National flags and language learning: representing German in virtual schoolscapes

Akra CHOWCHONG
Chulalongkorn University
Department of Western Languages
254 Pathumwan, Bangkok, Thailand
akra.c@chula.ac.th
DOI: 0000-0002-7666-6648

Die vorliegende Studie untersucht die Verwendung von nationalen Symbolen, insbesondere der Farben Schwarz-Rot-Gold, auf Facebook-Seiten thailändischer Sprachlehrender, die Deutsch als Fremdsprache unterrichten. Basierend auf einer Analyse von 1.879 Beiträgen und ethnografischen Interviews mit fünf Produzierenden wird gezeigt, wie semiotische Elemente eingesetzt werden, um die deutsche Standardsprache zu repräsentieren. Statistisch gesehen nutzen die meisten Beiträge Symbole, die mit Deutschland assoziiert sind, während Elemente, die auf Österreich oder die Schweiz verweisen, deutlich seltener vorkommen. Ethnografisch offenbaren die Interviews, dass Produzierende die deutsche Standardsprache oft mit Deutschland und dessen Flagge in Verbindung bringen, obwohl ein Produzent im Korpus nur in der Schweiz gelebt hat. Die Ergebnisse weisen auf einen wechselseitigen Einfluss zwischen semiotischen Entscheidungen und der Wahrnehmung von Sprache und Kultur hin. Abschließend wird diskutiert, wie diese Erkenntnisse zur Förderung eines kritischen Bewusstseins über Sprachideologien und kulturelle Vielfalt im Sprachunterricht genutzt werden können.

Stichwörter:
Schoolscape, virtuelle Sprachlandschaft, nationale Symbole, Deutschunterricht, Indexikalität, digitale Sprachbildung, Sprachideologie.

Keywords:
schoolscape, virtual linguistic landscape, national symbols, German language teaching, indexicality, digital language education, language ideology.

1. Introduction

How can a language be represented without explicitly naming it? The answer is often evident in everyday life. Brochures at tourist attractions and restaurant menus frequently feature national flags as visual markers (Dumitrica 2019), conveying linguistic information that is intuitively understood. While this may appear straightforward, a closer examination reveals a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon. First, it underscores the societal perception of nation and language as inseparable entities, where the national flag serves as an indexical symbol of the national language. Second, this practice implies an underlying assumption that one nation is typically associated with a single national language. These observations, combined with their sociolinguistic implications, prompt a deeper question: do these patterns also manifest in the domain of language teaching and learning, and if so, in what ways?

To investigate the use of national flags as symbols for languages, this study moved beyond traditional educational spaces to focus on the educational-

commercial domain. This domain, which includes private language schools, online learning platforms and language-learning applications, offers a rich context for exploration. Unlike formal educational settings, the educational-commercial space is marked by the commodification of language instruction. In this context, flags and other national symbols often serve as branding tools, leveraging their indexical meanings to enhance the appeal and marketability of language-learning products. This abundance of online material provides researchers with a wider array of examples and contexts for examining how national symbols are employed to represent languages and shape consumer perceptions.

This study focused on the virtual landscape of German language teaching and learning, where educational and commercial objectives converge. Using German language teaching as a case study, the analysis aimed to examine how national symbols are employed within this context to represent linguistic and cultural identities. The German language served as a particularly illustrative case because it is not only closely tied to Germany's national identity but is also an official or widely spoken language in other countries, including Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and regions such as Belgium, South Tyrol and Luxembourg (Kellermeier-Rehbein 2022). This geographical and cultural diversity challenges the simplistic association of a single language with a single national symbol, offering a rich context for exploring the way language is represented and marketed.

In order to focus on the perspective of a single society – one that is geographically and culturally distant from the German-speaking context – only Thai content creators were included in the corpus. This approach highlights how German language teaching and national symbols are perceived, adapted and marketed within a unique sociocultural environment. The study adopted both emic and etic perspectives (Szabó 2015) to provide a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon. The data collection was therefore complemented by ethnographic interviews with some of the content creators, offering insights into the motivations and strategies behind their use of national symbols in promoting language instruction.

