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Blommaert, Jan; Maly, Ico

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Invisible Lines in the Online-Offline Linguistic Landscape

by

Jan Blommaert[©] & Ico May[©]

(Babylon, Center for the Study of Superdiversity, Tilburg University)

j.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu

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Invisible lines in the online-offline linguistic landscape.

Jan Blommaert & Ico Maly

Abstract: Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) has over the past few years proven to be a very sensitive tool for detecting changes in superdiverse environments. It has allowed us to distinguish between various types of presence and ownership of different communities within one physical space, and it also added complexity to what more conventional demographic research yields. In this paper, an extension of ELLA is offered, in which we follow online links in the linguistic landscape. Such links (website addresses, Facebook Pages, Twitter accounts etc.) are very frequent features of inscriptions, shop signs and announcements emplaced in public space. Following them takes us far outside the area of emplacement, and raises fundamental questions about (a) the nature of the ‘local’ and the ‘urban’ and (b) the actors involved in social processes in the area of emplacement. Data for this paper are drawn from recent fieldwork in inner-city Antwerp (Belgium). The backdrop for this new dimension of ELLA is our growing awareness that superdiversity analysis requires attention to the online-offline nexus defining much of contemporary social life.

Introduction

Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) was developed as a way of addressing in a more satisfactory way the structure and significance of linguistic landscapes as an object in the study of sociolinguistic superdiversity (Blommaert & Maly 2016). The effort was inspired by a refusal to perform ‘snapshot’ linguistic landscape analysis based on hit-and-run fieldwork and yielding a Saussurean synchrony as analytical outcome. Instead, we wanted to emphasize the dynamic, processual character of superdiverse linguistic landscapes through a combination of longitudinal fieldwork, detailed observations of changes in the landscape, and an ethnographic-theoretical framework in which landscape signs are seen as traces of (and instruments for) social action (cf. Blommaert 2013).

It is the latter point that we seek to examine more profoundly in this paper. The aspect of social action remains, in general, an underdeveloped aspect of Linguistic Landscape research (LL), and here, too, the Saussurean synchrony can be identified as an underlying sociological imagination in much work. Social action, it seems, is located within a geographical circumscription – a neighborhood, a street, a town – which is seen as the locus of action of a sedentary community. LL signs are routinely interpreted as reflecting, in some way, the linguistic repertoires of those who live in the area where the signs have been emplaced. This, then, enables LL researchers to make statements about the demographic composition of such areas of emplacement, projected into statements about the sociolinguistic structures in that area.

The concept of social action, thus interpreted, remains highly superficial and deserves and demands far more attention. The question that needs to be raised is: *who* is involved in social

action in such areas? And what is the *locus* of such actions? Linguistic landscapes in superdiverse areas often offer clues that significantly complicate the assumptions about sedentary populations mentioned above. A simple example can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Antwerpse Algemene Dakwerken. © Jan Blommaert 2018

This picture was taken in the inner-city district of Oud-Berchem, Antwerp (Belgium) in the summer of 2018; we see a van with a Dutch-language inscription “Antwerpse Algemene Dakwerken” (“Antwerp General Roofing Works”), but with a Polish license plate locating the van in the area of Poznan. While the inscription suggests locality – a reference to Antwerp on a van emplaced in Antwerp – the license plate suggests translocality. Thus, building work performed in Antwerp appears to be connected to actions performed in Poznan – recruiting a workforce, manufacturing bespoke materials, warehousing heavy equipment and so forth. In an

era of transnational mobility, such things are evident, but they raise the fundamental questions outlined above.

Such questions, we believe, are becoming even more pressing and compelling as soon as we adjust our baseline sociological assumptions and accept that contemporary social life is not only played out in an ‘offline’ physical arena of copresent participants encountering each other in public space (the focus of Goffman 1963), but also in *online* spaces crosscutting the online ones in complex ways (cf. Blommaert 2018). We live our lives in an online-offline nexus. This simple observation renders us aware of the fact that social actions can be organized, set up, “staffed” and distributed in online as well as offline spaces; and it helps us realize that much of what we observe in the way of social action in superdiverse (offline, geographical) areas has, at least, been *conditioned* and perhaps even *made possible* by online infrastructures, in terms both of *actors* and of *topography*. This point we intend to illustrate in what follows.

