

## *St Peter's Basilica and its Linguistic Landscape: Symbolic Relevance*

### *Bazylika św. Piotra i jej krajobraz językowy: znaczenie symboliczne*

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#### **Keyword**

religion, symbolism, signage, identity, communication

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

religia, symbolizm, oznaczanie, tożsamość, komunikacja

#### **Abstract**

Although mainstream linguistic landscape studies focus mainly on street and shop signs, this paper centres on just one internationally-acclaimed monument: St Peter's basilica – the epicentre of a religion, Roman Catholicism, which developed from a small group of followers of Jesus Christ into a global religion. The basilica itself is steeped in two millennia of history and Christian values, whose importance transcends religion. It is adorned with priceless and breath-taking works of art. Unsurprisingly, it ranks among the top most-visited sites both by believers and non-believers from all over the world. This study's analysis of 85 signs (monolingual, bilingual and multilingual) captured digitally by the researcher demonstrates that many of the multilingual signs in St Peter's reflect the importance that the Church attaches to conveying its message, to inform, direct, appeal or warn those visiting the basilica. The wide spectrum of languages used clearly reflects the import of the universality of the symbolic universe of meaning which the Catholic Church seeks to advance through its linguistic landscape. The four research issues which are explored both quantitatively and qualitatively seek to explain the shift from the use of Latin, the mainstay of Catholicism in

favour of a set of vernacular languages. This study reveals that the sign writers at St Peter's are all too aware that though Latin, for centuries the official language of the Roman Catholic Church is forever present and deeply etched in the basilica's friezes, tribunes and monuments, contemporary society needs to be reached through living languages. The more recent signs show a definite language shift and an appreciation of other languages and other cultures. The towering presence of English as the second most present language in signs, is testimony to its status as a global language and the gateway to international communication with both pilgrims and visitors.

### **Abstrakt**

Choć główny nurt badań nad krajobrazem językowym skupia się na szyldach ulicznych i sklepowych, niniejszy artykuł stanowi omówienie tylko jednego zabytku. Jest nim znana na całym świecie Bazylika św. Piotra, centrum Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego, który z małej grupy wyznawców Jezusa Chrystusa rozwinął się w religię globalną. Bazylika stanowi doskonale ucieleśnienie dwutysięcznej tradycji i wartości chrześcijańskich, których znaczenie wykracza poza religię. Kościół ten zdobią bezcenne i zapierające dech w piersiach dzieła sztuki. Nie dziwi więc, że jest ona jednym z najchętniej odwiedzanych miejsc przez osoby wierzące i niewierzące z całego świata. Analiza 85 zarejestrowanych cyfrowo oznaczeń (jednojęzycznych, dwujęzycznych i wielojęzycznych) wykazała, że wiele z wielojęzycznych oznaczeń w Bazylice św. Piotra odzwierciedla wagę, jaką Kościół przywiązuje do swojego przesłania, a także informowania, kierowania, apelowania do lub ostrzegania osób odwiedzających Bazylikę. Szerokie spektrum używanych języków wyraźnie odzwierciedla istotną rolę, którą Kościół katolicki przypisuje symbolicznemu uniwersum znaczeń i które stara się propagować poprzez swój pejzaż językowy. Artykuł przedstawia analizę ilościową i jakościową czterech zagadnień badawczych, mającą na celu wyjaśnienie rezygnacji z używania łaciny, będącej ostoją katolicyzmu, na rzecz zestawu języków wernakularnych. Twórcy oznaczeń w Bazylice św. Piotra są aż nazbyt świadomi, że choć łacina, od wieków oficjalny język Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego, jest od zawsze obecna i głęboko wryta we fryzy, ołtarze i pomniki bazyliki, to do współczesnego społeczeństwa należy docierać poprzez żywe języki. Najnowsze oznaczenia wskazują na zdecydowany zwrot językowy i docenienie innych języków i kultur. Znacząca obecność angielskiego, który jest drugim najczęściej występującym językiem w oznaczeniach, świadczy o jego statusie jako języka globalnego i niezbędnego narzędzia w komunikacji międzynarodowej, zarówno z pielgrzymami, jak i zwiedzającymi.

## St Peter's Basilica and its Linguistic Landscape: Symbolic Relevance

### 1. Introduction

Rome ranks among the top three most-visited cities in the world, surpassed by Paris and London (Clayton-Lea 2019). Dubbed 'the eternal city', it has oft been described as 'a walking museum'. In practically every corner one finds archaeological sites, historic monuments, architectural masterpieces and a plethora of frescoes and paintings by highly-acclaimed artists. Rome also houses Vatican City, the smallest state in the world which was created in 1929 as a result of a bilateral agreement between Pope Pius XI and the Italian government. Though it was only in 1982 that UNESCO designated Vatican city and St Peter's basilica as world heritage sites (Comastri 2009), this basilica had been similarly appreciated much earlier by the renowned French travel writer Stendhal who at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in his book *Les Promenades dans Rome*, later translated into English *A Roman Journal* (1959), rapturously described St Peter's basilica as "a monument so great, so beautiful, so well kept, in a word the most beautiful church in the world's most beautiful region." (Stenhal 1959: 23)

Justifiably so, many scholars have channelled their energies to the study of this city's history, architecture, archaeology and art. Nevertheless, only relatively recently has attention been paid to the languages of its public signs. Even though the linguistic landscape or "all visual forms of language present in the public signage of a pre-determined geographic area" (Lou 2016: 2) – in our case St Peter's basilica – is the main focus of this paper, aspects related to religion and art are given prominence as these are inextricably intertwined with this basilica's linguistic landscape. Though there have been studies on Rome's linguistic landscape (henceforth LL), their main focus are street and shop signs.

The present author's interest in Rome was sparked years ago, as an undergraduate student studying languages. Her three-year university course included two study-units on the *History of Mediterranean Civilization*. One of these, which focussed on the history of Rome, its art, sculpture and architecture, kindled in her a lasting love and appreciation of the wonders of this city. Many years later, as a sociolinguist keenly interested in the study of languages displayed in public signs, her curiosity was further piqued during her frequent visits to Rome as she noticed an ever-increasing diversity of languages

on display in the LL both inside and within the confines of St Peter's. This led her to research the LL of St Peter's basilica during her sabbatical year in 2018.