2. Theoretical framework

This research positions itself at the intersection of two subfields within linguistic landscape studies: schoolscape and virtual linguistic landscape (VLL).

The concept of schoolscape, as developed by Brown (2005, 2012) and further explored by Szabó (2015), examines the linguistic landscape within school environments. It focuses on how the management of physical spaces and material artefacts in schools reflects, represents and (re)produces identities and ideologies. Brown (2012: 282) defines schoolscape as "the school-based environment where place and text, both written (graphic) and oral, constitute,

reproduce and transform language ideologies". This includes not only physical spaces such as entryways, hallways and classrooms but also the educational materials, such as textbooks and posters, used within these environments.

Although schoolscape is primarily understood as referring to physical spaces in the real world, Brown (2005) also examined virtual spaces, specifically the school website, as part of the linguistic landscape. Apart from the observation of the schoolscape, the studies of Brown and Szabó mentioned here also include ethnographic data gathered by interviewing school staff, thus allowing for a more nuanced and insightful understanding of how linguistic and cultural symbols operate within schoolscapes. This mixed method is referred to in the work of Szabó (2015) as emic and etic perspectives. Both Brown and Szabó identified the frequent use of national symbols, particularly flags, to represent languages and cultures. These symbols serve to reinforce national identities and create spaces of inclusion for "insiders" while subtly excluding "outsiders". Similar conclusions are also drawn in recent works, such as by Wagner (2021), who examined sociocultural and political symbols in schools in Poland, Austria and Germany, highlighting their role in constructing and communicating ideologies.

The application of linguistic landscape studies to digital contexts is termed virtual linguistic landscape (VLL) by Ivković & Lotherington (2009). They conceptualise VLL as an extension of traditional linguistic landscape studies into cyberspace, emphasising how language is represented multimodally through text, visuals and symbols online. This framework examines the interplay between language use, cultural identity and linguistic hierarchies in digital environments. For example, websites, social media platforms and other digital media can act as sites where language ideologies are constructed, maintained or challenged. While VLL studies often emphasise multilingual practices in digital contexts (e.g. Keles et al. 2019; McMonagle 2023), they share common ground with schoolscape studies in exploring the ideological implications of semiotic practices.

By using the term *virtual schoolscape*, the current study bridges these two frameworks by adopting an ideological-analytical approach from schoolscape studies and applying it to virtual spaces as the site of analysis. This blended theoretical lens allowed for a nuanced analysis of the digital aspects of linguistic landscapes, positioning virtual spaces as pivotal sites for examining the way language ideologies are constructed, manifested and evolve in the digital age, particularly within the context of language teaching and learning.

This research, therefore, examined the use of national symbols, particularly flags, on Facebook pages dedicated to teaching German as a foreign language. Like the schoolscape, these virtual spaces are seen as ideological environments where symbols convey messages about language, culture and identity. By combining the theoretical insights of schoolscape and VLL, this

study investigated the way semiotic elements in virtual spaces are employed to construct identities, signal inclusion or exclusion and perpetuate language ideologies. For example, just as a national flag in a school hallway might represent a language or culture, its digital counterpart on a webpage or social media post similarly signifies linguistic and cultural associations while reflecting certain ideologies.

3. Data collection and methodology

This study collected data from Facebook pages dedicated to teaching German as a foreign language, where the page owners or instructors are Thai nationals. Facebook pages were chosen as the sample for this study owing to the significant number of pages teaching German in Thai, as well as the large follower base of these pages. This indicates a preference among Thai learners to use Facebook for German language teaching and learning purposes.

