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What is This?
Infrastructures of superdiversity: Conviviality and language in an Antwerp neighborhood

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Abstract
This article develops an ethnographic approach to ‘linguistic landscapes’, applied to an inner-city neighborhood in Antwerp (Belgium). Linguistic landscapes are arrays of public signs, linguistic as well as non-linguistic, and range from shop windows and professional billboards to handwritten signs and announcements. An ethnographic approach to linguistic landscapes brings out the complexities of superdiverse arenas, such as those of inner-city Antwerp. In the neighborhood examined here, signs, index processes of demographic, social and economic change involving older residential immigrants moving up the social ladder because of new, real-estate and commercial opportunities created by the influx of more recent transient migrants as well as of more affluent native Belgian, inhabitants. We see how the use of languages, notably of a lingua franca, ‘oeccumenical’ variety of Dutch, contributes to the perpetual shaping and re-shaping of an infrastructure for superdiversity: a space in which, constant change and motion are the rule, in which complexity and unpredictability are rife, but within which important forms of conviviality are being articulated and sustained by means of language choice and language display.

Keywords
Antwerp, complexity, conviviality, linguistic landscape, sociolinguistics, superdiversity

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Introduction

Urban centers in Europe, as elsewhere, have undergone a massive demographic, social and cultural shift over the past two decades, and contemporary inner-city neighborhoods display features and characteristics that defy the clear categories of an older ethnic minorities paradigm. The point has been conclusively argued by Vertovec and others (e.g. Vertovec, 2007): we need to approach such social environments with an analytic instrumentarium that does justice to this superdiversity. That means that multiplicity – as in ‘multiculturalism’ or ‘multilingualism’ – is replaced by complexity – an approach in which we assume social processes to be multiple, multifilar and yet simultaneous–synchronous and located in a circumscribed spatial arena, in which we accept the ‘stochastic’ nature of social processes in which seemingly trivial, and unpredictable, events can disturb the regularity of established patterns, and in which, we accept dynamics, unboundedness, non-linearity as given when imagining processes – chaos, of course, but chaos that displays peculiar forms of order (cf. Prigogine and Stengers, 1984; Waddington, 1977).

Language and changes in language are extraordinarily sensitive diagnostics for capturing the intense dynamics of transformation we observe in superdiverse urban centers (cf. Blommaert and Rampton, 2011). When populations change, and relationships between populations, one of the first things that gets affected is language – people talking differently, different languages and scripts appearing in a neighborhood. Sometimes, years before such changes become visible in statistics, detailed sociolinguistic ethnographies of ‘linguistic landscapes’ can signal important features of change – often, paradoxically, on the basis of seemingly insignificant bits of evidence, details often dismissed as ‘fluctuations’ by others but proven to be accurate indexes of the nature and direction of social processes (Blommaert, 2012; Rampton, 2006; cf. also Scollon and Scollon, 2003).

In what follows, I will document processes of change in an inner-city neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium, by means of attention to small changes in the linguistic landscape. Antwerp is a relatively large industrial city in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, economically centered around the super-scale harbor of Antwerp. The Antwerp neighborhood I shall focus on is Oud-Berchem, a former largely working-class area in south-east Antwerp clustered around a shopping street, Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat, which is about 1 kilometer long. A major railway station and the Antwerp Ring highway are adjacent to the area, offering multidirectional mobility and facilitating access to the neighborhood. Since the 1970s, the neighborhood became home to a large resident community of Turkish labor migrants, who bought the working-class houses of the ageing native population and set up an ethnic commercial, religious and social infrastructure. Oud-Berchem is known as Antwerp’s Turkish neighborhood.

Since the mid-1990s, however, this ethnic neighborhood has seen a steady influx of new immigrants, mostly transient and from every part of the world, thus giving the neighborhood the typical features of contemporary demographic superdiversity. In terms of population, therefore, we can roughly distinguish three historical ‘layers’. The first layer would consist of a ‘native’ population, partly original to the neighborhood – elderly working-class people – and partly more affluent newcomers. The second layer would be the ‘first wave’ of Turkish immigrants; the third layer would be the post-1990s new immigrants.
The profound demographic transformation of the neighborhood since the mid-1990s has affected the structure of the neighborhood, and we observe permanent social, material and spatial adjustments to the continuously – and rapidly – changing population in the neighborhood. As a long-time inhabitant of the neighborhood, I report what can perhaps be called longitudinal auto-ethnography here, and from an ethnographic-methodological angle, my most annoying experience of the years has been that my object of inquiry, so to speak, just wouldn’t sit still. Whenever I thought I had acquired a comprehensive understanding of the neighborhood, it changed again.

These constant changes and adjustments will be the target of this article, and I will focus on the ways in which sociolinguistic changes – changes in the linguistic landscape – can be used to observe and understand these broader dynamics of adjustment. More in particular, attention to the linguistic landscape will teach us two things about the neighborhood:

1. The neighborhood can be understood in terms of a perpetually changing ‘infrastructure’ for superdiversity. We see how the complex demography and social stratigraphy in the neighborhood are supported by a flexible and dynamic infrastructure catering for nearly all segments of the population;
2. The central role of conviviality in the context of a rapidly changing social and cultural environment. We will see how conviviality is articulated through the choice of language in the neighborhood.