This basilica was chosen for the following reasons: (1) St Peter's is the largest Church in the world, contrastingly situated in the smallest state. (2) It is the seat of the pope, the head of the Roman Catholic faith. (3) St Peter's is one of the top tourist attractions for Christians and non-Christians visiting Rome. It has been embellished with priceless and breath-taking works of art contracted by the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* – the organisation set up to supervise the works in the basilica (Rice 1997) – and which also commissioned highly-talented architects, sculptors, and artists: Michelangelo Buonarroti, Donato Bramante, Guido Reni, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Carlo Maderno and Pietro da Cortona, to mention just a few. Undeniably, St Peter's artistic grandeur is a great force of attraction to pilgrims and tourists alike, so much so that many are those who patiently wait in the seemingly never-ending queues in inclement weather or under the blazing sun to visit it, since it is often believed that a visit to Rome is incomplete without at least a stopover at this basilica. In fact, the signs in different languages inside and within the precincts of this basilica, are testimony to the languages spoken by the large numbers of visitors.

## 2. LL research

Several LL studies have been conducted in Rome (Griffin 2004; Barni 2006; Bagna and Barni 2005; Barni and Bagna 2010; Gorter 2007) and in other cities such as Jerusalem (Rosenbaum et al. 1977; Spolsky and Cooper 1991), Montreal (Monnier 1989), Tokyo (Backhaus 2006); San Sebastian/Donosita (Cenz and Gorter 2006); Bangkok (Huebner 2006), Valletta and other localities in Malta (Sciriha and Vassallo 2015; Sciriha 2017); Washington's Chinatown (Lou 2016); and many others. However, it is only relatively recently that LL research on religious places of worship in different countries have started to emerge.

### Linguistic Landscapes of religious sites

Though much fewer in number when compared to those focussing on street and shop signs, research on the LL of religious sites has mostly taken place in non-European countries such as Nigeria, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. For example, in her study, Inya (2019) focuses on the signs in Christian and Muslim religious sites in Nigeria, while the scope of the research conducted by Coluzzi and Kitade (2015) in Malaysia, and Wafa and Wijayanti (2015) in Indonesia is wider in that these studies incorpo-

rate the LL of sites pertaining to the four major religions (Christianity, Islam, Hindu and Buddhism).

While these studies analyse more than one religious site and represent the different creeds present in their respective countries, the research conducted by Reema Ali Alsaif and Donna Starks (2019) on *Medium and domains in the linguistic landscapes of the Grand Mosque in Mecca* focuses on just Islam. It investigates the signs in what is the most important religious site for more than one billion Muslims: Mecca and its surrounding area. As the authors note, unlike other places of worship, those who go to the Grand Mosque are only Muslims who have one aim: to adhere to the precepts of Islam which stipulate that Muslims should visit Mecca at least once in their lives, of course only if this is possible for them to do so. In their findings (Alsaif and Starks 2019), Arabic is ever present and in particular, Classical Arabic is found in the inscriptions. Of the monolingual signs the languages displayed were Classical Arabic, Modern Arabic and English, with the signs in English being present in temporary medium signs.

Interestingly, Hirut Woldermariam and Elizabeth Lanza (2012) study the Ethiopian LL from a different perspective. The main purpose of their paper is to show the tactics employed by Christian groups of different denominations to disseminate their religion among Ethiopians through the use of posters, banners, stickers on buses and taxis., and the use of billboards. Their findings show that “The linguistic landscape serves as a platform for evangelization, contestation and debates, commodification and ultimately globalization.” (Woldermariam and Lanza (2012: 169)

Since these studies are not based in Europe, it is pertinent to include a project on *Multilingual Lausanne: A linguistic landscape project* by Shana Gormley and Jay Symons (2018), who investigate the languages used in religious centres in Lausanne, Switzerland. In their study the authors reveal the range of languages found in the signs in these centres. The authors of this project digitally captured signs outside the following religious centres: a Greek Orthodox church (Saint Gerasim), the Lausanne synagogue, the Scottish Kirks church, the Notre Dame Cathedral and the parish of Saint-Jean. Their findings reveal that French is the most predominantly used language, followed by other languages, among which is English. The authors conclude that the use of non-official languages reveals that these religious centres accommodate to the needs of non-official language speakers, even though French retains its prominence in these centres’ LL.

### 3. Background to St Peter's: Religion, History, Architecture and Art

St Peter's Basilica is not only the largest internationally-acclaimed monument. St Peter's is the epicentre of a religion, Roman Catholicism built over the tomb of the first pope, St Peter. The first stone of the new St Peter's, built on the first church (348AD) which had been commissioned by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was laid in 1506 and took more than a century to complete.

The floor plan of St Peter's (Figure 1) is in the form of a cross, having central and side naves, a transept and an apse. In the portico one finds five doors all leading to the basilica. Of the five, the Holy Door which is at the far right and closest to the Emperor Constantine's monument, is open only in Jubilee years, the first of which was initiated by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300, whereby he decreed that subsequent Jubilees would be held every one hundred years. This was later changed to a fifty-year interval following a petition to Pope Clement VI in 1343. The time frame from one Holy Year to another was further shortened to twenty-five years by Pope Paul II in 1475. However, there were times when popes declared a Holy Year due to extraordinary circumstances such as the 1933 Holy Year, only eight years after the 1925 Holy Year. Pope Pius XI did so in order to celebrate the establishment of the new Vatican City State. In more recent times, there have also been other extraordinary Jubilee Holy Years such as the *Holy Marian Year* by Pope John Paul II in 1988, and the 2016 *Year of Mercy* announced by Pope Francis (Lewis 2016).