The metadata for the initial corpus was retrieved using the Facepager software (Jünger & Keyling 2019), which allows users to collect publicly available data from social media platforms through API queries. In May 2023, the researcher used Thai keywords such as "ภาษาเยอรมัน" (*German language*) and "เรียนเยอรมัน" (*learn German*) to extract a list of approximately 1000 Facebook pages and their corresponding URLs. The extraction was completed within minutes, as Facepager automates the retrieval of page-level metadata from the Facebook server. The next step involved selecting a subset of pages based on specific criteria. The primary criteria included that the content creators or instructors must be the sole proprietors of the pages and not representatives or affiliates of international organisations or institutions, such as the Goethe-Institut or the Thai-German Cultural Foundation. In addition, the majority of the content shared on these pages had to be created by the page owners themselves, rather than sourced from external platforms. Finally, the top 10 pages with the highest number of followers that met these criteria were selected for the study, as summarised in Table 1.[1]

Page title	Followers	URL
EINS by DAO	31,442	https://www.facebook.com/303940562980549
Hallo Toto – เรียนเยอรมันกับครูโตโต้ (Hallo Toto – Learn German with Teacher Toto)	29,406	https://www.facebook.com/109444715175148
Baanpasa-เรียนรู้ภาษาเยอรมัน (House of Language – Learn German)	25,422	https://www.facebook.com/371874476226808

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[1]   For pages with names only in Thai, the English translation is provided in brackets. Page names originally in English or German remain unchanged.

เรียนเยอรมันกับนพพล *(Learn German with Noppon)*	23,137	https://www.facebook.com/369357453153552
เริ่มต้นเยอรมันกับ Mausmoin *(Start Learning German with Mausmoin)*	21,553	https://www.facebook.com/808660285864276
Germany and Napa	19,733	https://www.facebook.com/486451905177954
ครูเบิร์ด เยอรมัน ฟันส์ดี *(Teacher Burt Fun German)*	18,753	https://www.facebook.com/274146330172004
Born to Go German	18,299	https://www.facebook.com/113743450470446
ครูปอนด์ สอนเยอร *(Teacher Pond Teaches German)*	18,292	https://www.facebook.com/100106475064307
เยอรมัน นอกรอบ *(German Outside the Classroom)*	16,747	https://www.facebook.com/1739758842956192

Table 1: Facebook pages teaching German as a foreign language in the data corpus (as of 31 May 2023)

Data collection from the 10 selected pages included recording profile and cover photos published since the inception of the pages, as well as all content or posts published during 2022. The collected posts covered various formats, including text, images, infographics and videos. The types of content ranged from German language lessons to announcements and promotions, such as calls for new student registrations, as well as travel blogs or behind-the-scenes preparations for teaching materials in blog and vlog formats. The dataset consisted of 36 profile photos, 59 cover photos (a total of 95 images) and 1879 posts from 2022 (see Table 2). In addition, the collected data underwent a manual content analysis, where recurring elements were identified and categorised to uncover patterns and themes within the dataset.

Page title	Cover photos	Profile photos	Posts
EINS by DAO	12	4	325
Hallo Toto- เรียนเยอรมันกับครูโตโต้ *(Hallo Toto- Learn German with Teacher Toto)*	1	3	123
Baanpasa-เรียนรู้ภาษาเยอรมัน *(House of Language-Learn German)*	22	8	10
เรียนเยอรมันกับนพพล *(Learn German with Noppon)*	4	3	268
เริ่มต้นเยอรมันกับ Mausmoin *(Start Learning German with Mausmoin)*	8	7	17
Germany and Napa	1	2	329

ครูเบิร์ด เยอรมัน ฟันส์ดี (Teacher Burt Fun German)	5	2	375
Born to Go German	2	3	323
ครูปอนด์ สอนเยอร (Teacher Pond Teaches German)	3	1	94
เยอรมัน นอกรอบ (German Outside the Classroom)	1	3	15

Table 2: Number of cover photos, profile photos and posts by each of the ten selected pages