A focus on action

Before moving on towards these illustrations, we must briefly clarify the focus on action we shall bring to this analysis. Our own view of action is deeply influenced by an older tradition of action-centered sociology, of which Goffman (1961, 1963), Cicourel (1972), Blumer (1969) Strauss (1993) and Garfinkel (1967, 2002) can be seen as co-architects (see Blommaert, Lu & Li 2019 for a discussion).

A number of principles characterize this tradition.

1. The first and most important principle is that of *interactional co-construction of social facts* – the assumption that whatever we do in social life is done in collaboration, response or conflict with others. In fact, the people mentioned above argue that one can only talk of social action when it is *interaction* (e.g. Strauss 1993: 21), and for Blumer (1969: 7) “a society consists of individuals interacting with one another”.
2. Interaction, in turn, is “making sense” of social order in concrete situations – this is the second principle. For the scholars mentioned, social order and social structure does not exist in an abstract sense but is enacted constantly by people in contextualized, situated moments of interaction. In Garfinkel’s famous words (1967: 9), in each such moment we perform and co-construct social order “for another first time”. The social is *concrete*, ongoing and evolving, in other words.
3. The third principle is derived straight from Mead and can be summarized as follows: “we see ourselves through the way in which others see and define us” (Blumer 1969: 13). Somewhat more precisely, “organisms in interaction are observing each other’s ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action” (Blumer 2004: 18). This is the essence of Mead’s understanding of the Self: it is greatly influenced by anticipated responses from the others, and adjusted accordingly. The Self can thus never be an essence, a fixed characteristic, an a priori attribute of people: it is a situationally co-constructed performance ratified by others. Of course, Goffman’s work has greatly contributed to our understanding of this.

4. Fourth, we do this interactional monitoring and anticipating of the others' responses on the basis of an assumption of *recognizability*. When we experience something as meaningful, as something that “makes sense” to us, by recognizing it *as something specific* (cf. Garfinkel 1967: 9), a token of a type of meaningful acts which we can ratify as such. These types of acts can be called “genres” (Blommaert 2018: 51); Garfinkel called them “formats” (2002: 245), and Goffman (1974) theorized them as “frames”.
5. Fifth, all of the preceding has a major implication for how we see the Self, how we theorize it and address it in research. Rawls' (2002: 60) comment on Garfinkel nicely captures it, and the point can be extended to almost all the work in the tradition addressed here. Individual subjectivity, she writes,

“which had originally been thought of as belonging to the actor, [was relocated] in the regularities of social practices. (...) [A] population is constituted not by a set of individuals with something in common but by a set of practices common to particular situations or events”.

The latter point is of crucial importance here. It emphasizes that actions generate those who are involved in them, or to quote Rawls again, we see “situations that provide for the appearances of individuals” (2002: 46), and not vice versa. Converted into the vocabulary of this book: *identities, individual and collective, are effects of social actions* and not their ontological and methodological point of departure. They constitute, as it were, the “personnel” of social actions, and in an online-offline nexus, identifying this “personnel” is the challenge: who is actually and concretely involved in social action as actor? Who actually contributes to the actual form and structure of social actions? To these questions we can now turn, and we shall use ELLA as our tool.

Invisible lines

The method we employ in ELLA is very simple: we observe *everything* we notice in the way of publicly displayed language material. But we do not stop at the level of language – even if that language is, evidently, an important clue for locating e.g. diasporic audiences – but we look at what is actually contained in the signs. And one feature of a great number of publicly displayed signs nowadays is *online information*: references to websites, social media accounts and so forth. This already directs us towards a highly relevant insight: that “public” as a feature of sign emplacement now has at least two dimensions: the *local public emplacement of signs* – the concrete place where signs are put and shown to potential audiences – as well as a *translocal, online public sphere* with which the local signs are profoundly connected. This insight, in our view, forces us out of the local area and out of the customary modes of LL fieldwork: we have to move from the street to the computer, and we follow the online information displayed in the signs.