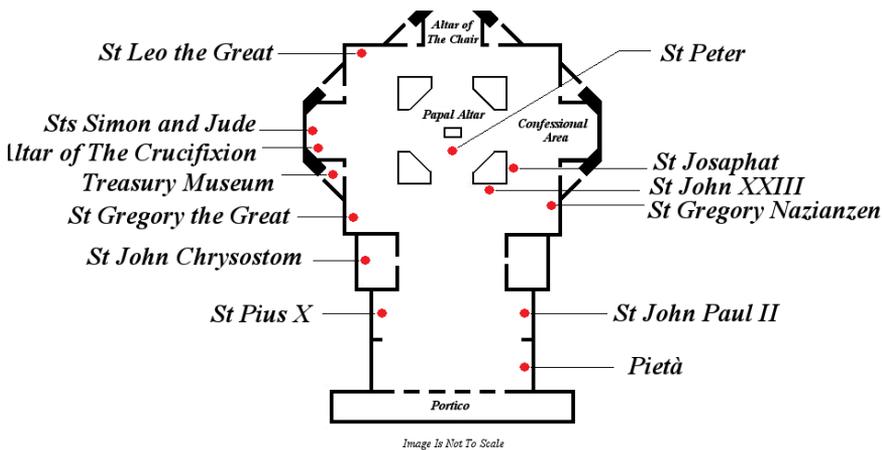


Figure 1: Floor plan of St Peter's basilica

The main focus of the basilica is its centre where one finds the papal altar, carved from a single slab of marble taken from Nerva's forum and which is built right above St Peter's tomb. Rising right above the papal altar is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's majestically ornate bronze canopy, most of its bronze having been taken from the Pantheon. Overshadowing this canopy is Michelangelo Buonarroti's cupola, the tallest in the world. Beneath the papal altar is St Peter's tomb (Figure 2) which pilgrims venerate through the basilica's grottoes where several popes have been buried including the pontiffs who have died in the last sixty years. Though initially buried in the Vatican grottoes, the most recently deceased pontiff, St Pope John Paul II and one of his predecessors St Pope John XXIII are now both buried inside the basilica – the former's remains are found in the *Chapel of St Sebastian* (Figure 3) close to the *Chapel of La Pietà*, while those of the latter are located beneath the altar of Domenichino's *Last Communion of St Jerome*, close to the area where there are the confessionals.



Figure 2: Papal altar underneath Bernini's canopy



Figure 3: Chapel of St Sebastian

Noteworthy are the Latin inscriptions in the frieze around the dome, the transept and the tribune, the most significant being the frieze in black mosaic letters with the Latin words "*Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram, aedificabo ecclesiam meam et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum*" (You are Peter and upon this rock I shall build my church and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven) – words uttered by Jesus Christ to St Peter and found in the gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 16, verses 18-19 (Vicchi 1999: 50).

As shown in Figure 4, facing the papal altar and on its right side, one finds Arnolfo di Cambio's bronze statue of a seated St Peter holding the keys of his *magisterium* in his left hand, while blessing the pilgrims with his right

hand. It is one of the most venerated statues. Over the centuries, pilgrims have smoothed the apostle's right foot with their caresses and kisses. On two occasions during the year – 22 February, the feast of the Chair of St Peter and 29 June, the feast of St Peter and St Paul – this statue is crowned with a precious tiara and adorned with an elaborate robe (Korn 2000; Comastri 2009; Lewis 2016).



Figure 4: Seated bronze statue of St Peter

At the far end of the basilica is the apse and one of Bernini's many masterpieces: the *Altar of the Chair*. High above the altar stands St Peter's chair held by angels amid the clouds. Present also are the four doctors of the two rites of the church, St John Chrysostom and St Anastasius, belonging to the Eastern rite church are in background, while St Augustine and St Ambrose representing the Latin rite are in the forefront. At the very end of the apse, the breath-taking multi-coloured glass window with a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit in its centre (Scoditti 2013), completes Bernini's brilliantly-cho-reographed work of art.

At the south end of the transept (see Figure 1, floor plan) one finds the area where there are the confessionals. It is here that priests administer the sacrament of reconciliation in different languages, inside specially-designed wooden confessionals intended to safeguard the privacy of penitents.

Even though every corner of St Peter's basilica is embellished with works of great artistic value and splendour, one cannot omit mentioning *La Pietà*, the work of a very young Michelangelo Buonarroti and one which bears his signature. This is located in the *Chapel of La Pietà*, the first chapel, on the right side as one enters the basilica. It is possibly one of the main attractions for both pilgrims and visitors alike.

Outside the basilica is a large welcoming square surrounded by Bernini's columns representing the arms of Our Saviour ready to embrace the world.

On the balustrade of St Peter's façade, designed by Carlo Maderno, are the statues of Christ the Redeemer flanked by St John the Baptist and eleven apostles (Korn 2000).

This brief overview of St Peter's basilica layout, architecture and salient artefacts has been given for the reader to better understand the locations and significance of the signs/notices that are given in the section on *Findings*.

## 4. Methodology

### (a) Data collection

Most LL researchers do not conduct their fieldwork inside places of worship since such a practice is generally restricted. Coluzzi and Kitade (2015: 250) specifically mention that "It is sometimes prohibited to take pictures inside praying halls, and even entering if one does not belong to that specific religion (in Malaysia this applies to mosques, whose praying halls are off-limit for non-Muslims)."

In the present study all the data – both inside and within the precincts of the basilica – was digitally captured. Although guided groups of tourists are not allowed to visit St Peter's during major liturgical services by the pope or his delegates, this prohibition is lifted at other times and visitors are allowed to visit most places and may also take photos.

Data collection was undertaken in March 2018. The visibility and salience of the languages on signs which were present in this basilica were carefully noted. Only photos of signs which are clearly intended to *inform*, *direct*, *appeal*, *request* or *warn* those visiting the basilica were taken. The corpus does not include photos of words in the basilicas' friezes, tribunes, transepts, or the inscriptions on monuments and sarcophagi which are usually in Latin and sometimes in Greek. Though the majority of the photos were taken inside the basilica, photos were also taken of signs found outside the basilica, but within its grounds, such as the church parvis, the main square, the adjacent post office and book/souvenir shops.

Data was collected over a period of three days, during which it was necessary to be present early to avoid crowds. Even so, this was not without its challenges because of the large number of chapels and altars (11 and 45 respectively). Roman Catholic prelates take the opportunity to celebrate early masses, and during these masses at the various altars and chapels no photos are allowed. To further narrow the research time-window, several scheduled weekly and festive masses and other celebrations during the day are held at the *Altar of St Joseph*, the *Altar of the Chair of St Peter*, and in the *Chapel of the*

*Blessed Sacrament* restrict data collection. St Peter's is undoubtedly vibrant with continuous activities (Figure 5) from 07:00 to 17:30.