I allow myself to be inspired by recent studies on conviviality in urban spaces here, especially those studies that focus on small and everyday structures in public space as vehicles for conviviality (e.g. Hinchcliffe and Whatmore, 2006; Maitland, 2008; Simpson, 2011; Koch and Latham, 2012). Methodologically, I will draw on social-semiotic insights developed by, among others, Gunther Kress (e.g. Kress, 2009; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) and Ron Scollon and Suzie Scollon (2003), and while an extensive discussion of this approach is beyond the scope of this article (but see Blommaert, 2013; Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009), it is worth identifying the main features and assumptions that will drive the analysis.

First, the linguistic landscape refers to visual language emplaced in the neighborhood – handwritten signs, publicity signs, shop signs, graffiti, official signs, posters and any other form of publicly visible inscription (cf. Barni and Bagna, 2008); those will be the concrete data-artifacts informing my discussion. Second, we see such signs as indexicals, that is, signs that point toward the social, cultural, material and ideological contexts that generated them and in which they operate (cf. Agha, 2007; Silverstein, 2006). Thus, the concrete features of signs – the language and scripts in which they are written, their design, the material qualities of the sign as an artifact and its specific emplacement in space – tell us not just a ‘linguistic’ story (sign X expresses ‘an invitation to a party’, for instance), but also a social, cultural and political story about who throws that party, who is actually invited, what this party is about or for and so on.

The reason why we can read signs in this way bring me to the third point I need to mention here: a small semiotic–theoretical issue. Every sign points backward, toward its history of production, as well as sideways to the surrounding context, and it points
forward to its possible uptake and effect. That means that, from signs, we can reconstruct *historical practices* of communication: who addresses whom, why and how? Thus, every *sign selects an audience*, and these acts of selection can be read from the features of the sign – from its indexicals, in other words. A simple example can clarify this elementary point: when I see a sign in my neighborhood written in Mandarin Chinese, it is quite likely that I – a native, Dutch-speaking Belgian – am not an intended addressee of this sign. People fluent in Mandarin Chinese, by contrast, belong to that category of potential addressees of that sign. Thus, we can see that the historical practices we can reconstruct are, evidently, social and political practices infused by power relationship, forms of group identification, expressions and images of belonging. In that sense, a careful analysis of the small details of visual signs in a neighborhood can point us toward large social and political histories developing in that neighborhood.

We are now ready to engage with Oud-Berchem and its intensely dynamic superdiversity patterns. The storyline to follow starts from the transformations in the oldest resident ethnic minority in the neighborhood, the Turkish community. We will see that the post-1990 superdiversification of the neighborhood has offered unprecedented economic opportunities to this community, and these opportunities are grasped by a younger generation of Turkish highly educated professionals, who have transformed the ‘ethnic’ commerce in the area. Interestingly, this economic shift exploits the multilingual repertoires – Turkish and Dutch – of that new generation of upwardly mobile professionals, who can ‘open up’ their business to non-Turkish (i.e. superdiverse) customers by means of Dutch. In this superdiverse neighborhood, a particular range of heavily ‘truncated’ and accented Dutch varieties serves as the transcommunity vernacular – I call it ‘oecumenical Dutch’. Observe that this is not *one* variety – a local pidgin or Creole, for instance, but a complex *specter* of very diverse levels of fluency, all of which appear to share the function of transcommunity vernacular.

It is the default usage of this oecumenical Dutch that has gradually become the stuff of conviviality in the neighborhood: it enables an open channel of interaction over and beyond the extreme diversity of communicating actors, over and beyond degrees of fluency and control over the language, thus forming the ‘glue’ for conviviality. Oecumenical Dutch, thus, is a critical element in the dynamic infrastructure for superdiversity we encounter in the neighborhood.

As a methodological *en passant*, note that the observations I offer here cannot be backed up by standard research tools such as detailed and up-to-date demographic statistics of the area. Such statistics, as indeed any kind of ‘hard’ data on the neighborhood, are not available.1 Part of the reason for this is what has already been said: the intense and rapid change that characterizes the neighborhood, preventing any ‘snapshot’ relevance and accuracy beyond perhaps a year or so. This problem, however, shows the advantages of the approach I propose here: we see rapid change in action, long before it finds its way into more static demographic or administrative records.

**The transformation of the Turkish community**

The three layers of the population I identified earlier are, naturally, not static, nor are they homogeneous. To start with the ‘native’ layer: the area has seen, over the last handful of
years, an influx of well-to-do, highly educated young native Belgians, attracted by relatively affordable real-estate prices. Their immigration has considerably inflated the real-estate prices, especially for the type of properties these more affluent people are looking for: relatively large middle-class houses with a garden, in which some creative restyling can be done. These affluent newcomers now live next to an older, retired native working-class population, and both groups have very different demographic and socio-economic characteristics; very different lifestyles, forms of mobility and modes of consumption; and even different political preferences, attitudes toward religion and patterns of interaction with other individuals and groups. The ‘native’ layer of the population in the neighborhood is, in actual fact, deeply divided. What is more interesting, however, is the internal dynamics in the older resident immigrant community, the Turkish.

