found similarly formatted A4 size signs advertising for Turks who speak Russian (two signs in shop windows looking for Russian interpreters, presumably to sell products to Russian clientele), and one color Uzbek sign advertising babysitting services in the Cyrillic script (presumably to mind the Uzbek infants while the parents are at work).

A thriving rental market, the same targeted audiences, the same sign formatting, the significant difference being that most of the signs are in Turkish: how can we explain these facts? With only 13 of 155 signs in the Uzbek language (whereas in July 2018, for a total of 133 'For Rent' signs, 83 of them written in Uzbek, and of those, 46, over half, were written in Cyrillic script), a reasonable hypothesis is that there are fewer Uzbek arrivals and a greater number of non-Uzbek foreigner arrivals seeking rooms to rent. The signs are clearly targeting foreigners (not the local population of Kurds and Turks), and so one draws the logical conclusion that the landlords chose Turkish as the most effective medium, capable of reaching a far broader audience than any other language, for broadcasting vacancies to a diverse multi-ethnic, multi-national audience. Which brings to mind Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) three maxims regarding the choice of languages one uses on signs:

1. Write in a language you know.
2. Prefer to write in a language that your readers are able to read.
3. Prefer to write in your own language or a language with which you wish to be identified.

So, what we may be seeing in Kumkapı, looking at the data in Table 2 across the three documentation periods, is a steady, stable rental market which experiences incoming and outgoing waves of immigrant populations: (Phase 1) In January 2017, most 'For Rent' signs were written in Turkish, the market mainly targeted *yabancı* ('foreigners'); (Phase 2) In July 2018, large numbers of Uzbeks were moving into the district, the market adapted to this incoming wave by preparing a majority of signs in Uzbek (note: most of the hand-written Uzbek signs were written by non-native hands), while also continuing to put up signs in Turkish for non-Uzbek *yabancı*; (Phase 3) In June 2023, the numbers of Uzbek arrivals having significantly diminished, the market is targeting *yabancı* once again. So now we must particularly examine the role and

function (the ecological niche, as it were) of Turkish in this environment. How is the language ecology impacted and how does it respond when numbers of non-Uzbek foreign-language speakers enter the district in need rooms to rent? There are structural relationships at work here that must be teased out.

As you can see, there is much more to be done in the analysis and interpretation of these ‘For Rent’ signs. Other documentary and demographic data will be examined in the future. Further analysis and interpretation of will have to wait.

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