Adopting an etic perspective, the first stage of this study encompassed data collection and an initial interpretation of the findings. This phase primarily focused on identifying prominent semiotic elements or distinct phenomena present within the data. The second stage made use of an emic perspective, which involved conducting interviews with the content creators of *House of Language*, *Germany and Napa*, *Teacher Burt Fun German*, *Teacher Pond Teaches German* and *German Outside the Classroom*. These interviews aimed to provide a more accurate interpretation of the data and offer additional insights that might otherwise have been overlooked by the researcher. The interviews with the five content creators were conducted online. In compliance with data protection and privacy regulations, the sessions were not audio- or video-recorded. Instead, detailed notes were taken during the interviews, with the screen shared in real time to enable participants to review, correct or withdraw any content they did not wish to have included. This method ensured transparency and participant agency throughout the process. Rather than using specialised software, the interview data were manually coded and thematically interpreted by the researcher. This approach allowed for a close, context-sensitive engagement with the material and was well suited to the scale and exploratory nature of the study.

4. Findings

4.1 The profile and cover photos

The analysis of profile and cover photos from the selected Facebook pages revealed distinct approaches to representing their identity and association with the German language. Profile photos were categorised into two main groups: those featuring the content creators or page owners and those displaying logos of the pages or institutions. Examples of the former include individual portraits, such as those on the pages *Germany and Napa* and *Teacher Burt Fun German*. One page also features a photograph of its creator posing with his successful student. These images not only introduce the creators but can be used to incorporate symbolic elements, such as traditional Bavarian attire (Lederhosen) and landscapes (the lavender field in Bavaria), to reinforce cultural ties to

German-speaking countries, as exemplified by the profile photo of the page *Born to Go German* shown in Figure 1.

Germany and Napa   *Teacher Burt Fun German*   *Born to Go German*

Figure 1: Profile photos featuring the creators

Logos, on the other hand, were often designed to reference the page name or branding, sometimes including playful elements like cartoon characters or semantic references. For instance, the page *EINS by Dao* uses the number one (*eins* in German), while *Mausmoin* incorporates a mouse symbolising the word *Maus* (a German word for *mouse*). Despite stylistic diversity, logos frequently utilised the tricolor of the German flag – black, red and gold – integrated into designs through stripes, icons or other elements, as shown in all six logos in Figure 2.

EINS by Dao   House of Language-Learn German   Start Learning German with Mausmoin

Teacher Pond Teaches German   Learn German with Noppon   German Outside the Classroom

Figure 2: Profile photos featuring page logo

Cover photos offer greater flexibility in presentation due to their larger format and are used to provide additional information or emphasise the page's identity. For instance, some pages include course offerings, teaching levels and contact information, as seen in *Mausmoin* and *EINS by Dao*, while others showcase promotional content, such as slogans or upcoming activities. Notably, many cover photos also rely on visual and cultural symbols associated with Germany, such as the German flag and famous landmarks like the Neuschwanstein Castle (Figure 3).

EINS by DAO   Start Learning German with Mausmoin

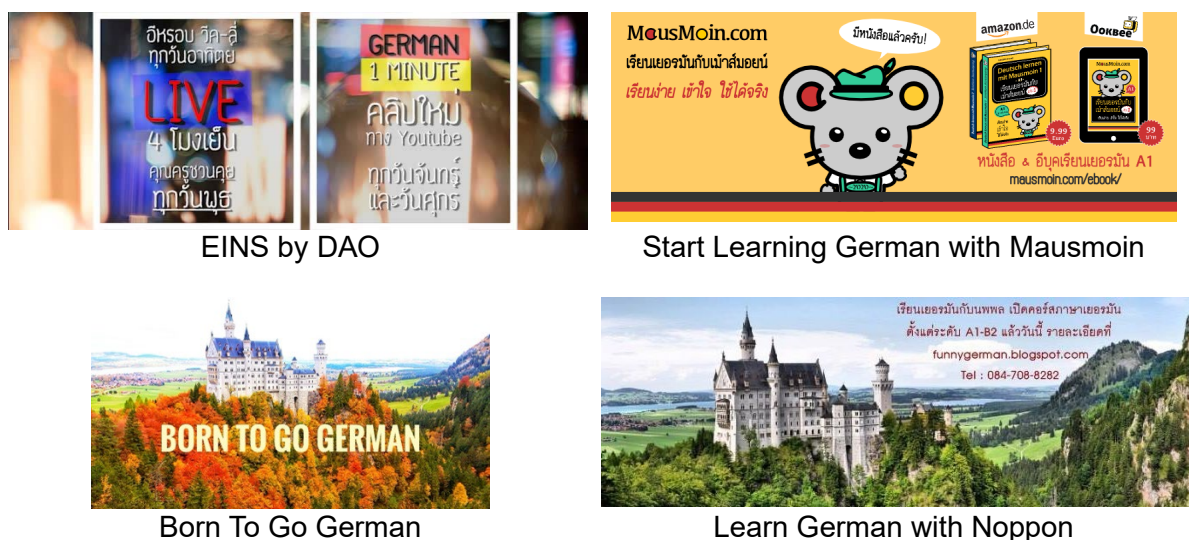Born To Go German   Learn German with Noppon

