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Paper 2

Enough is enough: The heuristics of authenticity in superdiversity

by

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Enough is enough:

The heuristics of authenticity in superdiversity

Jan Blommaert & Piia Varis

Introduction

This short paper intends to sketch an empirical theory of identity in a context of superdiversity.¹ It adds to the development of new approaches to language and semiotics in superdiverse environments (Blommaert & Rampton 2011), and intends to offer a realistic, yet generalizable, approach to inquiries into the complexities of contemporary identity practices. Such practices now evolve in real-life as well as in virtual contexts, and connections between both social universes are of major importance for our understanding of what superdiverse society is about.

These complexities are baffling, yet perhaps not entirely new; what is new is the awareness of such complexities among academic and lay observers. Late Modernity – the stage of Modernity in which the emergence of superdiversity is to be situated – has been described as an era of hybridized, fragmented and polymorph identities (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 2001; Žižek 1994), often also subject to conscious practices of ‘styling’ (Rampton 1995; Bucholtz & Trechter 2001; Coupland 2007). Prima facie evidence appears to confirm this: people do orient towards entirely different logics in different segments of life – one’s political views may not entirely correspond to stances taken in domains such as consumption, education or property. So here is a first point to be made about contemporary identities: they are organized as a patchwork of different specific objects and directions of action.

Micro-hegemonies

It is perfectly acceptable these days to, for instance, have strong and outspoken preferences for a Green party and participate actively in electoral campaigns underscoring the importance of environmental issues and the value of sociocultural diversity, while also driving a diesel car and sending one’s children to a school with low numbers of immigrant learners. The robust hegemonies that appeared to characterize Modernity have been traded for a blending within one individual life-project of several *micro-hegemonies* valid in specific segments of life and behavior, and providing the ‘most logical’ solution (or the ‘truth’) within these segments. Thus, our Green party supporter can ‘logically’ drive a diesel car

¹ This paper emerged in the context of the HERA project “Investigating discourses of inheritance and identity in four multilingual European settings”, and was first discussed during a meeting in Birmingham, May 2011. We are grateful to the participants of that meeting, and in particular to Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese, Jens-Normann Jörgensen, Marilyn Martin-Jones and Ben Rampton for stimulating reflections on that occasion.

when s/he has a job that involves frequent and long journeys by car, since diesel fuel is cheaper than other fuel types, and diesel cars have a reputation for lasting longer and being more robust than others. Our Green party supporter, then, finds him-/herself in the company of an entirely different community when issues of mobility and car use emerge than when general environmental politics are on the agenda; yet in both instances a particular micro-hegemony has been followed. The same occurs in the case of education: our Green party supporter wants 'the best for his children', and since highly 'mixed' schools are reputed to produce low quality standards in educational outputs, our subject again follows the most logical path in that field. For each of these topics, our subject can shift 'footing', to use a Goffmanian term, and each time s/he will deploy an entirely different register, genre, viewpoint and speaking position (cf. Agha 2007).

An individual life-project so becomes a dynamic (i.e. perpetually adjustable) complex of micro-hegemonies within which subjects situate their practices and behavior. Such complexes – we can call them a 'repertoire' – are not chaotic, and people often are not at all 'confused' or 'ambivalent' about their choices, nor appear to be 'caught between' different cultures or 'contradict themselves' when speaking about different topics. The complex of micro-hegemonies just provides a different type of order, a complex order composed of different niches of ordered behavior and discourses about behavior.

The combination of such micro-hegemonized niches is ultimately what would make up 'the' identity of someone. But already it is clear that identity as a singular notion has outlasted its usefulness – people define their 'identity' (singular) in relation to a multitude of different niches – social 'spheres' in Bakhtin's famous terms – and this is a plural term. One can be perfectly oneself while articulating sharply different orientations in different domains of life or on different issues. A left-wing person can thus perfectly, and unproblematically, enjoy the beauty of the works of Céline and d'Annunzio, notoriously fascist authors, since the criteria for literary beauty need not be identical to those that apply to voting behavior.