As we know, the Turkish community has immigrated into the neighborhood in the 1970s; their presence, consequently, spans now approximately three generations. Until about a decade ago, their socio-economic characteristics were similar to those observed among other immigrant groups in many other urban centers in Western Europe. Turkish immigrant communities would typically be composed of larger-than-average families with lower-than-average income. Male workers would be employed in low-skilled labor, often in vulnerable and conjuncture-sensitive sectors of the industry; chronic unemployment and underemployment would therefore be widespread. Formal employment would be supplemented by small-scale commerce, usually in groceries, bakeries or small pita and chips shops. The members of that community would typically own the houses they live in, and the value of their real estate would be very low – they would live in properties that aroused hardly any market interest.

We have also seen that new waves of immigration entered the neighborhood in the mid-1990s. Since then, we have witnessed a spectacular increase in social mobility in the Turkish community. The low-value houses they owned suddenly became a potential economic asset of sorts, as the demand for cheap accommodation in the neighborhood rose. Houses were rapidly transformed into rental accommodation with several small studios tailored to a market of short-term, transient or occasional residents. A young man called Hakan, son of a small local grocer, started a Do It Yourself (DIY) business, which was instantly successful and has since grown into a veritable empire with several outlets and more specialized add-ons for paint, wallpaper, windows, plumbing and so forth (Figure 1). The entire neighborhood now bears the marks of rebuilding and transformation done with material from Hakan’s DIY.

The influx of capital in the community created spatial mobility, therefore several Turkish families left their houses, now transformed into rental properties, and purchased properties in a more residential and middle-class suburb of Antwerp. Thus, while Turkish people still own and operate the ground-floor shops or businesses, several are no longer resident there – the demography of the neighborhood has rather profoundly changed.

Moving from the working class to a capital-intensive business such as real estate, of course, requires more than building skills. And here, a second and slower transformation within the Turkish community enters the picture and joins forces with the rapid rise of economic opportunity in the neighborhood.

Second- and third-generation Turkish immigrants increasingly obtain higher and more specialized qualifications (involving, inevitably, high levels of bilingual proficiency in
And while gaining access to the more prestigious law firms and finance corporations may still be slow and difficult, the new economic dynamics in the neighborhood offered an opportunity for young highly educated professionals to shape a new layer of ‘ethnic’ enterprise: service industries. The neighborhood now counts two Turkish-owned law offices, a Turkish general practitioner (GP) and a dentist, several financial services and accounting firms, a Turkish-owned franchise of a major bank, an industrial cleaning enterprise and a Turkish general contractor. In addition, a local branch of a major chain of pharmacies now has a Turkish female pharmacist on its staff; Turkish entrepreneurs have moved into more specialized trades such as advertising, lettering and printing, and some Turkish traders have managed to upscale their small groceries to the level of local supermarkets. Thus, we see a new stratum of economic activity among Turkish residents, not replacing the older forms of ethnic commerce, but adding to it. Figure 2 illustrates this: we see a Turkish-owned pita and chips shop next to a recently opened Turkish-owned law firm.

It is thanks to the assistance of these new specialized professionals that the transformation of the neighborhood could take place, and it was the influx of new and superdiverse groups of immigrants into the neighborhood that provoked the economic opportunity for new forms of business to set up camp and do quite well in the neighborhood. Thus, two kinds of historicity merge here in one process: the durée of gradual upward mobility across generations in the Turkish community coincides with a short-term historical fact, the changing nature of immigration into the neighborhood.
And these two coinciding processes shaped one new dynamics of change – the rapid evolution of a new entrepreneurial elite among the Turkish immigrants, driven by real-estate activities and by the resulting capital accumulation within their community. This composite dynamic has in a handful of years reshaped the whole nature, look and structure of the neighborhood. Observe that this transformation has also involved a reorganization of the networks of communication in the area, turning the younger members of the Turkish community increasingly toward outward and ecumenic patterns of communication, with everyone in the neighborhood and in more delicate and complicated modes of interaction. Explaining the details of an investment scheme demands communicative resources of a different order than those required for, say, taking orders for pitas and chips.

One final note is required here. The change in economic activities among the Turkish community was an effect of a rapid demographic transformation that created economic opportunities: money could be earned in offering accommodation for rent to newly immigrated people from all over the world. Superdiversity, so to speak, became a superb opportunity for emancipation, empowerment and economic prosperity among the Turkish community. This process is not yet finished; on the contrary, the economic symbiosis between older and new groups of immigrants is perpetually deepened and widened. The new businesses operated by members of the Turkish community employ significant numbers of new immigrants. The industrial cleaning business hires people ‘off the street’ for cleaning jobs; the general contractor, the DIY and the supermarkets...
likewise offer employment – temporary, low-skilled and not generously remunerated employment – to newcomers who are in need of money. Supply trucks of Turkish supermarkets are offloaded by Bulgarian and Russian men, African and Latin American women are recruited for occasional cleaning jobs and all do their shopping in the small groceries and night shops as well as in the more upscale supermarkets.

