

**A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF STREET ART AND GRAFFITI IN THE
STREETS OF PORTO**

**UM ESTUDO LINGUÍSTICO DA ARTE DE RUA E DO GRAFFITI NAS
RUAS DO PORTO**

Laura Prikule, *MFA*¹

Abstract

This article narrates my experience of studying Portuguese via Street Art and Graffiti in the urban settings of Porto city and Greater Porto Area. It examines the linguistic aspects of the city scape, and also describes the research process I carried out during my stay in the north of Portugal, explaining the terms used in different contexts, the research methods used and the conclusions I arrived to. The article also describes the output produced - the *Portoscript* Game - aimed at providing a subjective experience, while meandering through the hilly streets and establishing personal routes with the help of a set of flash cards. Globally, the article views the urban space as an experimental platform for self-discovery and a mirror of collective consciousness, using cognitive theory and semiotics to decipher the ideas. It also touches upon the typology of the words and categories of the found text, discussing the benefits and risks of the methods chosen, as they lead to a less traditional scientific output.

Keywords: Graffiti, street art; urban art; linguistic city scape; collective consciousness; experimental research, anarchist vocabulary

¹ Professional Master's Study Programme *Written Translation* at University of Latvia (UL), Faculty of Humanities.

Resumo

Este artigo relata a minha experiência de estudo da língua portuguesa através da Street Art e do Graffiti no contexto urbano da cidade do Porto e do Grande Porto. O artigo analisa os aspetos linguísticos da paisagem urbana e descreve o processo de investigação que realizei durante a minha estadia no norte de Portugal, explicando os termos utilizados em diferentes contextos, os métodos de investigação utilizados e as conclusões a que cheguei. O artigo descreve ainda o output produzido - o Jogo Portoscript - com o objetivo de proporcionar uma experiência subjetiva, ao deambular pelas ruas acidentadas e estabelecer percursos pessoais com a ajuda de um conjunto de flash cards. Globalmente, o artigo encara o espaço urbano como uma plataforma experimental de auto-descoberta e um espelho da consciência coletiva, recorrendo à teoria cognitiva e à semiótica para decifrar as ideias, abordando ainda a tipologia das palavras e as categorias do texto encontrado, discutindo as vantagens e os riscos dos métodos escolhidos, uma vez que conduzem a um resultado científico menos tradicional.

Palavras-chave: Graffiti, arte de rua; arte urbana; paisagem urbana linguística; consciência coletiva; investigação experimental, vocabulário anarquista

Introduction

Can you read a city as a book? Is it possible to learn a language and a culture just by reading the text written in the streets, or are other methods more efficient? Can you understand the global trends by delving into local processes? These questions were the initial starting point for my research.

Last year, during my study period at ISCAP-P.PORTO, Porto Polytechnic University, Portugal, under the guidance of Professor Clara Sarmiento, at the Centre for Intercultural Studies, I worked on a project where I researched text and image in the streets of Porto (Graffiti, Street Art, and other writings). Using photography as a medium, I collected a large pool of samples with several thousand items, including both images and text written on walls, doors, tiles, pavement, and all other possible locations accessible to the casual or seasoned “night-shifter” (*writer*) working with paint, markers, sprays, stencils etc. I wrote/made several visual essays inspired by the “*Repository. 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places*” (Havik et al., 2023), created art installations, presentations, spoken word performances and designed a set of vocabulary cards based on the research I did. I also wrote a scientific article discussing the possibilities of developing street art and graffiti with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

1. Glossary of Terms

my research started by identifying a range of terms, professionalisms and jargon referring to the graffiti culture used in articles, research studies, websites, and colloquial speech. Then, I proceeded to the collection of images referring to each of these categories based on my field research in the streets of Porto.