Figure 3: Cover photos featuring elements indexing Germany

Beyond promoting courses, some cover photos highlight the instructors' qualifications and achievements, adding credibility to the pages. In Figure 4, for example, *Teacher Pond* displays his educational history and language test scores.

Figure 4: Cover photos featuring further information about the creator

Interestingly, abstract designs are also employed to indirectly signify the German language, such as a computer keyboard with a German flag on the enter key or typical classroom materials with the phrase "Sprechen Sie

Deutsch?" ("*Do you speak German?*") and a German flag (Figure 5). Across all examples, national symbols – primarily those of Germany – play a consistent role in associating the pages with the German language. However, elements referencing other nations are also identified. Owing to his personal affiliations, *Teacher Burt* also uses semiotic elements indexing Switzerland, where he has lived and worked for more than 30 years (see Section 3.3).

House of Language – Learn German

Teacher Burt Fun German
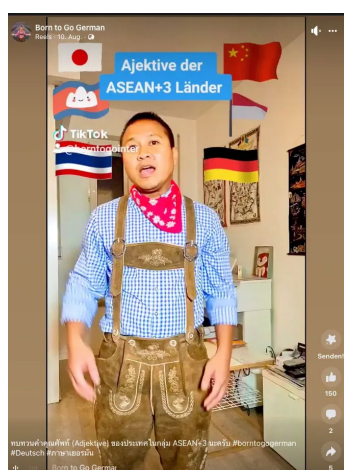
Teacher Burt Fun German

Figure 5: Abstract cover photos featuring national flags

In summary, while the presentation strategies vary – ranging from simple biographical highlights to promotional content – every page employs semiotic resources that link the creator's identity to German-speaking countries, particularly Germany. The use of the German flag's colors and symbols is ubiquitous, underscoring its effectiveness in representing the German language. Even pages created by individuals identifying with another German-speaking nation, such as Switzerland, often use German national symbols, suggesting their broader applicability in signifying the German language within the online educational space. By analogy, the virtual space resembles the entryway or hallway of a school, adorned with ornaments or garlands prominently displaying the colours of black, red and gold.

4.2 The posts

The analysis of 1879 posts revealed a wide variety of semiotic elements used to signify the German language. These included national flags, flag emojis, flag colours, landscapes, the geographical shape of the country and cultural artefacts or products. Such elements are linked to the three main countries in which German is an official language: Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Owing to the multimodal nature of social media, it is not surprising that many posts incorporated multiple semiotic elements within a single post. For example, a post from *Born to Go German* (Figure 6) features the instructor wearing traditional Bavarian attire, a map of Germany on the wall in the background and an edited German flag embedded in the video. Similarly, an infographic from *Learn German with Noppon* prominently displays the German flag and its colours to promote available courses. In contrast, semiotic elements referencing all three German-speaking countries rarely appeared in the corpus. One example is a video thumbnail from the page *Teacher Burt Fun German*, which incorporates emojis of the German, Austrian and Swiss flags. Interestingly, the page *Germany and Napa* stands out by not featuring any semiotic elements referencing German-speaking countries, such as flags, colours and emojis.
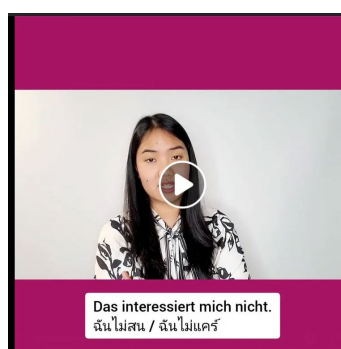