Figure 5: Official mass schedule at St Peter's basilica

Some areas are also off-limits and heavily-guarded by Vatican officials. Foremost among these is the *Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament* (Figure 6) located on the right aisle next to the *Chapel of St Sebastian*. Another difficult location is a large space on the right transept of the basilica where the confessionals are found. In these two locations, only those who want to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament, or who wish to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation respectively are allowed entry. No photos could be taken inside the *Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament* and the only written material available there was a holy picture accompanied by a prayer written by Angelo Cardinal Comastri, one time archpriest of St Peter's (Figures 6 and 7). Photos were taken outside this chapel as there were several *warning* signs prohibiting tourists from visiting this Chapel unless they wish to pray. Consequently, the quality of some of photos is not always so good. At times data had to be furtively collected.



Figure 6: Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament

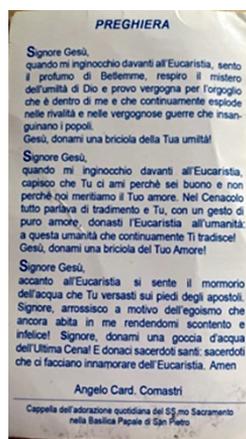


Figure 7: Prayer in Italian by Angelo Cardinal Comastri

Even though according to Gorter (2012) most LL researchers do not encounter methodological difficulties, outside the *Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament* data collection proved to be problematic. In effect, Gorter’s (2019:48) advice to LL researchers to “take your time”, “frame the sign”, “focus”, “pay attention to the light” and “check the picture immediately afterwards” could not always be followed. In contrast, data collection around the confessional area was slightly easier. In this area each wooden confessional has a framed notice affixed to one of its sides bearing the priest’s name and his availability to hear confessions in an array of languages. Though all of the confessionals bore such signs, for ethical reasons and to safeguard the privacy of penitents, only photos of unoccupied confessionals were taken. So confessionals had to be vacant before photos were taken and usually this was a rushed job. This also compromised the technical quality of the data (Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8: Clear photo of notice on confessional



Figure 9: Blurred photo of notice on confessional

At the centre of this confessional area there are several two-meter-long pews with integrated kneelers in front of the seating benches. This setting imposed numerous restrictions and photos had to be taken in stages. Each pew’s surface has a groove in which typed instructions in several languages (protected by glass) on how one could obtain the plenary indulgence are inserted. These had originally been inserted during the extraordinary Year of Mercy in 2016, together with the prayers one needs to say before and after confessing (e.g. Act of Contrition, Our Father, Hail Mary). On kneeling to pray, as one rests one’s arms, it is easy to read these prayers. What is of particular interest is that each pew is numbered and includes instructions and prayers in one language only. In order to capture all the signs in the different languages in all the pews, the researcher had no option but to go from one pew to another. Moreover, it was not possible to clearly capture each pew’s prayers in each

language without compromising the quality of the photo since the sign is far too wide (Figures 10). So, a panoramic photo of the prayers on each pew was first taken. This, despite being sharp was not always readable. So, this was later magnified later magnified (Figure 11).



Figure 10: Panoramic photo of prayers in Ukrainian (Pew 2)

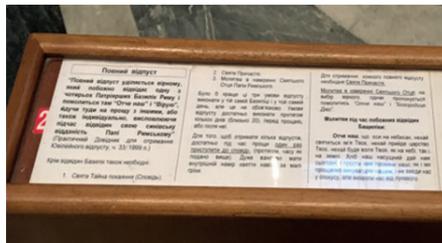


Figure 11: Magnified photo (Pew 2)

Another problem which had not been previously encountered elsewhere is related to the specific nature of data collection. Rather than taking photos of works of art, data collection for this study involved only signs. This, to people not conversant with data collection techniques in sociolinguistics, could have raised suspicion, thus creating more contextual stress in the fieldwork process.

### (b) Selection and codification of signs

The corpus does not include signs which were unclear or which were repeated in different areas of the basilica. All the signs which had been digitally captured were classified, coded and then entered in SPSS. Each photo was assigned a SCN (Serial Consecutive Number), and coded by language (e.g. Italian, English, French), linguistic category (e.g. monolingual, bilingual and multilingual), and location (e.g. parvis). Moreover, in respect of bilingual and multilingual signs, a coding frame was set up to show the combination of the languages as they appear on each sign in line with Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003:120) who state that:

In most cases studied so far, the preferred code is located above the secondary or peripheral codes if they are aligned vertically; if they are aligned horizontally the preferred is located in the left position and the peripheral code is located in the right position. A third possibility is that the preferred code is located in the center and the peripheral code is placed around the periphery.

The researcher devised a particular code to show the language combinations of bilingual signs. By way of an example, the sign code I – E meant that

the sign is horizontally aligned and that Italian is the preferred code since it is on the left, while English is on the righthand side as in Figure 12.



Figure 12: Italian (left) and English (right) information sign at the *Pietà Chapel*

With regard to signs which were aligned vertically, for example the code I/E means that Italian is at the top of the sign and thus the preferred code, while English is beneath it.

Moreover, since the use of a larger font size for a particular language in a bilingual or multilingual sign also reveals the salience of the language in the sign, the font size was also recorded in the case of bilingual and multilingual signs. The type of material used for each sign was also coded in line with Spolsky and Cooper (1991). In this respect Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003:129) note that such material reveals “permanence or durability, temporality or newness quality” and whether there are “add-ons or extensions.”

Furthermore, the precise location of the signs in the basilica (e.g. confessional area, entrance, atrium, altars, parvis, bookshops) and the types of signs (e.g. warnings, information, notices, directions, prayers) were also documented. Once all the signs had all been coded according to the above-mentioned criteria, all the data was entered in the IBM SPSS program and analysed.

### (c) Research questions

This study analyses quantitatively and qualitatively the signs collected in St Peter’s. It attempts to check whether there are differences in the number of languages which feature in these signs, and whether some languages are given more prominence. Also considered is the combination of languages in bilingual and multilingual signs as outlined by Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003), the type of material used in the signs, as well as their location (Spolsky and Cooper 1991). These research questions will be answered in the next section on *Findings* in the following order:

1. How many monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs are there in St Peter’s?

2. What are the language combinations in bilingual and multilingual signs?
3. What type of material is used in these signs?
4. In which locations are these signs found in St Peter's?

Following the presentation of the findings, a discussion which will seek to interpret holistically the LL used in St Peter's will follow.