The terms that are important to know, when discussing the graffiti language are the following:

#	Term	Meaning
1.	King	One of the best graffiti artists in town
2.	Crew	A team working on graffiti
3.	Writer	Graffiti artist
4.	Tag	A primitive, first-degree graffiti, showing just the signature of the writer

5.	Throwie	Quickly executed work, using one or two colours, short for “Throw-up”
6.	Bubble-letters	Graffiti style using rounded letters
7.	Wild-Style	Elaborate style of graffiti with illegible or interlaced psychedelic letters, with additional elements (arrows, etc)
8.	Blockbuster	Graffiti done with block letters, usually covering the entire wall
9.	Piece	Short from “Masterpiece”, elaborate and detailed work, usually done by one of the kings
10.	Cross-out	To make a new work over a previous work done by somebody else
11.	Character	A figure of human or non-human origin featured in the work
12.	Buff	To remove the graffiti from the wall
13.	Bite	To copy another graffiti writer
14.	Wheat-pasting	Illegally put posters on the walls throughout the city using wheat paste
15.	Bombing	Doing illegal graffiti

Other terms: Burner, character, wheat pasting, fade, fill-in, outline, shadow, stencil art, bombing, mural, street art, fat cap, skinny cap, guerilla art, sticker art, calligraffiti, etching, scratching, removing, reverse graffiti, Broken Windows Theory, visual pollution. (Kraviec, M, 2007) and (Sousa, A, 2009).

I also developed a visual glossary / presentation explaining each of these terms illustrated with images, as well as a closer description of their actual meaning.

2. Graffiti and Street Art in Porto, and Beyond

2.1. Graffiti Language (Graffitise)

The main characteristics of the street texts can be identified as the following: spontaneity, brief sentences, urgent message, strong language. The Portuguese version of the Graffiti language (hereinafter, “Graffitise”, drawing upon the analogy of “Legalese”, which is a term referring to the language of law practitioners and legal documents), alongside multiple and omni-present Portuguese expressions, uses many words and phrases borrowed from English, even if the

subject matter is of another origin. Even though many local cultural realia come into play, the language can be globally understood, as it heavily relies upon images to convey the meaning. There are also many examples where it is impossible to tear away the text from the image, and often the relations between them are non-hierarchical.

However, to really be able to read the city as a book and be fluent in Graffitise, it is beneficial to have some knowledge of the following: Portuguese (European and Brazilian), Spanish, English, French, Political Theory, Portuguese History, World History, and also to be familiar with Cultural Theory, Anthropology, Philosophy, History of Religion, Graphology and Contemporary Art.

2.2. Linguistic Landscape

Numerous disciplinary fields, including linguistics, communication studies, sociology, sociolinguistics, economics, social geography, landscape architecture, psychology, and education, are useful for the study of the linguistic landscape itself (Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J., 2008).

To be able to express yourself in Graffitise, you don't need much, even a black marker will do. However, if your ambitions are higher, you should look at the graffiti in the streets, learn different techniques (stencilling, spraying, painting), hang out with other writers and be an activist in one way or other. Also, it would be beneficial for you to have an athletic background (sports, alpinism etc.), because then you can use all the possibilities the city architecture offers to urban writing adepts: climbing to rooftops, balancing on unstable surfaces, and more. Graffitise is not only about ideas and activism; searching for adrenaline is an integral part of the process and at times also the goal itself.