Born To Go German
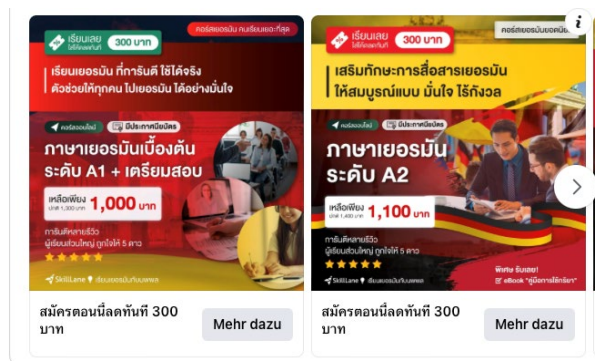
Learn German with Noppon

Teacher Burt Fun German

Germany and Napa

Figure 6: Facebook posts from the corpus

Statistical analysis showed that semiotic elements referencing Germany appeared in 1202 posts, with the most common being the tricolour (499 posts),

flag emojis (277 posts), the German flag itself (227 posts)[2] and images of German landscapes (156 posts). References to Austria and Switzerland were significantly less frequent, appearing in only 88 and 22 posts, respectively.

When examining the communicative purpose of posts, a notable correlation emerged between the presence of semiotic elements and the purpose of the communication: Of the 626 posts promoting courses or encouraging enrolment, 396 (63 %) included semiotic elements such as flags, colours and cultural symbols. In contrast, posts aiming to build relationships (e.g. holiday greetings) or provide entertainment (e.g. telling jokes) used elements indexing nations less frequently. Posts specifically designed for teaching German used these elements in only 360 of 980 posts (37 %), likely because the language itself is explicitly discussed within the teaching materials. In promotional posts, the use of semiotic elements served to establish a clear and immediate connection between the instructor and the German language, which explained the frequent incorporation of national symbols.

In summary, German language teaching pages on Facebook construct their virtual presence by using semiotic elements associated with German-speaking countries to indirectly signify the German language. This phenomenon underscores the way content creators view nation, language and national identity as inseparable. The use of national symbols, particularly the German flag and its colours, reflects the language ideology described by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 17) as "one language, one people". This ideology implies an intrinsic association between a nation and its singular national language. While such symbols may serve to reinforce the link between a nation and its national language in contexts where the language is taught within its native cultural and geographic environment, their use takes on additional layers of meaning in the context of foreign language teaching in non-native settings. In cases where the instructors' first language differs from the target language, these national elements may evoke perceptions of linguistic "nativeness" or proficiency equivalent to that of native speakers (Holliday 2006). This may leave the impression that learning the language through such instructors or institutions could lead to native-like proficiency or that the instructors possess a level of competence comparable to speakers from the associated nation. This interpretation suggests the need for further investigation, such as conducting research with the audience, to explore how the use of national symbols influences perceptions of language competence, authenticity and the effectiveness of foreign language instruction.

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[2]   In this study, "the tricolour" refers to the use of the black-red-gold colour scheme without displaying a full flag (e.g. as design elements, borders or icons). "Flag emojis" are the Unicode DE emoji version of the German flag used in post text or captions. "The German flag itself" refers to photographic or illustrated depictions of the complete national flag as a visual image within the post.