Discursive orientations and the quest for authenticity

The foregoing argument is surely unsurprising; it can be empirically corroborated in a wide variety of ways and it undoubtedly reflects the life experiences of many of us. But we need to go further. What follows is a schematic general framework for investigating the complex and dynamic identity processes we outlined above. We can identify four points in this framework.

- a. Identity discourses and practices can be described as discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen (or can be seen) as emblematic of particular identities. These features can be manifold and include artefacts, styles, forms of language, places, times, forms of art or aesthetics, ideas and so forth.
- b. To be more precise, we will invariably encounter specific arrangements or configurations of such potentially emblematic features. The features

rarely occur as a random or flexible complex; when they appear they are presented (and oriented towards) as 'essential' combinations of features that reflect, bestow and emphasize 'authenticity'.

c. We will inevitably encounter different degrees of fluency in enregistering these discursive orientations. Consequently, identity practices will very often include stratified distinctions between 'experts' and 'novices', 'teachers' and 'learners', and 'degrees' of authenticity. In this respect, we will see an implicit benchmark being applied: 'enoughness'. One has to 'have' enough of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category.

d. Obviously, these processes involve conflict and contestation, especially revolving around 'enoughness' (s/he is *not enough* of X; or *too much* of X) as well as about the particular configurations of emblematic features ('in order to be X, you need to have 1,2,3,4 and 5' versus 'you can't be X without having 6, 7, 8, 9'). And given this essentially contested character, these processes are highly dynamic: configurations of features and criteria of enoughness can be adjusted, reinvented, amended.

Let us clarify some of the points.

1. We speak of identity practices as discursive orientations towards sets of emblematic resources. The reason is that, empirically, when talking about identity or acting within an identity category, people 'point towards' a wide variety of objects that characterize their identities. Particular identities are clarified – i.e. offered for inspection to others – by referring to particular forms of music (e.g. classical music versus heavy metal), dress codes (the suit-and-necktie, Gothic style, dreadlocks, blingbling), food preferences or habits (e.g. vegetarians versus steak-eaters, oriental or Mediterranean cuisine, beer versus wine drinkers), forms of language (e.g. RP versus Estuarian British English; HipHop or Rasta jargon, specialized professional jargons, hobby jargons such as the discourse of wine experts, foreign accents etc.), art forms (e.g. Manga, contemporary or conceptual art; 'pulp' versus 'high' movies etc.), names (being able to name all the football players in a favorite team; being able to refer to Hegel, Marx, Tarkowski, Dylan Thomas, practices of 'name dropping') and so on. Discourses in which people identify themselves and others include a bewildering range of objects towards which such people express affinity, attachment, belonging; or rejection, disgust, disapproval. One can read Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) as an illustration of the range of features that can be invoked as emblematic of particular (class) identities.

2. These features, however, need to be taken seriously because they are never organized at random: they appear in specific arrangements and configurations. It is at this point and by means of such particular arrangements that one can, for instance, distinguish discourses of identity-as-heritage as discourses in which the particular configuration of features reflects and emanates images of unbroken, trans-generational transmission of 'traditions', of timeless essentials, of reproduction of that which is already there. Discourses of identity-as-creation would, contrarily, be organized around configurations that enable an imagery of innovation, discontinuity and deviation. Thus, it is clear that administrative

criteria for, e.g., Britishness include very different configurations of discourses on the same issue from a right-wing nationalist organization, a cultural heritage foundation or a radio DJ specializing in Reggae. 'Essential' Britishness will each time appear in an entirely different shape. One can already anticipate the many ways in which such differences can become fields of sharp conflict and contestation, and we will return to this below.

3. The different degrees of fluency in enregistering these discursive orientations are crucial as another field of contest and conflict. When criteria are being set (i.e. particular configurations of emblematic features are assembled), some people will inevitably have easier access to these features than others, and will consequently have less problems in discoursing about them (and 'in' them, by embodying them or by displaying them as part of their 'habitus'). We emphasize the processual and dynamic nature of this: we use 'enregistering' rather than 'register', because as we have seen, the specific configuration of features is always changeable and never stable, and people are confronted with the task of perpetual re-enregistering rather than just acquiring and learning, once and for all, *the* register. Competence (to use an old term) is competence in changing the parameters of identity categories, and in adjusting to such changes.