#### 4. Findings

The results are structured in a manner to help readers who have never been inside St Peter's to better understand the location of the signs inside this religious place of worship. For this reason, it is helpful to refer to St Peter's floor plan previously given in Figure 1.

**Research Question 1:** How many monolingual, bilingual or multilingual signs are there in St Peter's?

The findings in Table 1 show that 85 signs are found both inside and within the precincts of the basilica; the highest number of signs ( $n=40$ ) are bilingual, followed by 27 monolingual signs; the lowest number of signs are multilingual signs ( $n=18$ ). Italian is the most visible language in monolingual signs (Figure 13). Five of the multilingual signs include three languages; 4 signs each display four, five and six languages respectively, while only 1 sign incorporates seven languages. Figures 12, 13 and 14 display the three kinds of signs present in the basilica. In Figures 13 and 14, Italian is the preferred code followed by English.

**Table 1:** Monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs in St Peter's basilica

		MONOLING	BILINGUAL	MULTILING	
NUMBER OF LANGUAGES	ONE	27	0	0	27
	TWO	0	40	0	40
	THREE	0	0	5	5
	FOUR	0	0	4	4
	FIVE	0	0	4	4
	SIX	0	0	4	4
	SEVEN	0	0	1	1
Total		27	40	18	85



Figure 12: Monolingual in Italian



Figure 13: Bilingual in Italian and English



Figure 14: Multilingual: Italian, English, German, Spanish & French

Table 2 gives a further breakdown of the languages in first and only position in the case of monolingual signs, or in the first and preferred position in the case of bilingual and multilingual signs. In respect of bilingual and multilingual signs, in line with Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003: 122) “there is a coherent code preference system which privileges the top, the left, and the center.” Of the 27 monolingual signs, surprisingly, the majority of the signs are not in Italian (n=9) as one would have expected; the remaining monolingual signs include 15 signs; there is an equal number of signs in English, French German, Spanish and Polish, while there are three signs each displaying one language – Ukrainian, Hungarian and Croatian. Moreover, as regards the 40 bilingual signs, virtually all signs (n=38) have Italian as the preferred code, while French is the only other language in first position in 2 bilingual signs and also in one multilingual sign. Of the 18 multilingual signs, 14 of them have Italian as the first language, French (n=1), Polish (n=2) and Slovakian (n=1) are in preferred position too. However, this does not mean to say that these are the only languages in multilingual signs in St Peter’s as will be shown later in this paper

Table 2: Languages in Preferred Position in Monolingual, Bilingual and Multilingual signs

	MONOL	BILINGUAL	MULTILINGUAL	Total
ITALIAN	9	38	14	61
ENGLISH	3	0	0	3
FRENCH	3	2	1	6
GERMAN	3	0	0	3

SPANISH	3	0	0	3
POLISH	3	0	2	5
UKRANIAN	1	0	0	1
HUNGARIAN	1	0	0	1
SLOVAKIAN	0	0	1	1
CROATIAN	1	0	0	1
Total	27	40	18	85

Figure 15 shows a directional sign: Italian as the preferred language in top position in a vertical alignment. It is also the salient language since the location's name SACRESTIA is in capital letters and in a much bigger font size, compared to the other languages on this sign.



Figure 15: Italian as the preferred and salient language in a multilingual directional sign

**Research Question 2:** Which are the language combinations displayed on bilingual and multilingual signs?

The combination of languages in signs follows the one applied by Gorter (2007). Table 3 gives a breakdown of these combinations in bilingual and multilingual signs. There is a total of 40 bilingual signs in St Peter's, with the overwhelming majority being horizontally aligned – Italian is on the left and thus the preferred code, while the other language, usually English is placed on the right side. In respect of multilingual signs, there are different combinations with the most popular having Italian as the preferred language, immediately followed by English and other European languages (n=9). Other combinations include Italian, English, followed by European languages and also non-European languages too (n=3). There are five signs whose language combination is Italian and European languages. Only one sign was recorded displaying Italian, English and non-European languages.

**Table 3:** General language combinations for bilingual and multilingual signs

	Frequency	Percent
Monolingual	27	31.8
BL: I + E	36	42.4
Other Bilingual	4	4.7
ML: I +E+European Language/s	9	10.6
ML: I+E+European+ Non-European Language/s	3	3.5
ML: I+E+Non-European l anguages	1	1.2
ML: I+European languages	5	5.9
Total	85	100.0

Table 4 provides a more detailed breakdown of the languages and their alignment in the signs, for example a multilingual sign such as I-F/G-PT/E-S demonstrates both vertical and horizontal alignments. In this example Italian on the left and French on the right are horizontally aligned in the first line of the sign; in the second line are German (left) and Portuguese (right), while English (left) and Spanish (right) are in the third and final line. Other multilingual signs have languages which are all vertically aligned: 2 signs have six languages – Italian, followed by English, French, Spanish, German and Chinese and one sign includes seven languages – Italian, English, German, French, Polish, Spanish, Chinese.

**Table 4:** Detailed language combination of bilingual and multilingual signs with their respective vertical and/or horizontal alignments

	Frequency	Percent
I – E	26	30.6
I / E	10	11.8
I/E/G/S/F	2	2.4
I/E/F/S/G/C	2	2.4
I-F/G-PT/E-S	1	1.2
PI/I/E	2	2.4
F/R/I	1	1.2
I/F/G	1	1.2
F/I	2	2.4
I/E/G/F	3	3.5
SL/CZ/HU/I	1	1.2

I/E/G/F/PL/S/C	1	1.2
I/E/S	1	1.2
I/S	2	2.4
I-G/E-F	1	1.2
I/E/PT/G/PL/S	1	1.2
I/E/C/J/K	1	1.2
Total	58	68.2
Monolingual	27	31.8
Total	85	100.0

Though the left-to-right horizontal alignment is the most popular for bilingual signs (n=26) in Italian and English (n=10), these two languages also appeared in a vertical alignment. Figure 16 shows a horizontally-aligned bilingual sign in Italian and English on a stand adjacent to the *Altar of St Basil*, while Figure 17 portrays a vertically-aligned trilingual sign in Italian, English and French placed at the *Chapel of Baptism*.