The superdiverse area of Oud-Berchem counts a large number of new shop-window evangelical churches catering for specific diaspora audiences from Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. One such church is located in premises previously occupied by a Chinese restaurant. A couple of posters are affixed to the austere front of the building; Figure 2 displays one of them.



Figure 2: services at the Latin-American church. © Jan Blommaert 2018

The poster offers mundane information: the weekly organization of services in the church. We notice that the information is bilingual, in Dutch and Spanish (here is the level of language), and we already know from previous fieldwork that the church is run by pastors from Peru and caters for a relatively small congregation of faithful hailing from several parts of Latin America.

At the very bottom of the poster, however, we notice a web address: www.bethel.tv. When we follow that link, we enter a very different sphere (Figure 3).

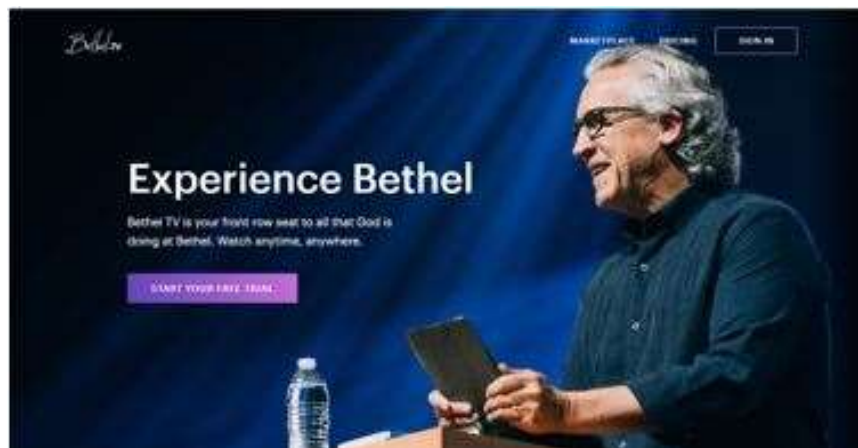


Figure 3: Experience Bethel.

Bethel TV is a globally active religious enterprise, based in California, and offering for-money religious services and commodities to a very wide audience of customers around the world. The

Bethel TV website contains all the features of commercial websites, including the “free trial” offer, preferably followed by the “premium” subscription (Figure 4).