4. Conflict and contest are evident in such a shifting and dynamic process, where, furthermore, the stakes are sometimes quite high. Being qualified by others as a 'wannabe', a 'fake' or some other dismissive category is one of many people's greatest anxieties. For people charged with crimes, or asylum seekers hoping to acquire the refugee status, such categorizations can be a matter of life and death.

5. A special note about 'enoughness' is in order. The benchmark for being admitted into an identity category (as a 'real' or 'authentic' member) is 'having enough' of the features specified for them. This is slippery terrain, because 'enough' is manifestly a judgment, often a compromise, and rarely a black-and-white and well-defined set of criteria (this even counts for apparently clear and unambiguous administrative criteria, see Mehan 1996 for an excellent example of a 'learning disabled' child; Blommaert 2009 for a judgment call of sorts in asylum procedures). Competence, to return to what we said above, often revolves around the capacity to make adequate judgment calls on enoughness. Enoughness also explains some of the strange and apparently incoherent phenomena observed in contexts where authenticity is the core of the issue, as in minority cultural groups. We observe in such contexts that the use and display of 'homeopathic' doses of e.g. the heritage language can suffice as acts of authentic identity. Greetings and other concise communicative rituals, indigenous songs or dances can prevail over the absence of most of 'indigenous' culture as features that produce enough authenticity (e.g. Moore 2011 for an excellent example; also Silverstein 2006). In contexts of rapid sociocultural change (as e.g. in the case of migration) and the dispersal of contexts for identity work (as in the increased use of social media), we can expect enoughness to gain more and more importance as a critical tool for identity work. One needs to be 'enough' of a rapper, not 'too much'; the same goes for an art lover, an intellectual, a football fan, an online game player and so forth.

Enoughness in action 1: The chav

The range of features that can be employed in identity work in order to produce authenticity can be wide and include a number of different, and sometimes very elaborate semiotic means. However, in actual practice the features that produce recognisable identities can be reduced to a very limited set, and here we encounter something that can be called 'dosing'. That is, mobilising an authentic identity discourse about oneself can be a matter of attending to the most infinitesimally small details – sometimes even only observable to those 'in the know' – and a very small number of recognisable items, such as a piece of clothing.²

In enregistering such features, certain rules need to be observed for the process to be successful – to be recognised by others as what was intended. These are the rules that 'newcomers', 'beginners' and 'wannabes' need to observe and mobilise in their own identity work in order to 'pass' as authentic to someone (cf. e.g. Kennedy's 2001 account on racial passing). This is where the Internet, for all the freedom and opportunity it is seen as offering for creative identity-play, appears not only as a useful instructional, normative source for the 'wannabe' but also as a space rife with regulatory discourses on 'how to' be or become someone. YouTube, for instance, features plenty of 'how to' videos – videos providing viewers with instructions on the minute details of how to be an 'authentic' gangsta or emo – that is, the features that should be employed for an authentic identity as a gangsta or an emo to be produced. The Internet now offers an infinite range of identity assembly kits and complements them with volumes of users' guides. Such identities are not necessarily offered to *replace* others; they are offered as additional *niches*, and one can walk in and out of them ad lib. The users' guides, therefore, are the micro-hegemonies we mentioned above.

The chav culture – a form of working-class British youth culture – is one example of a subculture very visible on the Internet. A search online for anything 'chav' provides plenty of material for someone wishing to 'chavify' oneself (although it should be perhaps pointed out that this is not amongst the most desired and aspired to identities to be displayed by young Brits) – from YouTube videos to images that put forward a 'chav-semiotics' where certain features are iconic of a chav identity.

² We can see 'dosing' also in the many studies of 'styling' now available in the literature since Rampton's (1995) pioneering work. Homeopathic doses of features – one sound sometimes, or one word – can be enough to redefine the speakers in an interaction as well as the whole situation itself.