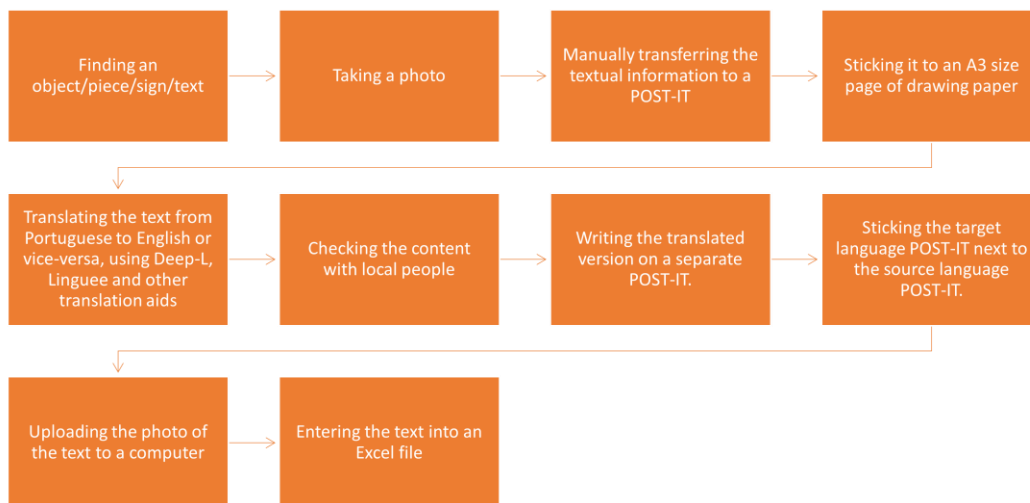
2.3. Scale, Quality and Detail

Some of the works are minuscular, they can hardly be noticed by a passer-by, while others cover the entire wall, sending the message (or lack of message) to the world with great self-assurance, even bravado. During my research process, I was particularly interested in finding text that could work regardless of the scale used.

The works also vary in quality of execution, ranging from quick "throwies" and "tags" to "blockbusters", "pieces" and even "murals".

2.4. Sample Pool and Research Methodology

While collecting thousands of images for my Image Bank during my field research process in Porto, and actively using my camera as a practical research tool, I also gradually extracted 365 meaningful sentences and phrases from the collected data pool, to form a **“Library” written on tiny Post-ITs**. The material I have included in this library is the text in the original, along with a translated Portuguese or English version of the same (depending on the source language). It was a slow process, because at the beginning I did not have any knowledge of Portuguese, and had to heavily rely upon my knowledge of Spanish to decipher the meaning of the phrases, find out the cultural context by talking to the locals, etc. Each of the phrases is like a book that you can open to enter a certain part of the street culture. Below is a flowchart explaining my working process. I used an ethnographic approach and qualitative analysis:



3. Analysis

3.1. Themes

Analysing my collection, I also identified several re-occurring themes. They are the following:

- Life and the city
- Philosophy and religion
- Politics and social issues
- Sex, love, relationships
- Resistance
- Self
- Death

Obviously, all the themes are inter-related but, in general, many ideas cover the fields that are not only important for the street writers of Porto, but also for many residents of the cities in the global West and beyond.

Below are some of the **one-sentence** phrases I collected from the streets and translated, which I have classified and arranged in organised clusters according to the themes they belong to.

3.1.1. Life in the city/world

Porto is not a place; it is a feeling. I am not a hostel yet. Tourism is killing community living. Let's unite against the increase in the cost of living. A house to live. Normalize getting home safe and alive. I was born here. I walk home tonight with the keys between my fingers. Life is a bad trip. Young, with no prospects in life. Welcome to the brave new world. Fight for your city. Life is a present. Signs on the sidewalk block the umbrellas. King of the street. Porto is not a brand. It is urgent to live more slowly. Pay attention to the signs. I need the sidewalk more than you. There were so many cars, that you could not hear the birds. Tik tik tok, that sound of your life running out. One life. More student housing. Crazy life. A world with a view to another world. I am literally sad, at times, a tourist in my own city. Rights to the city!

3.1.2. Philosophy and Religion

All the great transformations are internal. Take the time to smile. Today I am from the world, and the world is from me. Birds born in a cage believe that flying is wrong. There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. Screw karma, they owe us a soul. Just be in the present time! Bored Zen look. We only realise when the sources are dry. Beautiful, light, free, loose. Take the time to smile.

3.1.3. Politics

Putler, Fuck u. Fuck Putin, Fuck Russia, Fuck Portuguese Communist Party. Fck. Free Palestine. Capitalism is cannibalism. Stand up for the Afghan women, act now! Now or never, defend the Afghan community! We are against the silencing of Afghan women!