These newcomers thus offer the upwardly mobile Turkish-origin business elite a flexible reserve army of labor and so form a vital factor for achieving success – an elastic cheap labor market. In addition, these processes show that what I called ‘ethnic enterprise’ earlier can in fact be seen as a more porous and heterogeneous phenomenon, in which different groups collaborate in a hierarchy of labor and opportunity. Even if the basic relationship – we can safely assume – is one of pretty grim exploitation, it has at the same time an effect of social and economic cohesion. Groups that are socio-economically differently positioned nevertheless depend on each other and maintain close interactions with each other, shaping new patterns of communication usually in the kind of oecumenical Dutch we will elaborate below, and in an ambiance of what we could qualify as conviviality or moderate solidarity: scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.

Unfinished transitions

This transformation of the neighborhood happened surprisingly quickly; the move from working class to upwardly mobile professional middle class took many new entrepreneurs a mere handful of years; the same short time was needed for members of the Turkish community to adapt their houses to the endless demand for cheap rental accommodation and accumulate substantial capital that way. This rapid transformation intersected with a slower one: the emergence of a professional and highly skilled middle class among the younger generation of the Turkish community. From an average immigrant neighborhood, the area has now rapidly morphed into some kind of an ethnic middle-class or petty bourgeoisie home, in which professional and social ambitions are conspicuously displayed.

What we see here, consequently, is a newly emerging structure, a very recent one, which is still very much in the process of becoming. Language can again illuminate the complex, ambivalent and evolving nature of this process.

I mentioned earlier that the younger and more highly qualified members of the Turkish community are (and have to be) fluent bilinguals, proficient both in their Turkish home language and the advanced levels of Dutch proficiency that follow from higher education qualifications. One of the features of the new and more ambitious forms of economic activity by these younger members of immigrant groups is that they explicitly target what we can call an ‘oecumenical’ audience. Even if they bear a sometimes explicit ethnic character and even if most of their customers would be members of the same ethnic group, publicly displayed signs would almost invariably be in Dutch. Exceptions would still be written in Turkish-Dutch bilingual codes, but Dutch clearly dominates the signs in the new service industries owned by the new Turkish middle-class professionals (see Figure 3).

We see part of the window of a shop offering financial services: mortgages, accounting services, insurance and consumer credit. The information on the window (not visible
on Figure 3) is neatly organized in symmetrical bilingualism: Turkish text on the left, Dutch text on the right. The thing is, however, that the Dutch text in Figure 3 contains a glaring orthographic error. ‘Hipothecaire lening’ (mortgage) should be ‘Hypothecaire lening’, with a ‘y’ instead of an ‘i’. Similar errors in Dutch can be seen on other shop windows of more ambitious businesses in the neighborhood. Thus, for instance, the recently started Turkish-owned industrial cleaning firm advertises ‘industriële onderhoud’ (industrial cleaning), where ‘industrieel onderhoud’ would be more in line with standard Dutch. Those are emblematic features of ‘immigrant accent’ in written Dutch, effects of bilingualism and language contact that appear to persist in spite of generally very high levels of Dutch proficiency among more highly qualified young members of the Turkish community.

We thus begin to see the ambivalence of the process of transformation. An ‘old’ immigrant accent enters into a newly evolving economic stratum, testifying to the unfinished and ongoing character of the becoming of a new ethnic middle class. We see the emergence of a new order in which significantly superior linguistic and communicative resources are being displayed and used, but some defining traces of the old order are still there.

It is not unlikely that we should understand the use of Dutch in these new businesses as an expression of the fluent bilingualism of the new young entrepreneurs; we can also, and simultaneously, see it as a gesture of aspiration and ambition, characterizing the upwardly mobile by means of ‘language display’ (in the sense of Eastman and Stein, 1993) and expressing the desire to draw customers from all groups in the area. Dutch selects the widest possible audience in the neighborhood; the use of Dutch signals that all are welcome. This attempt toward language display, however, is partly unsuccessful.
– the emblematic immigrant accent shines through. It is the vernacular Dutch of actual superdiversity-on-the-ground, and its performance inevitably provokes indexicals pointing toward diversity, not assimilation. We will see presently that the Dutch displayed in Figure 3 fits into a broader category of ‘oecumenical’ Dutch signs. This vernacular Dutch is the most accurate diagnostic of the way in which the rapid social transformations in the neighborhood proceed.

**Oecumenical Dutch as a diagnostic**

The reason for this is that the oecumenical orientation in signage, expressed in the use of Dutch, is not restricted to new elite businesses in the neighborhood. We encounter it as a feature of the very many new evangelical churches that have opened in the neighborhood (Blommaert, 2011), and such varieties of Dutch are also the spoken lingua franca of the neighborhood. Consequently, whenever businesses address a broad audience, they would use Dutch – or at least approximative varieties that could be read and construed as Dutch (see Figures 4 and 5).