Figure 1: The chav

Chav identity, as articulated for instance on YouTube, is flagged by means of features including obesity, smoking, street drinking, rowdiness, teenage pregnancy, unemployment and, surprisingly, one particular fashion feature. Soccer player Wayne Rooney would be the archetypical chav. In getting the right amount of recognisable 'chav', a very small semiotic dose is in fact enough for a certain identity discourse to be activated. Here the metaphor of medication is perhaps useful: just as the pain killer we take to get rid of a headache features one active substance in the dose that takes away the pain – while the rest of the content can in fact be totally irrelevant for achieving that aim – in producing an authentic identity all is needed is one active substance in the dose.



Figure 2: Chav smiley

As we can see from Figures 1 and 2³, in the case of producing 'chav' this 'active substance' is the fashion feature we mentioned above: the British luxury brand Burberry, with its fingerprint tartan pattern. Burberry manufactures a wide range of products, such as clothing, shoes and accessories, and as a brand has become emblematic of the working-class chav culture. The fact that this often takes place in the form of *counterfeit* Burberry products is of no major importance as such: it may in fact be essential for the products themselves to be 'fake' in the production of an authentic 'chav'. Whether 'real' Burberry or not, the brand itself is indeed emblematic of 'chav' to the extent that the Burberry check

³ All the images and web information appearing in this paper were retrieved on June 28, 2011.

is also enough in itself to turn other cultural products into 'chav' – as in the case of Chav Guevara (Figure 3.).



Figure 3: Chav Guevara

Turning Che Guevara into Chav Guevara by presenting him in the Burberry check pattern points to a significant, more general aspect in identity work.

Administering the right amount of specific semiotic features is at the core of authenticity: being an authentic someone requires orientations towards certain resources that index a particular desired identity, and, as with chav identity, the dose of resources can be minimal, almost homeopathic. The dose can be small, but the only thing that is required is that it is *enough* – enough to produce a recognisable identity as an authentic someone. And as the illustrations here make clear: this single emblematic feature can be applied in an almost infinite range of cases, redefining every object into a 'chav' object. On the Internet, we find underwear, cars and houses coated in the Burberry tartan, along with almost every imaginable cartoon figure and superhero. The 'active substance' of chavness can be blended with almost any other substance to produce the same 'real', 'true', 'authentic' and, above all, instantly recognizable image: the 'chav'.

Enoughness in action 2: Is this pub Irish enough?

The second vignette illustrating the processes described in this paper engages with a globalized social and cultural icon, to be found at present in almost any large and middle-size city of the Western world and many parts of the non-western world as well. Wherever it occurs, the Irish pub is instantly recognizable. And as we have seen in the previous example, this recognizability is triggered by the use of a small set of 'active substances' that, when present in the right dose, lend a pub its instant identification as 'Irish'. The active substances are objects and artefacts people orient towards in an attempt to construct authenticity.

The Irish pub is undoubtedly an instance of the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), something which has been developed quite recently as a particular iconic place breathing a kind of fundamental ‘Irishness’ inscribed in its layout, spatial organization, furniture and products on offer. As for the latter, there is little doubt that the Guinness beer brand has been instrumental in developing and promoting this worldwide ‘standard’, so to speak. The Irish pub is an artefact of globalized commodification.

As a globalized commodity, it has become extraordinarily successful. In Belgium alone, 86 ‘Irish pubs’ are listed on www.cafe.be, the main website on cafés in Belgium. Most, if not all of them are of course run by Belgian publicans; customers would be served in the language of the place and some of the staff working in such pubs have never visited Ireland. Such Irish pubs do in fact present a blend of local and global features; the presence of the globalized features turns them into instantly recognizable Irish pubs; the local features ensure that the overwhelmingly local customers do not feel out of place in such pubs.

Let us now turn to the globalized features, the ‘active substances’ as we called them. Running through about one hundred Irish pub websites (and having visited a good number of such pubs ourselves), we see that a small handful of emblematic features appear in almost every case; we can list them. But before we do that, let us have a look at one illustration, in which we see several of the emblematic items. In Figure 4, we see a coaster from an Irish pub in the small Belgian town of Zottegem:



Figure 4: Paddy's Pub, Zottegem. www.irishpub.eu

1. Pubs have a recognizable *Irish name*. This name can be a family name. From the list of Belgian Irish pubs, we note: Blarney, Conway, Fabian O'Farrell, Finnegan, Kate Whelan, Kelly, Kitty O'Shea, Mac Sweeney, Mac Murphy, Maguire, McCormack, Molly Malone, Murphy, O'Fianch, O'Malley, O'Reilly, O'Dwyer, Paddy, Patrick Foley, Scruffy O'Neill, Sean O'Casey. Apart from a name, an identifiably Irish word can be used, such as 'An Sibhin' or 'The Ceilidh'. Alternatively, the pub's name refers to Irish symbols such as the Shamrock, or to well-known

characters from Irish literature such as Molly Bloom. And words such as ‘Irish’ and ‘Celtic’ can also be used to flag the Irishness of the pub.

2. There would be a preference for a particular kind of *Celtic lettering* in shop signs and advertisement boards; this can be done ‘completely’ or by approximation. In Figure 4 we see a rather amateurish attempt in ‘Zottegem’, where especially the ‘e’, the ‘g’ and the ‘m’ have a Celtic twist.

3. Some stock symbols of Ireland would be present. The official website <http://www.of-ireland.info/symbol.html> lists the following canon of five ‘symbols of Ireland’: the flag, the shamrock, the harp, the Celtic cross and the ring of Claddagh. The three-leaf clover, *shamrock* would be present in almost every case – see Figure 4. The *Irish harp* would also be quite frequently used, certainly when Guinness beer is advertised; less used are the *Irish flag* and the *Celtic cross*. We have not found instances of the use of the ring of Claddagh. Also quite widespread as a symbol of elementary Irishness is the *color green* – see again Figure 4 above, where green dominates the coaster as well as the clothes of the figures depicted in it.

4. Irish pubs would almost always advertise *music* as part of their character and attractiveness. Evening shows with live bands, often performing folk music, are quite a widespread feature of Irish pubs, and one Belgian Irish pub is called after the legendary folk band ‘The Dubliners’. Other Irish stars such as Van Morrison and U2 would be mentioned, and theme nights would be organized around their music.

5. Finally, some *products* are omnipresent. *Guinness beer* is undoubtedly the indispensable commodity on offer in any Irish pub. *Jameson whiskey* is another very frequent item on offer, and both would often be visibly advertised from the outside of the pub. Other ‘typical’ products would be Kilkenny’s beer and Irish cider; when food is offered, Irish lamb stew and Irish steak would very often be found on the menu.

These five elements dominate the Irish pubs in Belgium; no doubt, they will be found elsewhere around the world as well.⁴ They combine in a rustic, dark wood and brass interior to form a kind of cosiness welcomed by customers. The Zottegem Paddy’s Pub summarizes its character as follows:

“The Paddy’s pub is an Irish pub where everyone feels at home and makes oneself comfortable (sic). It’s got everything you can find in an Irish pub, nice music, Irish whiskeys, Guinness, Kilkenny, Adam’s Apple, Irish food combined with European dishes, in a word, a part of Ireland in Zottegem Belgium.”

Note the Belgian accent in Paddy’s English, and observe the statement “Irish food combined with European dishes” – which summarizes what we intended to

⁴ A possible sixth feature could be this. Almost all pubs would organize a *St Patrick’s Day* event. Customers are requested to dress in green colors that day, and substantial drinking at discount prices would be the backbone of the event; live bands would perform as well.

demonstrate. Irish pubs blend a small dose of emblematic globalized Irishness with a whole lot of local and other features. Guinness and cider are flanked by solidly Belgian beers such as Jupiler and Leffe on tap. So too with food: apart from the Irish lamb stew and the Irish Angus beef, Irish pubs in Belgium offer the same snacks and meals as those offered by non-Irish pubs in many places around the world. O'Reilly's in Brussels, for instance, offers some iconic Irish food along with buffalo wings, beef and veggie nachos, hamburgers (with Irish beef), as well as the very English fish and chips and Sunday roast (<http://oreillys.nl/brussels/menu/7-food-menu.html>). And in many pubs, a choice of Irish whiskies would be complemented by a rich variety of original Scotch malts. Irishness can be extended, as we can see, into a broader realm of Anglo-saxon-ness. Needless to say, nevertheless, that almost every Irish pub advertises itself as *authentically* Irish.