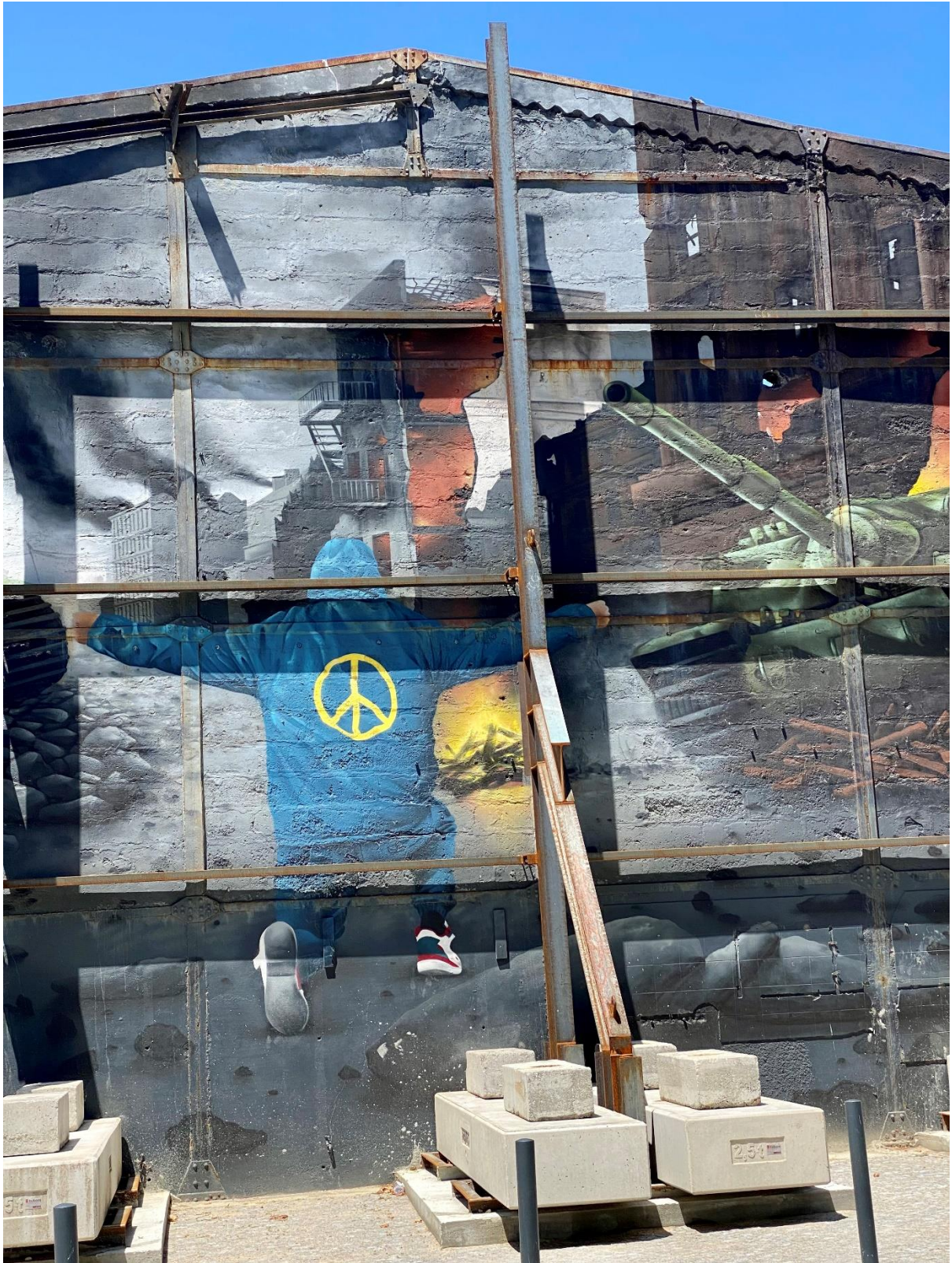


Figure 1 – Freedom Fighter by Mr Dheo (detail), Matosinhos, 2022

3.1.4. Sex, Love, Relationships

In this street we saw each other for the first time. Love will tinder us apart again. In your eyes I got to know the darkest sea of lies. Love is good, spread love. Sexual education is not pornography, it is intellectual honesty. Enough to be attached to you. Forbidden to love. Memory beach. Love or money? Tantric love spa.

3.1.5. Resistance

That who resists, persists. Not forgetting April is already a form of struggle. All drawings made on the street are acts of rebellion in themselves. The indifferent are also guilty. Think, while you can. Normalize offline. Vandals on holidays. No thirst, no revolution! Let's unite, one city against racism, fascism, and homophobia. We are not alone in the same struggle. Our streets, our laws. Fuck the police. They sink the culture because cultured people will bother the elite.