The next section will explore the reasons behind these semiotic choices, drawing on insights gathered from ethnographic interviews conducted with five of the content creators.

4.3 Insights

The ethnographic interviews provided valuable insights into the reasons behind the producers' choices of symbols and colours on the analysed Facebook pages.

A prominent finding is the widespread use of the black-red-gold colour scheme, which, as confirmed by all interviewed producers, clearly represents the German flag. Upon deeper examination, it became apparent that the language these producers teach, specifically Standard German, is closely associated with Germany. The creators intentionally use the German flag or its colours as indexical markers to represent the standardised variety of German spoken in that country. One key motivation for this choice is rooted in their expertise and the specific knowledge they offer. The creators of *House of Language* and *German Outside the Classroom* indicated that their aim was to represent Standard German by referencing Germany. While fully aware that German is also spoken in countries such as Switzerland and Austria, they deliberately avoided using symbols from these regions. This decision stemmed from the understanding that employing symbols associated with other German-speaking nations could imply expertise in regional varieties or dialects that they do not teach or possess significant knowledge about. At the same time, the interviews also confirmed that the creators intentionally focus on Standard German as spoken in Germany, as this aligns with the general audience's expectations and is perceived as more accessible and practically useful for learners. Moreover, the use of the colours of the German flag simplifies communication, as these elements alone are sufficient to signal that the page is dedicated to the German language without requiring additional semiotic clarification.

The experiences of creators associated with German-speaking countries outside of Germany offered another perspective. *Teacher Burt*, who lived in Switzerland for 35 years before returning to Thailand, acknowledged that using only the Swiss flag would appeal to a narrower audience, as most people associate the German language with Germany. Thus, his early cover photos prominently featured the German flag and its tricolour scheme. However, in more recent content, *Teacher Burt* has begun to include symbols of other German-speaking countries, such as the flags of Switzerland and Austria. He explained that this strategy aims to attract Thai audiences living in these countries and highlight the broader applicability of the German language, emphasising that it is also spoken and used in official, educational and everyday contexts in Austria, Switzerland and other parts of Europe. Additionally, the frequent use of the Swiss flag reflects his personal connection to Switzerland

and his desire to emphasise his roots, distinguishing himself from being solely associated with Germany.

Despite the prevalence of the black-red-gold colour scheme, some producers expressed reservations about its overuse. The creator of the page *Germany and Napa* intentionally avoided using national flags or their colours. She explained that incorporating such symbols would tie her content to a specific country, which she found limiting. For her, language and culture transcend national borders, particularly in the case of German, which is spoken in neighboring countries as well. She also perceived the use of flags as overly nationalistic and misaligned with contemporary globalisation trends, where national boundaries and identities are becoming increasingly fluid. For *Napa*, inclusive content focused solely on teaching the language without relying on sociocultural symbols. The creator of *Teacher Pond Teaches German* also noted that while these colours featured on his page logo, he avoided excessive use of them in his infographics. He perceived the colour scheme as overused in the context of German language teaching and learning, and believed it could appear overly commercialised. He explained that the tricolour was acceptable for content specifically related to German culture, such as food, but he preferred to minimise its use to avoid a "hard sell" aesthetic.

The ethnographic data described highlight the rationale behind the use of the black-red-gold of the German tricolour. On one hand, it is strongly associated with Germany and its Standard German variety, which the creators were most familiar with and equipped to teach. The flag's colours serve as powerful indexical symbols, instantly signalling that the content relates to the German language, as is evident in the case of *Teacher Burt*. Despite his Swiss roots, he initially prioritised the use of the German flag and its tricolour scheme on his page. This choice reflects a commonly shared perception among the interviewed creators that the Thai audience overwhelmingly associates the German language with Germany, necessitating the use of German symbols to align with societal expectations.