In Figures 4 and 5, we see signs in shops that are distinctly non-elite. In Figure 5, the shop in question is owned by an Albanian man and specializes in repairs of all kinds of electrical appliances; it also sells bottom-of-the-range used appliances very cheaply: repaired TV sets, refrigerators and stoves. It is, thus, typically a shop catering for new immigrants with not much cash to spend on household equipment, and the shop is using the volatility of residence patterns as a crucial business condition. People sometimes have to leave their homes quickly, and urgently need to sell their equipment to, among
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others, the Albanian repair shop. That shop, in turn, can sell those used goods cheaply to newcomers urgently in need of appliances; the shop owners can also repair damaged hand-me-downs given to newcomers. This shop is typically an infrastructure catering for the very specific needs of a superdiverse neighborhood.

The same goes for the shop documented in Figure 5. This shop is owned by a Turkish couple and sells cheap textile – curtains, towels, sheets and blankets – as well as some other household items such as glasses and cups, pots and pans and cutlery. Like the repair shop, it would be a shop that attracts customers from the lower end of the market: people who need to quickly and cheaply furnish their house or apartment and turn it into a pleasant home at modest expense. Again, this is obviously not an elite business. Yet, both shops use Dutch signage, but let us take a closer look.

In Figure 4, the shop window announces ‘alles elektro reparatie’. Many would identify this as pidgin Dutch; almost nothing in these three words is in accordance with Dutch linguistic and spelling rules. A more normative version of this would be ‘Alle electro reparaties’, with a plural noun ‘reparaties’, a corresponding inflected adjective ‘alle’ and with ‘electro’ written with ‘c’ rather than with ‘k’. Remarkably, a complex noun such as ‘huishoudtoestellen’ (household appliances) is spelled correctly. But the shop also promises ‘zes manden garantie’ – translated as ‘six baskets of guarantee’, because ‘manden’ (baskets) should have been ‘maanden’ (months).

We see in Figure 4 an attempt at writing Dutch manifestly hampered by severe constraints on access to normative varieties of written Dutch. Notwithstanding these constraints, Dutch is used here because it is the oecumenical lingua franca in the neighborhood. Potential customers from this shop do not belong to one specific group.
or community; they can come from any corner of the world. The safest and most neutral code to address this superdiverse population is by means of Dutch – any form of Dutch. And while the people who manufactured the lettering on the shop window were obviously well skilled in graphic techniques, standard Dutch orthography was clearly not within their purview.

The same applies to Figure 5. The handwritten sign on the window was accompanied by stills from a surveillance camera showing pictures of a man – probably a shoplifter – and the sign reads ‘wie kent dezen persoon en weet waar hij woont’ (‘who knows this person and knows where he lives’). Like in the previous example, this sign shows several orthographic problems. ‘Dezen persoon’ would have been correct until the 1950s, when the orthographic rules of Dutch were changed and ‘deze persoon’ (without final ‘n’ in the demonstrative ‘deze’) became normative. And ‘woont’ should be ‘woont’, with ‘t’ and not with ‘d’. This is an ad hoc sign, a temporary handwritten message posted because of an emergency; it is safe to assume that it was written by the shop owner and that it reflects his or her degree of fluency in written Dutch. Like in Figure 4, we see how a specific social stratum is reflected in the features of a sign: this is sub-elite Dutch, Dutch with a thick immigrant accent, and it reflects the position of its authors in the social stratification of the neighborhood. At the bottom end of the specter of oecumenical Dutch, we encounter signs, as shown in Figure 6.

This sign was posted on the window of an Internet shop operated by people from the Indian subcontinent. Internet shops, obviously, cater for the lowest segment of the
market in the area: people who have no official address and who have, therefore, no access to subscription Internet. It is impossible to determine the ‘language’ in which country names such as ‘Sut Africa’ (South Africa), ‘Tunesea’ (Tunisia) and ‘Turky’ (Turkey) are written. It is, however, possible to determine the origins of ‘Peiro’ (Peru): it is written in the Antwerp dialect, the local native vernacular variety of Dutch in which /e:/ would be pronounced as /ae:/, a sound which is written as ‘ei’. The dynamics of access, and the constraints on access to language varieties, are obvious here: the people who wrote this sign lack almost any form of access to normative varieties of Dutch; thus, they draw from an informal well of ‘how it sounds’ and convert this in a sort of eye dialect.

One final example is useful here, because it underscores the compelling dominance of oecumenical Dutch. Figure 7 shows signage on a recently closed shop.

Almost everything in the signs displayed here is in Dutch. The main sign announces that the shop has moved to another area; in announcing that, the authors write ‘verhuist’ instead of ‘verhuisd’ (‘moved’) – another example of the emblematic orthographic error in Dutch, in which orthographic difference between ‘d’ and ‘t’ signals an inflectional feature and not an acoustic one: the notorious ‘d-t rule’.

