This study is about discourses of bilingualism in Bolzano-Bozen, Italy, and what they reveal about language, place, identity and hegemony. It is a linguistic ethnography, in which a close interrogation of the semiotic landscape has proved essential.

Here, my aim is to demonstrate how nexus analysis and geosemiotics have been employed to unravel how and why place names, their public placement, and Fascist-era monuments maintained a constant presence (along with bilingual education) under broader discourses on bilingualism, during a five year research period.

Nexus analysis focuses on social action and geosemiotics pays meticulous attention to fundamental aspects of signs, including the visual and place semiotics and how social actors interact with them. Further, both nexus analysis and geosemiotics insist on a deep ethnographic understanding of context, which has led to an investigation of the historical past, and how this is represented, understood and indexed in the present by those who align (or not) to ideologies of language and nation. In the complex multilingual context of this study, this combined approach reveals how such ideologies are mobilized to contest ownership of geographic place and the right to make social space.

A key strength of both approaches is the flexibility in applying instruments for data collection and analysis. They have also allowed – obliged even – the tracing of discourses across disparate discursive genres, seemingly displaced by time and space, to reveal the interrelationships between language and other social semiotic data in discourses on bilingualism in Bolzano-Bozen. In this instance, data is from a number of sources including spoken interaction, newspapers, historical texts, law-making discourse, public signs and monuments.

In all I demonstrate that combined, as in this linguistic ethnography, these approaches become powerful tools for capturing and analysing discourse itineraries (or chains) which would escape the bounds of the traditionally linguistic.

Keywords: geosemiotics, Nexus analysis.