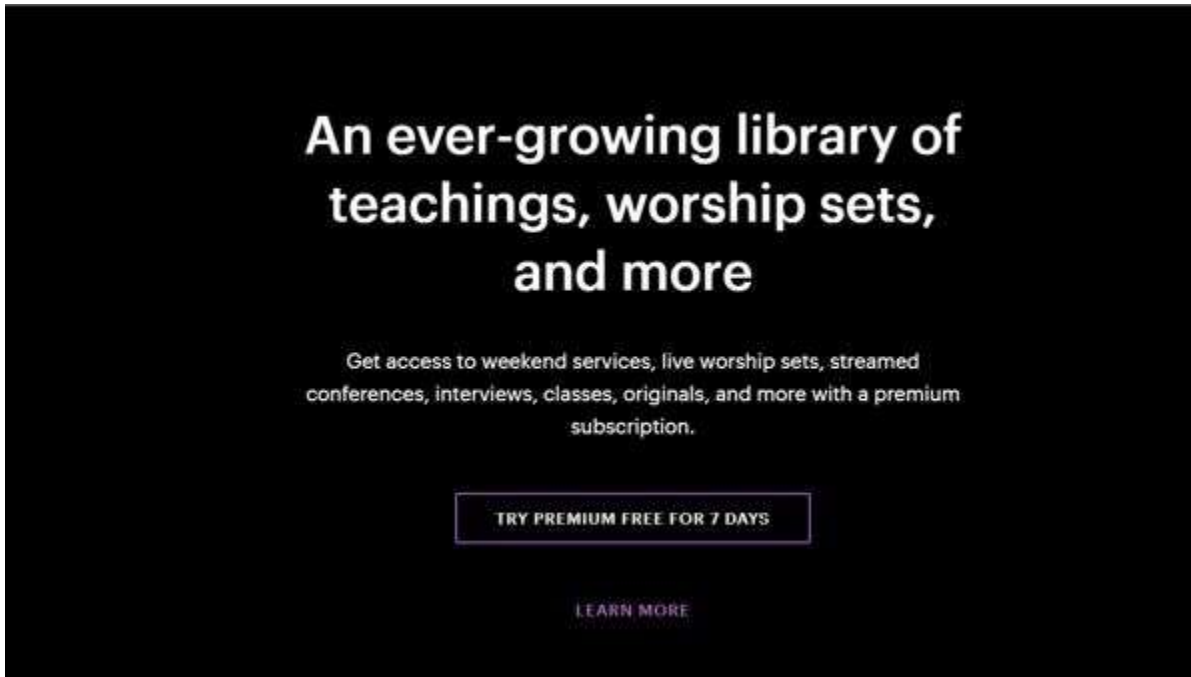


Figure 4: Bethel Premium

Note the implications of this. We have moved from a sociolinguistics of offline areas and communities into a sociolinguistics of digital culture, and both are inextricably connected in a locally emplaced sign. That we find ourselves fully in the realm of digital culture becomes clear when we follow some more links. Bethel TV is active on a great number of social media platforms, and prominently on YouTube, where its channel has almost 150,000 subscribers (figure 5).

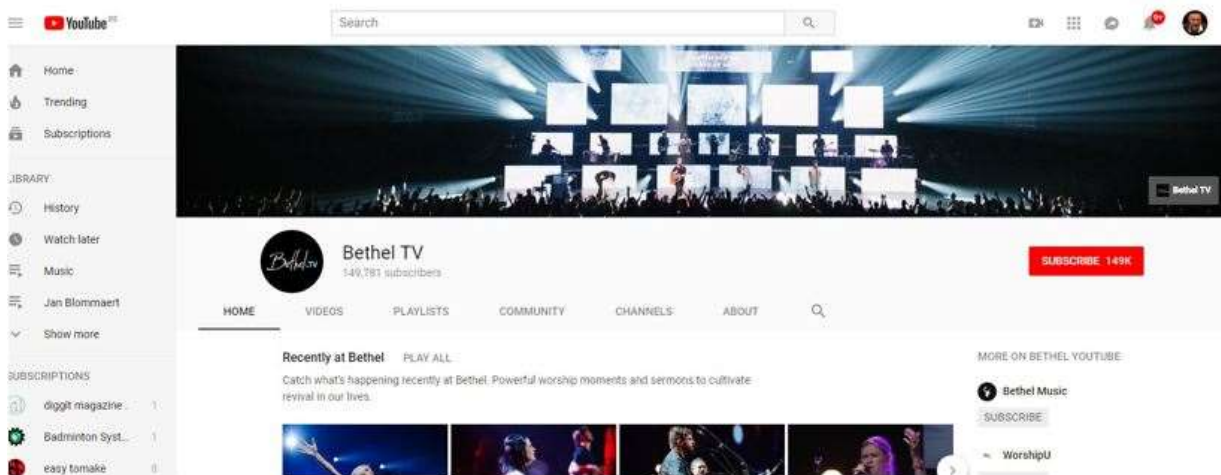


Figure 5: Bethel TV YouTube channel

YouTube channels along with other social media activities, let us note, are a frequent feature of the new evangelical churches in Oud-Berchem. Thus, Apostle Johnson Suleman, the pastor of a church serving a small West-African congregation in Oud-Berchem, is far bigger online than offline. His YouTube channel has over 106,000 subscribers and shows footage of services held in Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and several other countries (Figure 6).