Is there a critical limit to the amount of emblematicity that a place ought to display in order to be a recognizably 'Irish' pub in Belgium? When is a pub 'Irish enough' to pass credibly as such? From our observations, we see that *at least some* of the features listed above are mandatory. One feature is not enough: a pub called 'Sean O'Reilly's' but not serving Guinness or other Irish products would not easily be recognized as 'Irish' ("what! You don't have Guinness?!"); in the opposite case, it is not enough to serve Guinness to qualify as an Irish pub. Irish pubs need to *look* and *feel* Irish, and they achieve that by means of a bundle of emblematic features: a name, a choice of products, displays of the shamrock or the harp, the color green, and so forth. The bundle, however, should not be *too big*. A pub which is so Irish that customers are required to speak English in order to get their orders passed, for instance, would not be too long in business in a town such as Zottegem. The same would apply to pubs that would only welcome Irish customers.⁵ Irish pubs are globalized in a familiar way: a small but highly relevant bundle of globalized emblematic features is blended with a high dose of firmly local features. Customers can feel at home in Zottegem while they are, simultaneously, savoring an 'authentically Irish' pub ambiance. By entering an Irish pub, the local customers do not become Irish; nor would they have to, and that is the whole point: one merely enters a niche of Irishness.

Enough is enough

In the two illustrations we gave, we have seen how authenticity is manufactured by blending a variety of features, some of which – the defining ones – are sufficient to produce the particular targeted authentic identity. In the case of the *chav*, one single feature was enough to define almost any other object as 'chav'; in the case of Irish pubs, the bundle was larger and more complex, but still essentially quite limited: a small dose of 'active substance' that turned pubs into Irish pubs in so many places in the world. In many ways, this process reminds us of what we know as 'accent': globalized identities are not absorbed *in toto*; they become an *accent*, a kind of inflection of other identities. This accented package – a-sufficiently-Irish-pub-in-Zottegem – is what we now understand as identity.

⁵ A very small number of exceptions exist, mostly in larger cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, targeting English-speaking expatriates.

We can see the particular configurations of features mentioned above as the 'micro-hegemonies' mentioned earlier. In different niches of our social and cultural lives, we arrange features in such a way that they enable others to identify us as 'authentic', 'real' members of social groups, even if this authenticity comes with a lower rank as 'apprentice' within a particular field. We enter and leave these niches often in rapid sequence, changing footing and style each time and deploying the resources we have collected for performing each of these identities – our identity repertoire is the key to what we can be or can perform – in social life.

Enoughness judgments determine the ways in which one can rise from the apprentice rank to higher, more authoritative ranks – apprentices orient towards the 'full' authenticity while they start building their own restricted versions of it. Fans of Irish pubs, for instance, would begin to exhibit and develop their fandom by collecting 'Irish' objects: green top hats, shamrock coasters, Guinness beer glasses, Irish national team soccer jerseys and so on. They gather objects that culturally bespeak 'Irishness' – such Irishness that can align them with the object they orient towards, the Irish pub and beyond it, an imaginary essential Irishness. Throughout all of this we see that 'culture' appears as *that which provides (enough) meaning*, i.e. makes practices and statements sufficiently recognizable for others *as* productions of identities. And throughout all of this, we see such cultures as things that are perpetually subject to learning practices. One is never a 'full' member of any cultural system, because the configurations of features are perpetually changing, and one's fluency of yesterday need not guarantee fluency tomorrow. In the same move, we of course see how such processes involve a core of perpetually shifting normativities (the things that enable recognizability and, thus, meaning), and because of that, power – power operating at a variety of scale levels in a polycentric sociocultural environment in which all of us, all the time, are required to satisfy the rules of recognizability.

All of this can be empirically investigated; it enables us to use an anti-essentialist framework that, however, does not lapse into a rhetoric of fragmentation and contradiction, but attempts to provide a realistic account of identity practices. Such practices, one will observe in a variety of domains, revolve around a complex and unpredictable notion of authenticity, which in turn rests on judgments of enoughness. The concise framework sketched here can serve as a heuristic for engaging with this enormous and rapidly changing domain of authenticity.

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