Figure 16: Bilingual sign in Italian and English



Figure 17: Trilingual sign in Italian, English and French

Table 4 also shows that vertical alignment (top-to-bottom) is also used in some multilingual signs in the basilica. Noteworthy is the sign in front of the confessional area (Figure 18), where seven languages are displayed, one of which is Chinese, a non-European language. Italian is in first position, followed by English, German, French, Polish, Spanish and Chinese. The salience of Italian is further shown by means of the larger font size used when compared to the other languages. These signs are easy to rank the order of language preference chosen by the sign writers. Chinese is included in only three multilingual signs in the basilica – one in the area where there are the confessionals, another in front of the *Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament* and the third sign is found at the entrance to the basilica.



**Figure 18:** Multilingual sign in both European and non-European languages

Furthermore, Table 4 also reveals that the majority of multilingual signs may have just a vertical alignment with languages displayed from top to bottom (n=16). However, of particular interest are the signs with both horizontal and vertical alignments, as the sign writer's way to compress the sign. In Figure 19, Italian is clearly the preferred code not only because it is on the first line of the first column and is on the left side when reading from a left-to-right direction, but also because the name of the chapel – CAPPELLA DEL SS.MO SACRAMENTO – is in capital letters and a bigger font is used. Though the classification is clear for Italian, how are the hierarchies of the languages in this sign to be determined? Which of the other languages are in second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth position? If we consider the first line of this sign and read it from left-to-right, then French is the second language. However, the languages would be ranked differently if one reads the left column from top to bottom, followed by the second right column in a similar direction? This would place German in second position and English in third position? How should we assign the language positions in both Figures 19 and 20?



**Figure 19:** Horizontal and vertical alignments (I-F/G-PT/E-S)



**Figure 20:** Horizontal and vertical alignments (I-G/E-F)

To check this, a second level qualitative analysis in the form of a focus group was undertaken. There was agreement among this group that the sign in Figure 19 is to be read line-by-line starting from the top first line using a left-to-right reading structure as follows: Italian (1), French (2) *in line 1*; German (3), Portuguese (4) *in line 2*, English (5), Spanish (6) *in line 3*. The

same reading strategy was adopted for Figure 20. On the basis of this qualitative research, this coding system was adopted in respect of Table 2.

### **Language Proficiency or Language Dominance in multilingual signs?**

Some multilingual signs did not just include language preferences, but also language proficiency. As noted earlier, the sacrament of reconciliation is important in the Roman Catholic religion, and the Church caters for the needs of pilgrims with diverse language backgrounds. The linguistic repertoire of the priests assigned to hear confessions varies: most of them are trilingual and some are even multilingual. Pilgrims are guided to choose the priest who speaks one of their languages, as shown on the framed notices on the sides of the wooden confessionals. These wooden-framed notices are of particular interest in respect of the font sizes of the languages displayed on these signs and the order in which the languages appear in a vertical alignment only. The following four signs (Figures 21-24) all illustrate that Italian is known by each confessor, as one would expect this since they are resident in Italy where the language of the community is Italian. In these signs the languages in the highest position namely Polish, French, English and Slovakian respectively are the preferred languages for each of the confessors. However, the font sizes of the second and subsequent languages were differently-sized in some signs, but not in others. A first interpretation is that the differences in font sizes could reflect the confessor's varying proficiency levels in his languages, or that font size was purely incidental. These two possible interpretations were also presented to the focus group for analysis. The focus group agreed that the first language at the top of the sign is the priest's dominant language and if the penitent were to choose a language which is further down the list and printed in a smaller font, the priest's proficiency level is lower. Figure 21 is an interesting example in which level of proficiency is manifested graphically by the use of different font sizes, the mixture of capital and small letters. In this case, Polish is the priest's dominant language. The font size is the largest of the three listed languages and is at the top of the vertical list. He is also proficient in Italian. However, although English is also included as one of the languages, the priest's proficiency would be low considering that it is not only at the bottom of the list, but unlike the other language names, it is typed in lowercase letters.



**Figure 21:**  
Polish, Italian,  
English



**Figure 22:**  
French, Romanian,  
Italian



**Figure 23:**  
English, Italian,  
Maltese



**Figure 24:**  
Slovakian, Czech,  
Polish, Hungarian,  
Italian

The third sign in this series of notices on the wooden confessionals (Figure 23) is also quite interesting. The focus group concluded that although the priest is Maltese (as shown by his Maltese surname) and thus must be proficient in Maltese and English, both of which are official languages in Malta, on the international stage the status of English is higher than Maltese. For this reason English is placed at the top so as to show its importance as a global language.

Figure 24 reflects a different situation: the priest is proficient in five languages (Slovakian, Czech, Polish, Hungarian and Italian). Though Slovakian is the highest in the list of languages, the fact that the other listed languages are in the same font sizes and all in capital letters, reveals that the priest has similar proficiency levels in all these languages, though his dominant language is Slovakian.

Other vertically-aligned language combinations, such as the multilingual sign in Figure 25, includes European languages and one non-European language. Interestingly, Figure 26 shows Italian, English and three non-European languages – a sign found outside the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. Clearly Italian is always the preferred and dominant language.



**Figure 25:** Multilingual sign with one non-European language



**Figure 26:** Multilingual sign including three non-European languages

**Research Question 3:** In which locations are the signs found inside/outside St Peter’s basilica?

Table 5 shows that a good number of signs inside the basilica of St Peter’s are located in the penitential area (n=20) where confessions are held, and several signs are usually placed adjacent to the altars and chapels (n=26). The basilica’s main entrance has various signs (n=12) as in Figure 27. Interestingly, quite a number of signs are found outside the basilica either on the church parvis and in the piazza/square (n=21). Only four signs were captured outside the basilica in the bookshop/souvenir shop and the post office (Figure 28).

Though, as noted earlier, St Peter’s basilica has many altars and chapels, one needs to point out that some of them did not include information on the artefacts, while at other times it was not possible to capture these signs since some of these places were either cordoned off for restoration works, or else masses were being held. Noteworthy is the fact that most of the signs near these altars/chapels are bilingual in Italian and English with a horizontal alignment.