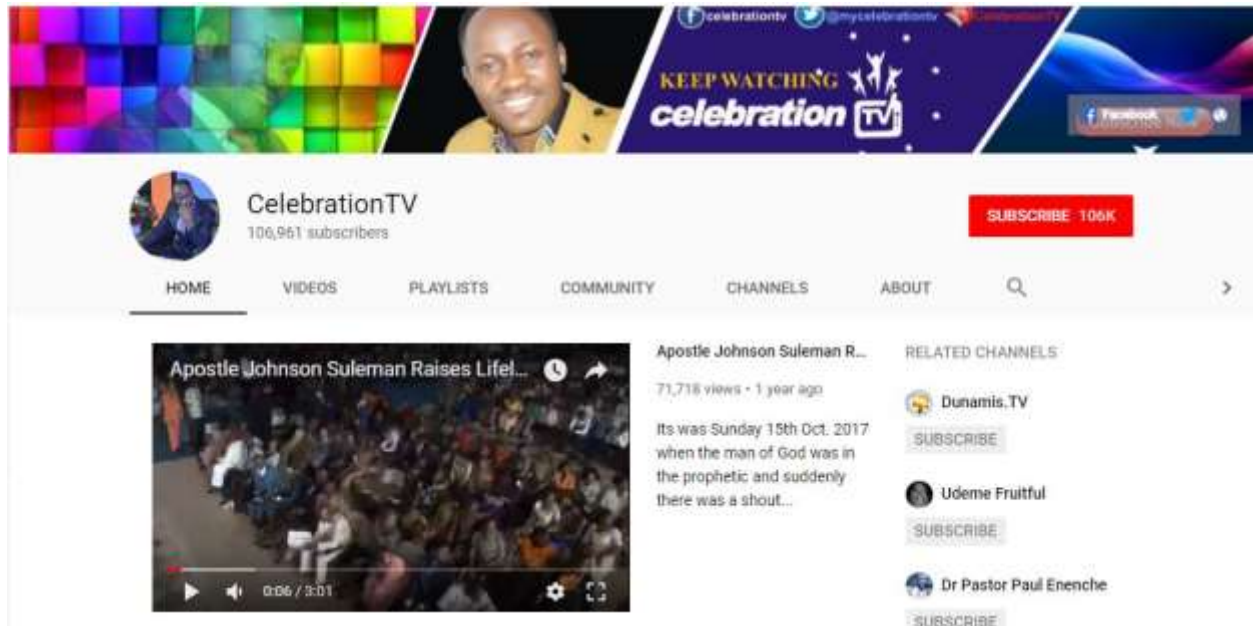


Figure 6: Apostle Johnson Suleman online

The case of Apostle Johnson Suleman suggests a slightly different analysis than the ones we provided in earlier work: the church in Oud-Berchem is not connected with the “homeland” of its founders (Nigeria in this case), as a kind of “station” in a network of diasporic community members seeking to worship. It is a node in a transnational network of actions, performed by an *itinerant* pastor-entrepreneur. The center of this network is not Lagos or Abuja: its center is *online*, it is the YouTube channel that ties together a range of activities and actors dispersed over several countries. And the case of Bethel TV shows how local churches are resourced by religious multinationals also connecting a multitude of small local nodes in a global network.

We see now, through this online-offline ELLA, how lots of invisible lines run to and from a local area – Oud-Berchem – and how explaining what goes on in this local area demands attention to what the invisible lines bring and take in the way of resources and “personnel” to concrete, situated actions such as Sunday churches, and to concrete, situated modes of community-making. Members of the congregation have 24/7 access to some services of “the church”, regardless of where they are physically stationed. Figure 7, from the website of yet another evangelical church located in Oud-Berchem, illustrates this.