3.1.6. Self

Today I do it for myself. Today I can, want and do. Today I recharge the energies. I am still here. Today I am furious. Today I am mentally on holidays. I am. Today I am broken.

3.1.7. Death

No animal should die for me to live. Find your way (find the north), live above death. Death to all, who hide the truth from the people.

3.1.8. Other

Don't panic it is organic. This is too white. Today there was an experience not to repeat. Safety for everyone. Today the world does not end tomorrow. In my voice there was a dream. Will be complicated. In case of rain the sun is here.



*Figure 2 – Graffiti on the Social Housing Project SAAL Bouça building (Architect Álvaro Siza.)
Location: Rua das Águas Férreas, 4050-040 Porto*

3.2.Words

I also analyzed my Library and Image Bank, trying to identify the words that could become part of a Street Vocabulary, as more or less typical words, commonly represented on the walls

of Porto buildings. I selected up to five words in Portuguese for each letter, based on objective and subjective selection criteria.

3.2.1. Word Selection Criteria

The objective criteria involved identifying words that:

- originate from the streets of Porto (in graffiti, on stickers, written on the walls, etc.)
- are often repeated (*rua* (street), *vida* (life), *habitar* (to live), *futebol* (football), *amor* (love), *saudade* (longing) etc.)
- represent important aspects of life (resistance, social issues, emotions, politics)
- serve as contemporary footprint of life in Porto.

The subjective criteria involved identifying words that:

- add to the overall feel of the vocabulary, but are not very typical to the street-scene (*Zen*)
- evoke strong associations (*Ferrari*, *Jaguar*, *karma*)
- look or sound good (*Eternamente* (eternally), *guarda-chuva* (umbrella)).

3.2.2. Word List

Here is a list, translated into English, of other words that I identified as important for a potential Street Vocabulary:

Revolution, rebellion, April, shack, neighbourhood, beard, whiteness, enough, cannibalism, capitalism, car, house, city, finger, defence, money, rights, drugs, family, holidays, flower, cage, guarantee, graffiti, strike, umbrella, housing, live, today, honesty, honour, church, real estate, independence, indifferent, internal, born, nature, business, name, normalize, fear, memory, death, woman, world, legal, free, madness, fight, light, Jesus, youth, swear, join, occupy, workshop, eye, option, wage, patience, word, bird, first, privilege, when, that, break, want, quota, rule, resistance, to know, feeling, sun, roof, all, work, transformation, tourist, one, union, united, urgent, utopia, vandal, voyage, live, voice, here, rent, increase, *saudade*, xenophobia.



Figure 3 – Graffiti on a frequently painted-over wall in Bonfim, by artist Add Fuel

4. Further Results

4.1 Visual Urban Essay

I used the medium of Visual Urban Essays, described in detail in *Repository. 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places* (Havik et al, 2023), to process the information, reach new layers of meaning and create work where the images and text interact on equal terms. According to Luc Pauwels, as a modern means of expressing and visualising a wide range of introspective thoughts, novel concepts, disagreements, experiences, and observations, the visual essay has evolved into a hybrid form that can be perceived as a combination of manifesto, analysis, testimonial, and engaging narrative (Havik et al, 2023).

4.2 City Exploration game Portoscript

Based on the Image Bank I created, as well as on the phrases and vocabulary collected, I elaborated a prototype for a city exploration game, called PORTOSCRIPT: FIND YOUR WAY. It is based on the extended Latin alphabet from A to Z, and serves as a language learning tool, as an anarchist's guide to the city, as a writer's inspiration instrument, and a lot more. It is a bilingual set of flash cards in Portuguese and English. I tested it with the research team at the Centre for Intercultural Studies of ISCAP-P.PORTO, and several other professionals from various fields. The results it provides and the discussion it is capable of generating shows that PORTOSCRIPT: FIND YOUR WAY can be used as a tool in several contexts and situations.