Intriguingly, the commodity previously traded in that shop was language. The business was operated by a small group of young men of Moroccan descent, and they offered driving lessons in Arabic in preparation for the Belgian driver’s license test, specifically targeting Moroccan women recently arrived in Belgium. While the driver’s license tests
are in Dutch, lessons taught in Arabic can significantly facilitate things for Moroccan-born customers whose Dutch is elementary. After a few months, and in an attempt to broaden their customer base, the business moved to an area more densely populated by Moroccan immigrants. The thing is that this business deals explicitly in services in a language other than Dutch, but that almost all the signage on the window is in Dutch – from the opening hours down to the schedule of classes and the announcement of the transfer to a different location. Manifestly, oecumenical Dutch is not just an option in this neighborhood: it is something of a compelling default, a ‘point zero’ in public communication.

The list of examples is virtually endless; the sociolinguistic stratification in this neighborhood is not just a hierarchy among languages: it is also a hierarchy within languages, notably within Dutch. Two remarks should be added to this.

First, in spite of the sometimes catastrophic orthographic challenges posed by some of the signs, they effectively communicate. Dutch, as we know, is the oecumenical medium of communication in the neighborhood. Consequently, it is performed in a bewildering range of varieties, and audiences display a remarkable elasticity and tolerance when it comes to understanding misspelled forms. Very few people would have difficulties understanding that ‘Peiro’ stands for ‘Peru’, or ‘Sut Africa’ for ‘South Africa’; the same goes for the handwritten emergency note and the ‘Alles elektro reparatie’ sign. Dutch has an oecumenical function in the area, and it therefore appears in oecumenical varieties – very few of them satisfactory in the eyes of any school teacher of standard Dutch, but most if not all of them pragmatically adequate for the purposes they need to serve. In fact, the neighborhood can be said to be characterized by precisely this oecumenical Dutch. Its emergence and density are defining features of the development of the neighborhood into a superdiverse one; they are, in other words, a defining part of the evolving and dynamic language regime of the area.

One must, however, be specific about what we observe here. I have repeatedly stressed that we are confronted not with ‘Dutch’ per se, but with highly specific and specialized ‘little bits’ of Dutch – specific resources that satisfy not just direct communicative needs such as ordering bread in a bakery but that in spite of their often minimal and ‘truncated’ character possess a gestural, emblematic and performative quality. They not just enable people to order bread but also to insert such mundane practices in a culture of conviviality; conviviality is lodged not in spectacular features and interventions, but in the generosity of small stuff of everyday contact (cf. Maitland, 2008 and Simpson, 2011).

Two, this oecumenical Dutch signals newly evolving as well as perduring structures in the neighborhood. Remarkably, the sub-elite examples in Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 belong in essence to the same sociolinguistic and indexical category as that in Figure 3 (the financial services business), even if differences in degree appear: they are all ‘Dutch with an immigrant accent’, and seeing these accented signs instantly identifies the author as an immigrant. Thus, the use of oecumenical Dutch connects the shopkeepers at the very bottom of the market to the new elite entrepreneurs who used Dutch in their shop signs as well. The rapid socio-economic restratification we witness in the area does not seem to be synchronized with a sociocultural restratification; the ‘old’ cultural features of social position – accented Dutch – occur pervasively across very different social strata now; they are a durée phenomenon.
This is where we see the unfinished character of the processes in the neighborhood: certain signs mark a dramatic and sharp upward social mobility for some groups; the same signs, however, also mark their ‘belonging’ in an older stratification, so to speak. And that anachronism characterizes both the dynamics of the social system here as well as its constraints and obstacles – we see the engines that propel people toward higher social positions, but we see, simultaneously, the factors that slow them down. Different historicities and different historical forces can be read from the same types of signs here, and their appearance in synchronic space does not suggest just one thing: it suggests complex processes in which push and pull factors interact. By attending to their complexity, such signs serve as an excellent diagnostic of what goes on below the surface as well as on the surface. If fact, we begin to understand that they are pretty astonishingly accurate chronicles of complexity.

**Infrastructures of superdiversity**

We can see how our ethnographic linguistic landscaping enables us to (1) compose a detailed image of the synchronic order present in the neighborhood and (2) to read from and through this synchronic image the traces of various asynchronous processes of becoming. We see multiple histories coincide into a ‘synchronized’ space, we see different coinciding speeds of change operating on the same process, and anachronisms marking the unfinished character of these different processes of transformation.

Among Antwerp urban planners and policy makers, Oud-Berchem is known as a ‘problematic’ neighborhood because its density of immigrants as well as their changing profiles, a higher-than-average unemployment rate and a lower-than-average income per capita all turn it into, objectively, a ‘poor’ neighborhood. Subjectively, older ‘native’ inhabitants would often bemoan what they see and experience as the decay and degradation of the neighborhood. A totalizing perception of the area dominates, and it is one of linear deterioration.