**Table 5:** Location of signs in St Peter’s basilica

	Frequency	Percent
PENITENTIAL AREA	20	23.5
ALTARS AND CHAPELS	26	30.5
MAIN ENTRANCE	12	14.1
PIAZZA/ PARVIS/PORTICO	21	24.7
SACRISTY	2	2.4
BOOKSHOP / SOUVENIR OUTLETS	2	2.4
POST OFFICE	2	2.4
Total	85	100.0



**Figure 27:** Multilingual exit sign inside basilica



**Figure 28:** Multilingual Post Office sign outside basilica

#### Research Question 4: What material is used to display these signs?

Table 6 shows that the majority of the signs are inside a wooden frame. This evidences permanence and also gives St Peter's an aura of seriousness and professionalism. As noted in an earlier section, framed notices are affixed to the sides of the confessionals. Only one handwritten paper with a note in Portuguese is included in the corpus. The temporality of the situation is present in this sign (Figure 29), which is attached to the original framed sign with the name of the priest and his linguistic repertoire in Portuguese, Italian and English. Figure 29 shows the add-on notice in writing stating that: '*This week there will be no confessions in Portuguese because I am taking an internal forum course*'. Strikingly different from this handwritten note is another sign outside the *Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament* where the main notice is in an elaborate wooden frame, while hanging on hooks are two other signs – one displaying three icons – barring visitors from taking photos, using their mobile phone or taking videos – and an even lower sign warns visitors not to enter the chapel unless they intend to pray in both European and non-European languages (Figure 30). Noteworthy is the fact that this is the only sign inside the basilica which includes three non-European languages. As shown earlier in the confessional area, one of the languages on the sign informing visitors that they may only enter to confess is also in Chinese.

Of the 85 signs, some are laminated posters (n=8), or else protected by glass (n=8). Interesting is the inclusion of large digital screens in St Peter's square which relay information in several languages.

Table 5: Material of signs

	Frequency	Percent
PRINTED INSIDE FRAME	49	57.6
WRITTEN	1	1.2
INSCRIBED IN STONE	1	1.2
METAL	6	7.1
DIGITAL SCREEN	12	14.1
LAMINATED POSTER	8	9.4
COVERED BY PERSPEX/ GLASS	8	9.4
Total	85	100.0

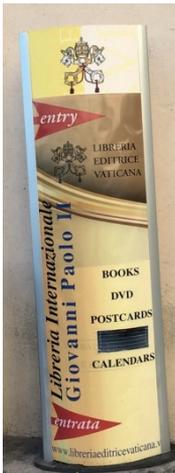


**Figure 29:** Hand-written note on confessional



**Figure 30:** Three inter-connected signs outside Chapel of Blessed Sacrament

Laminated posters (n=8) are found both at the doorstep of the bookshop and at the entrance to the basilica. Most of these posters are also encased in a metal frame (Figure 31) and in some others they are inside a metal frame with a metal stand (Figure 32). Included in the latter sign is the basilica's floor plan and the use of icons, a universally understandable language, prohibiting visitors from: (i) wearing hats; (ii) using camera tripods; (iii) taking strollers inside; (iv) being accompanied by dogs; (v) being scantily dressed; (vi) using their mobile; (vii) smoking. The third part of this sign includes the schedule of daily and weekly masses.



**Figure 31:** Bookshop Framed Poster

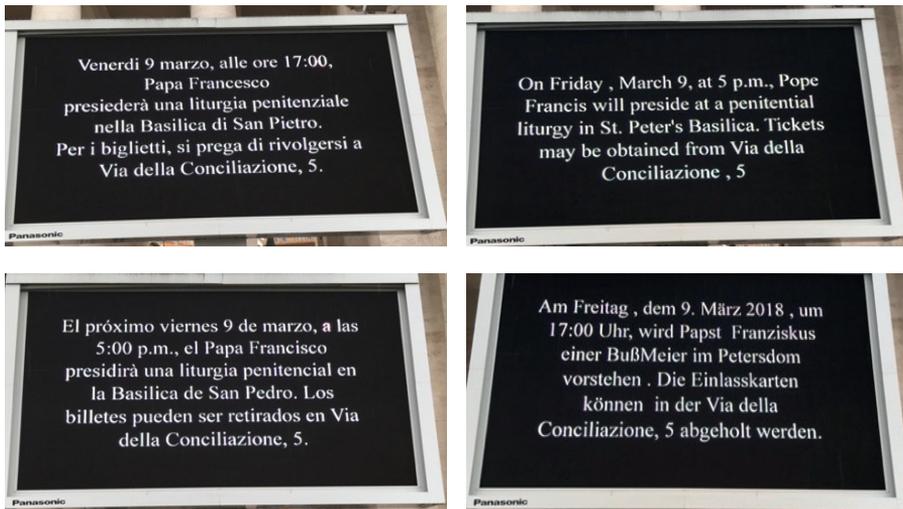


**Figure 32:** Metal framed poster on a stand

Within the area of St Peter's square and the parvis one notes a greater variety of material used in the signs. Of particular note is the use of digital screens which act as notification boards. Vatican officials use these screens to relay information regarding for example, the closure of the basilica for visitors so that preparations may be made for special events such as for example, a penitential service held by the pope, and where one may go to obtain a ticket to enter the basilica during this penitential liturgy.

In Figure 33 the same message is relayed in six European languages in the following order: Italian (1<sup>st</sup>), English (2<sup>nd</sup>), Spanish (3<sup>rd</sup>), German (4<sup>th</sup>), French (5<sup>th</sup>) and Polish (6<sup>th</sup>). Italian appears first and is followed by English. It is clearly evident that Vatican officials who transmit these messages on these digital screens are all too aware of the global status that English has acquired. It is the language of communication and this fact is reinforced in the other signs inside the basilica. However, some other languages which feature in a number of other signs also reveal that successive popes have probably promoted the visibility of their native languages. A case in point are three languages: Polish, German and Spanish, the native languages of John Paul II, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI and the present pontiff Francis.

Noteworthy is the fact that the languages in the digital screens which feature Spanish (3<sup>rd</sup>) and German (4<sup>th</sup>), the two native languages of Pope Francis and Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI respectively, appear before French (5<sup>th</sup>) the erstwhile international language. Even after more than sixteen years since the death of Pope John Paul II, his presence is still felt through the use of his native language which is included, albeit in final position (6<sup>th</sup>) among the other European languages.