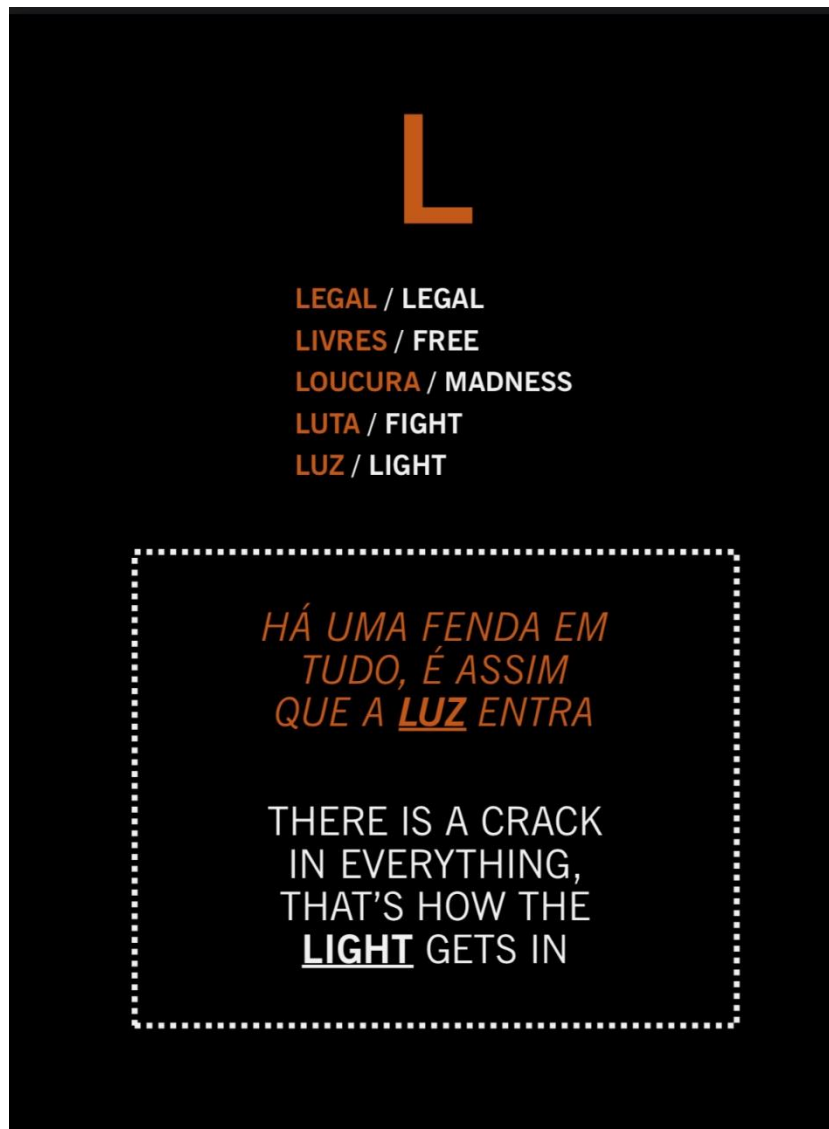


Figure 4 – Detail of Portoscript Game

5. Conclusion

Working with *Graffiti* daily, I have learnt a lot more about Portuguese language and culture, than I would have in a regular classroom situation, although I have used that opportunity as well. Currently, I am intrigued to explore the idea how my Porto Collection would relate to a similar material obtained from the streets of Riga. Hence, my plan is to add new entries to the Image Bank, Library and Vocabulary, and then process the samples by applying a comparative analysis.

Bibliography

Awad, S. H., Wagoner, B., & Glaveanu, V. (2017). *The street art of resistance* (pp. 161-180). Springer Singapore.

Havik, K; Bernal, D. M.; Machado e Moura, C.; Restrepo, E.; Niculae, L. (eds.) (2023) *Repository. 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places*, , EU COST Action CA18126 Writing Urban Places. Rotterdam: nai010 Publishers. . ISBN 978-94-6208-779-8. 224 pages.

Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2008). Knowledge about language and linguistic landscape. *Encyclopedia of language and education*, 6 (pp. 343-355).

Krawiec, M. (2007). English Words Adopted and Used by Polish Graffiti Writers. A Review of Socio-Linguistic Aspects. *Acta Neophilologica*, IX (pp. 53-63).

Sousa, A. (2009). *O vocabulário do Graffiti*. <https://gembh.wordpress.com/2009/05/21/205/>

Images

Photographies by Laura Prikule.