On the other hand, some creators, such as *Napa*, adopted a non-patriotic approach, arguing that teaching a language does not necessitate the use of national symbols. This perspective reflects a more inclusive view of language and culture that transcends national boundaries. *Teacher Pond* likewise demonstrated a notable level of awareness by consciously resisting dominant visual conventions. Despite operating within a commercial environment, he limited the use of the German colour scheme to avoid what he perceived as an over-commercialised aesthetic. His approach highlights the way content producers actively negotiate the tension between branding, cultural representation and audience expectations within digital language education spaces. These differing approaches underscore the diverse ways in which

creators navigate the interplay between linguistic representation, national identity and audience expectations in the digital space.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings from both the statistical and ethnographic analyses highlight the way semiotic elements, particularly the German flag and its associated colours, are used to represent the German language on Facebook pages created by Thai producers. Statistically, the black-red-gold colour scheme appeared in 499 out of 1879 posts, making it the most frequently used semiotic element, followed by flag emojis, images of the flag and German landscapes. Symbols associated with Austria and Switzerland were used far less frequently, appearing in only 88 and 22 posts, respectively. Ethnographically, producers predominantly linked Standard German with Germany, employing these symbols as indexical markers. However, two of the five interviewed producers adopted inclusive strategies, choosing either to limit or completely avoid national symbols in order to emphasise the transnational character of the German language.

These findings illustrate how national symbols, as semiotic elements, are used to represent the German language by fostering cultural connections and aligning with societal expectations while supporting the creators' individual branding strategies. On one hand, these elements serve as functional representations, as exemplified by the use of the black-red-gold tricolour to effectively signal Standard German without requiring extensive explanation. On the other hand, they can be used or avoided in order to reflect nuanced identities and pedagogical goals, as seen in *Teacher Burt'*s integration of Swiss elements and *Teacher Pond'*s selective use of the German colour scheme to prevent over-commercialisation. This dual role underscores the adaptability of national symbols in conveying linguistic connotations and supporting the diverse objectives of content creators.

It is important to note that this study focused on a selected subset of Facebook pages that met specific inclusion criteria, thereby excluding a portion of the initially extracted data. However, a cursory review of the broader dataset did not suggest fundamentally different patterns regarding the use of national symbols. Nonetheless, the possibility that additional trends exist beyond the analysed subset cannot be entirely ruled out.

How can these findings contribute to the field of language learning and teaching? One practical application is for instructors to incorporate real-world examples of flag usage into their teaching materials. The daily observation of national flags being used to represent languages offers an opportunity for educators to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in such practices. While a national flag can serve as a convenient representation of a language, it also signifies the country and its associated culture. This dual function provides a valuable opportunity to foster (inter)cultural competence by helping learners

understand how language, culture and national identity are interconnected. Moreover, such symbolic choices are not limited to flags. The frequent appearance of stereotypical imagery – such as Neuschwanstein Castle or traditional Bavarian attire like Lederhosen – may also reinforce narrow and idealised representations of Germany. These visuals, while culturally recognisable, risk presenting a limited view of what "German culture" entails. Addressing these choices in the classroom can prompt discussions about cultural complexity and the diversity of German-speaking regions.

Whether or not the interviewed creators were fully aware of the symbolic implications of their choices, their use or avoidance of national symbols offers educators and researchers a valuable opportunity to critically examine the meanings such symbols convey in language education. While the use of flags in international contexts such as sporting events typically serves to represent nations in a straightforward and uncontroversial way, their role in language learning is more complex, raising questions about linguistic identity, ownership and pedagogical positioning. These visual choices can also open up important discussions about language ideologies and the sociopolitical dimensions of representation. Although using a national flag or its colours may be a convenient and widely recognised way to signify a language, it inherently simplifies complex sociolinguistic realities. As Irvine & Gal (2000) point out, such practices can result in the "erasure" of certain elements, meaning that the diversity of dialects, regional varieties and multilingual realities within a nation are often overlooked. By engaging students in a critical dialogue about these oversimplifications, educators can challenge monolithic perceptions of language and encourage a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. This approach not only enhances linguistic knowledge but also equips learners with the critical tools needed to navigate and question language ideologies in a globalised world.

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