When the complexity of the environment is effectively perceived and understood, an entirely different picture of the area emerges. We can now see that in the rapidly changing and unfinished processes of transformation of the neighborhood, one maxim seems to be present: changes and transformations are governed by the need for an adequate infrastructure for the people who live there. In the words of Aboumaliq Simone (2010), ‘Infrastructure serves as a vehicle of articulation among diverse economic actors. It brings them into a proximity of relations that may be specified by certain contractual responsibilities, investment shares, and tasks, but need not be restricted to them’ (p. 12). Simone defines the essence of the process as such:

Urbanization, at is its very core, concerns the multiplication of relationships that can exist among people and things and the way in which value can be created by enhancing the circulation of people, ideas, materials, and practices and by using things that exist in more than one way. (id: 5)

And elsewhere, he writes
… existent materials of all kinds are to be appropriated – sometimes through theft and looting; sometimes through ‘heretical’ uses made of infrastructures, languages, objects and spaces; sometimes through social practices that ensure that available materials pass through many hands. The key is to multiply the uses … (Simone, 2006: 358)

Intensification of circulation, multiplicity and (‘heretical’) flexibility of function: those are exactly the features of infrastructure observed in Oud-Berchem.

Infrastructure is iconic of the area for which it functions. If the aggregate community is complex and dynamic, so will the infrastructure be. There is not one infrastructure in the neighborhood, there are several overlapping and complementary ones. The neighborhood in its totality can be seen as a complex of infrastructures for superdiversity, and all sorts of delicate interactions and relationships are constructed in and through these infrastructures. This infrastructural dimension, in fact, is probably the ‘order’ in the ‘chaos’ of the neighborhood. It is the complex logic that ties together the seemingly incoherent dynamics of the place, the apparently contradictory forces that operate on it and the absence of uniformity it displays.

We have seen that the neighborhood is composed of groups that are ethnically and socio-economically very different. Certain facilities in the neighborhood will be specific to certain groups, while others are more general in their scope. The publicly visible signs often already inform us of the preferential audiences; ethnographic immersion in them tells us the other half of the story. Let us begin by looking at some of the specific ones and work our way toward the more oecumenical ones. In the process, and as an outcome of the analysis above, we begin to distinguish a more precise view of the population in the neighborhood, considerably more refined, because of the connection with signs and activities, than the rough demographic layers I identified earlier.

1. The category of people lowest on the socio-economic ladder are the recent immigrants; they are very often residing in the neighborhood as undocumented immigrants; they can therefore not acquire an official address, no local bank account and no subscription to telephone or Internet providers. Internet shops and shops handling money transfer services are therefore typically infrastructures that cater for this group of inhabitants. Apart from an occasional outsider entering an Internet shop to buy cigarettes or soft drinks, few people outside of this category would use such facilities.

2. The same goes evidently for the local housing market, which is typically segmented into different categorical strata. On the one end, we would have the cheap and basic studios and flats rented out to newcomers; on the other end, we would have sometimes ostentatious middle-class houses with gardens, typically sold to and stylishly transformed by native, young middle-class couples. Cross-overs are very rare. But the availability of a flexible supply of cheap accommodation, located closely to important axes of mobility – the railway station, the Ring highway – turns the neighborhood into a magnet for newcomers.

3. These newcomers would also typically be the main customers of the shops we illustrated in Figures 4 and 5: places where cheap furniture, textiles, food and household appliances can be bought – cheap enough to pay cash – and where
used or damaged commodities can be repaired and maintained. The handful of laundrettes in the area would also fit this category. This ‘budget economy’ is a very conspicuous presence in the neighborhood, and some of it is also oecumenical: some chain franchises of the cheaper kind are located in the area, and they attract customers from all segments of the neighborhood.

4. The cafés and betting shops are also quite specific in the audiences they draw. In spite of the overwhelming dominance of Dutch in public signs, most of the cafés would be ‘specialized’, so to speak, and address particular ethnic groups. The Polish, Russian and Bulgarian people visit different cafés than the Turkish people and the Belgian ones.

5. Hair saloons would also be rather clearly ethnically specialized, though the picture is not uniform. There is a very high density of Turkish and Moroccan hair salons in the area – in the broader Antwerp area, Moroccans even refer to a distinct ‘Berchem style’ of haircut. Their customers would come mainly from the same communities. But some Turkish and Moroccan hair salons attract customers from all segments of the population (I myself use the services of an excellent Moroccan barber). The Belgian hairdresser, considerably more distinguished in appearance than his Turkish or Moroccan competitors, works mainly for a native (and also non-local) clientele, including the better-off Eastern European ladies who are served by a Polish and a Russian assistant in the shop.

6. The segmentation we saw in cafés does not count for restaurants. The area has a high density of Turkish restaurants, ranging from basic pita and chips bars to more elaborate pizza or specialty restaurants. They attract business from all segments of the neighborhood. Some are quite popular among students attending the secondary school in the neighborhood – delicious and affordable snacks can be purchased for lunch there.

7. The same goes for night shops. They are usually owned and operated by new immigrants, but their customer base is very broad. Food, alcohol and tobacco can be purchased there until the early hours of the morning.

8. And for the groceries, both the small ones and the supermarket-size ones. There is a superb daily supply of fresh vegetables and fruits, and plenty of choice. All segments of the population go there. The quite numerous bakeries in the area (mainly owned by Moroccan and Turkish bakers) also work oecumenically. And while the Belgian butcher in the area supplies primarily Belgian customers, the two Moroccan ones sell their halal produce to anyone.