**Figure 33:** Digital screen notices in 6 languages in St Peter's Square in order of appearance: First line: 1<sup>st</sup> Italian; 2<sup>nd</sup> English; 3<sup>rd</sup> Spanish; Second line: 4<sup>th</sup> German; 5<sup>th</sup> French and 6<sup>th</sup> Polish

## Conclusion

Although Roman Catholicism dominates all the aspects of history and of contemporary life in Rome, one of the most important capitals of Europe, its import and influence extend well beyond the minute precincts of the mini-state in which St Peter's basilica is sited. It is spread around the world as shown by Jurczak (2018), who ranks the top ten Roman Catholic countries by population as follows: 1. Brazil (Spanish); 2. Mexico (Portuguese); 3. Philippines (English, 2<sup>nd</sup> official language); 4. USA (English); 5. Italy (Italian); 6. France (French); 7. Columbia (Spanish); 8. Poland (Polish); 9. Spain (Spanish) and 10. Democratic Republic of Congo (French).

The corpus in this research records an impressive 16 languages in St Peter's LL, including all six languages spoken in the top ten most-densely Roman Catholic countries. Clearly, several of the multilingual signs in St Peter's take into account the languages spoken by these populations. For example, of the six languages which are displayed on the digital screens (Figure 33) in St Peter's square, German is the only outsider, since Germany, Austria and Switzerland are not included among the top ten Roman Catholic countries. Yet, its inclusion is a deliberate one. It is not only Emeritus Pope Benedict's native language, but German is also ranked 12<sup>th</sup> position among the top twenty most-spoken languages listed by *Ethnologue 200*. Poland is ranked 8<sup>th</sup> among the most populous Roman Catholic countries and Polish is also visible in some signs. However, its inclusion is also symbolic. It is a tribute to Pope John Paul II who passed away in 2005 and who is still spiritually present in St Peter's, especially after having been proclaimed a saint in 2014. Since then, thousands of Polish nationals attend daily masses in Polish in the Chapel of St Sebastian where he is buried.

Nevertheless, of all the languages present in the linguistic landscape of St Peter's, striking is the visibility of English in practically all the bilingual and multilingual signs and in particular, its preferred position after Italian in

most of these signs. From a historical European-based religious perspective, the importance given to English appears as somewhat incongruous in view of England's departure from Catholicism in the sixteenth century. But nowadays, English is not just the language of the English, but it is a global language and the lingua franca of many nations. Its position as the first language among the top twenty most-spoken languages in the world, is unparalleled (Ethnologue 200). It has the highest number of native speakers and more importantly are the ever-increasing numbers of ESL or EFL learners.

The findings clearly reveal that the sign writers in St Peter's are all too cognizant of the fortunes of English and though Latin, for centuries the official language of the Roman Catholic Church and which is forever etched in the words in the basilica's friezes, tribunes and monuments, the more recent signs show a definite language shift. It is now English that is the gateway to international communication with both pilgrims and visitors. This is clearly in line with Barni and Vedovelli (2012: 31) who note that the presence of English in street and shop signs in Rome's LL "is perceived as a non-foreign language." As such, its presence is not injurious to Italian – the language of the host country. Not only should we attribute the inclusion of Italian as a political geo-linguistically astute strategy to accommodate Italian pilgrims, but the sign writers who are of course Vatican officials, clearly implement the changes brought about by Vatican Council II which gave prominence to the vernacular languages in the churches around the world.

The living languages in St Peter's public signage reflect diverse cultures. From a sociolinguistic perspective it is also pertinent to highlight the inclusion of non-European languages, especially Chinese, a language which is visible in Rome's LL because of the sizable Chinese community present (Barni and Vedovelli 2012). However, its inclusion could also be viewed symbolically: The Catholic Church singles out Chinese Christians, although relatively small in number, by showing them that they are her important and unforgotten members. The systematic and ever-increasing persecutions of Christians by China (Enos and So 2021), cause grave concern to the Roman Catholic church.

The inclusion of *any* language in this basilica, the epicentre of Roman Catholicism and one that is steeped in two millennia of history and Christian beliefs, gives its speakers visibility, identity and a sense of pride. Of all the locations where this is deeply felt and in evidence, the confessional area, with its many signs displaying priests' linguistic repertoires, is of paramount importance. Despite its minuscule population, Maltese or *Malti*, is the only Semitic language St Peter's LL. In this regard it is apt to recall Spolsky and Cooper (1991), who provide rules for the choice of the languages present in

the signs in Jerusalem, but which can be generalised to other contexts, in our case to St Peter's. They contend that:

- (i) the language on the sign evidences the sign writer's proficiency in the language;
- (ii) the language used in signs assumes that the intended readers know the language and
- (iii) the languages on signs are written in the sign writer's own language or in the language/s with which they wish to be identified (Spolsky and Cooper 1991: 81-84).

Undoubtedly, the Vatican has several international officials who work in the Roman Curia, for whom translating these signs from Italian as the relay language, into their native language is not difficult (Rule 1). That is why *Malti* (Maltese) is one of the languages on the signs and the language of one of the confessors. If no priest knew Maltese then this language would not have been included. However, of greater relevance is Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) Rule 2 which states that the languages used in the signs reflect the intended readers of signs. Had there not been a need to translate these signs into many languages, this would not have happened. But the need was felt since St Peter's is visited by people from all corners of the globe. Still, Vatican officials are selective in their choice of languages, and they tend to respect the larger populations of Roman Catholic pilgrims. Finally, Rule 3 as outlined by Spolsky and Cooper (1991) is very important in this study. The frequent use of English in the signs at St Peter's symbolically shows that the Roman Catholic Church wishes to be identified with the massive global community of speakers of English. The bilingual and multilingual signs, most of which include English, are a clear indication that the sign writers do not wish to be seen as conservative, but rather as forward-looking and in-keeping with the times. Even the material used on most of the signs shows permanence. Signs in English are there to stay because English is such an important language that is not set to disappear in the near nor distant future.

The wide array of 16 languages captured in the LL reflects the universality of the Catholic Church: the use of minority languages reinforces the identity of smaller communities in St Peter's LL. St Peter's basilica incorporates everyone – Christians and non-Christians – just like the welcoming St Peter's square with Bernini's two semi-circles of columns, symbolically representing the arms of Jesus Christ ready to embrace the world (Korn 2000). Anyone may visit St Peter's basilica irrespective of race, colour and religion. St Peter's Basilica unites and does not divide: the languages in its signs underpin this warm welcome.

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