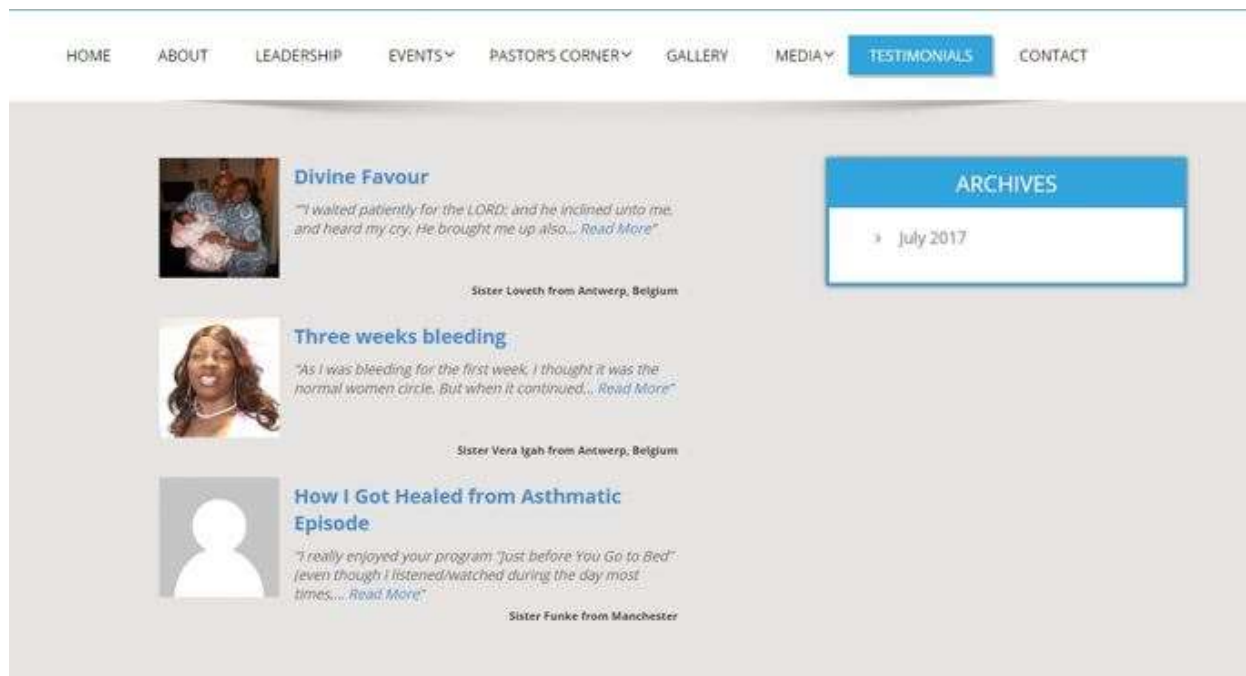


Figure 7: Web testimonials

The website offers a page for “testimonials”, and apart from two Antwerp-based members, we also see a testimonial from a member based in Manchester, UK. Members not present in the actual physical locale of the church can watch the services on YouTube and draw similar spiritual satisfaction from it.

Conclusion: ELLA 2.0

When we follow the leads from locally emplaced signs towards the online sphere they point towards, we begin to see vastly more. This move from offline to online and back, we consider to be of major importance for ELLA, for it directs us towards a far more precise view of *actors* and *topography* of action. As for actors, the actions performed in specific offline places are dispersed and operate locally as well as translocally. The “personnel” of locally performed actions, thus, is far broader and more diverse than what an exclusively offline LL analysis would show. As for topography, we see invisible lines connecting places as far apart as Oud-Berchem and California, and resources, formats and personnel are provided in all these places and made available for local enactment.

We thus find ourselves in an ELLA 2.0, an online-offline ethnography starting from linguistic landscapes and taking us to the structure of social actions in superdiverse neighborhoods. Its findings inevitably distort the acquired imagery of sedentary diaspora demographics as the cornerstone of superdiversity studies: “multi-ethnic” neighborhoods as the locale within which social actions by their populations must be confined, or privileged analytically. The online-offline nexus no longer affords such views.

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