9. The more specialized ‘ethnic’ businesses – the doctor, the dentist, the lawyers and financial services providers – mostly cater to audiences from their own ethnic community. One of the lawyers, however, is a community leader representing the Berchem area in the City Council.

10. Pharmacies, medical doctors, banks and other established service suppliers operate for everyone in the neighborhood. The same goes for the schools in the area, the welfare offices, social employment offices and the branch of the local administration and police.

11. A special role is played by the providers of building and construction materials and services. The Hakan DIY is probably the most oecumenical shop in the area,
attracting customers from all walks of life. The same goes for a native-owned hardware shop, where just a slight predominance of native customers can be noted. The industrial cleaning firm and the building contractor operate in a more regional market.

We now begin to see a highly intricate web of relationships between the various infrastructures in the area, a specific sort of order. Some facilities are primarily used by small and specific groups of people, but many are used by all; ethnic and class lines are crossed continuously, there are numerous meeting points in the area and invisible lines tying separate groups together in transactions and other forms of engagement; and the availability of cheap food, fresh bread and vegetables 7 days per week is not just good for low-income people but also a convenient aspect of life for the middle-class inhabitants. The same goes for night shops: middle-class Belgians who get an unexpected visitor at night can still fetch a decent bottle of wine or a selection of special Belgian beers from the night shops and avoid social embarrassment that way.

The relationships between the various segments of the population in the neighborhood are, thus, multifaceted and intense, and they contribute to a level of social cohesion and conviviality that stands in sharp contrast to the public image of decay and degradation in the area. Violent crime is rare, and incidents trigger great inter-ethnic solidarity. When a specialized chocolate shop, owned by Belgian-Italian people, went up in fire a handful of years ago, the shop owners and their children were rescued and evacuated by their Turkish neighbors; a fire disaster in a Turkish-owned supermarket likewise provoked a wave of solidarity and spontaneous support across the neighborhood. The Gujarati grocer borrows the Belgian newspapers from his neighbor, a Moroccan hairdresser; and a night shop owned by a man from Afghanistan sells every possible variety of Polish beers and vodka because his neighbors are Polish construction workers. As mentioned, new immigrants can find temporary and low-paid jobs in the flourishing new businesses in the neighborhood. There is no reason to picture this particular kind of relationship in romantic colors, but it is a relationship of mutual dependency nonetheless.

One of the crucial infrastructures in this superdiverse neighborhood is oecumenical Dutch – the low-threshold non-standard varieties of Dutch that can be picked up in the area without formal instruction, and used, often in an emblematic and gestural fashion, in interactions in which interlocutors display surprising levels of elasticity in production and interpretation. The use of this oecumenical Dutch – a feature that does not exclude anyone in the area – is the mark of conviviality; we have seen it displayed publicly, and it can also be heard whenever inhabitants of the neighborhood greet each other or exchange what is known as small talk. This form of Dutch, then, facilitates the low-intensity routine engagements between very different inhabitants of the neighborhood, and public signage in this variety of Dutch points the way toward its importance in the neighborhood.

Language is quite often overlooked in studies of social conduct in urban space, and more attention has gone toward the material-infrastructural and spatial-architectural (topographic or cartographic) features of the city (for a critique, see Koch and Latham, 2012). Even studies on various forms of performance in public space, including (perhaps surprisingly) those of Erving Goffman, tend to pay only superficial attention to the
non-arbitrary nature of the actual linguistic resources employed and deployed in such events (e.g. Simpson, 2011; but compare Vigouroux, 2010). I hope to have made a sound case for paying more and more structured attention to it, especially in studies on conviviality and especially in attempts toward comparison.

There are good reasons for that. Linguae francae such as the oecumenical varieties of Dutch historically always fulfill this function of conviviality, they are always the ‘neutral’ medium used in highly diversified communities where, on the face of it, the overwhelming amount of differences between people should produce highly unstable and conflict-ridden social environments. The literature on pidgin languages is replete with such cases (e.g. Hymes, 1971; Mufwene, 2004). In Oud-Berchem, oecumenical Dutch signals even in minimal forms the desire not to activate this potential for conflict and to achieve understanding, not misunderstanding. Such understanding does not require massive amounts of interaction or advanced levels of exposure, fluency and complexity. Understanding each other does not only happen when people can discuss Schopenauer with each other – a common error in thinking about language in the context of migration. It happens when people exchange pleasant small talk and engage with each other in clearly delineated and flagged interactional routines. Thus, while most of us have learned to disregard small and routine talk as relatively unimportant – it is often seen as the prelude or coda to ‘serious’ talk – we see that it is in actual fact a massively important feature of social structure. Small talk in non-standard varieties of language is, in fact, the very ‘stuff’ of conviviality, and thus a key infrastructure of superdiversity.

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1. The Belgian social geographer Maarten Loopmans, however, has done extensive research on Oud-Berchem, see Loopmans (2006). I am grateful to Maarten for several stimulating discussions and exchanges of findings on the topic of the neighborhood.
References


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