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## Spaces of Multilingualism<sup>1</sup> (Gent/Brussels 2004)

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## 1. Introduction

The central issue in this paper is: how does space organize regimes of language?<sup>2</sup> Can space be seen as *constitutive* and *agentive* in organizing patterns of multilingualism? And if so, how can we start bringing that into focus? The questions, as so often, are derived from rather commonsense observations. People with highly developed multilingual skills can feel, and be, communicatively incapacitated when they are ‘out of place’. One can find oneself struggling with the most basic and mundane tasks in a foreign country - trying to do some shopping in the vegetables section of a supermarket or trying to buy a train ticket - because ‘they don’t speak *your* language’, ‘they don’t speak *any* language’, or, from a different perspective, because you lack the specific multilingual resources and skills required in that place. It is undoubtedly an experience many of us share – an experience in which a change in spatial environment clearly affects our capacity to deploy linguistic resources and skills, and imposes a set of requirements on us which we fail to meet. Physical space and distance become cultural and social and start having semiotic effects. This is one particular instance of dealing with deterritorialization, one part of the experience of Late Modernity that we try to address.

The question of agentivity is central here, and should be underscored right from the start: what happens in such instances is not the individual *losing* multilingual resources or skills or *having* a lack of capacity to communicate and interact, but the particular environment that *organizes* a particular regime of language, a regime which *incapacitates individuals*. A lack of competence to communicate adequately is here not seen as a problem *of* the speaker, but as a problem *for* the speaker, lodged not in individual forms of deficit or inability, but in the mapping between individual communicative potential and requirements produced by the environment. Individuals maintain (and may even expand) their repertoires and skills, but the function and value of these resources and skills in that particular environment have changed. What worked well elsewhere does not work well in that place, and we feel at a loss. Stated in the clearest possible terms: communication problems in such situations are the

result of how individuals and their communicative ‘baggage’ are inserted into regimes of language valid in that particular space. The consequence is that space in itself demands closer investigation if we intend to analyze the way in which multilingualism operates in and across societies nowadays. Every communicative event develops in a particular space, and this space may influence the event in non-arbitrary ways.

The effort we are doing should be seen as inspired by recognizing the need to come to terms with globalization in the sense that it causes a need for a better integration of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and social theory. We strongly believe that such integration requires an empirical program that addresses language diversity and interaction in their situated co-occurrence as well as language hierarchy and systemic processes holding across situations and transcending localities.

This is not an original exercise, there are many precursors. But what we intend to add to it is an orientation to questions of the balance between stability and creativity, systemic aspects versus versatile and unpredictable aspects of social processes. Such tensions, we believe, become increasingly prominent in our field of study as the result of globalization processes. Authors such as Jacquemet (2000) and Rampton (1998) have coined terms such as ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘transidiomaticity’ for it, identifying disconnections between language practices and resources on the one hand, and conventional attributions of such practices and resources on the other (see also Silverstein 1998 and the collection of essays in Coupland 2003). And others have emphasized the way in which diasporic communicative resources reshuffle existing language hierarchies and reorder patterns of indexicality (Rampton 1995; Harris, Leung & Rampton 2001).

Such insights are valuable, but we believe that we need to complement them with more refined ways of looking at the precise movements people (and their symbolic attributes) make through different environments. Describing such moves is not enough, we need to identify the larger frames within which such moves are possible, get enabled, get denied, and have effects. And we shall do so from within ethnography: an ethnography that intends to start developing an argumentation about language competencies and what counts as competencies in real environments. The issue of competencies has been dealt with in the past, but rarely as something which is

connected to situated occurrences in an environment which has its own spatio-temporal characteristics. Ethnography forces us to address this situatedness and thus, to destabilize the seemingly static notion of ‘competencies’ as a set of attributes of individuals. Multilingualism should not be understood as ‘full competence in different languages’, despite dominant ideologies which emphasise complete facility. Haviland (2003) shows the contrasts between ideologies focusing on ‘full competence’ and, what one could refer to as ‘truncated multilingualism’: linguistic competencies which are organised topically, on the basis of domains or specific activities. The phenomenon of ‘truncated multilingualism’ is extremely widespread. Rampton’s (1995) work on crossing shows that speakers may creatively appropriate the voices of others across language boundaries, while possessing a very limited knowledge of the languages being appropriated. For instance, Anglo-youngsters who ‘crossed’ into Jamaican Creole cannot be considered ‘completely’ bilingual. The same applies for the Japanese rap-artists discussed by Pennycook (2003) who insert American English, topically organised expressions, into their Japanese lyrics. Further examples are given below.

We also adopt the idea, central to contemporary ethnography, that meaningful behavior is organized *indexically* and that language is an ideological object, i.e. an object invested with social and cultural interests, not just a vehicle for (denotational, neutral) meaning (see Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Gal & Woolard 2001; Haviland 2003). Indexicality forces us to look at social processes as culturalized, i.e. as turned into complexes of meaningful and understandable (indexical) items that offer semiotic potential to people.

The argument is theoretical, though it is based on fieldwork done in the Summer/ Fall of 2003 and Spring of 2004 in immigrant neighborhoods in Ghent, a middle-size city in Belgium.<sup>3</sup> This fieldwork started from an analysis of space (the identification and delineation of ‘neighborhoods’) and then moved into analyses of different patterns of multilingualism within and across the neighborhoods. This approach forced us to keep the historical and spatial anchoring of patterns of language use in focus, while allowing us at the same time to concentrate on the details of the situated deployment of linguistic-communicative resources and skills. The reflections that follow are one result of this project. We shall organize them as follows.

The core of our argument will be spelled out in the next section. There, we shall suggest that space should be seen in connection to scaling processes. Movements across space involve movements across scales of social structure having indexical value and thus providing meaning to individual, situated acts. We do this against the background of a semiotic model in which meaningful conduct is seen as oriented towards *orders of indexicality*: indexical meanings organized in layered, stratified patterns emanating from centers (authoritative individuals or institutions: schools, government, the church etc., see Blommaert 2004 for details). Environments are polycentric and individuals orient to multiple centers. But, we shall argue, such polycentric systems involve different scales, differences between the range and scope of meanings and meaningful social behavior, some of which are strictly local-situational, others being translocal (national, transnational, ethnic, political...).

After having laid out this general sketch of our proposal, we will engage with two bodies of theory which may be fruitfully and productively re-read in light of what went before. We shall first engage with some of Goffman's (1974, 1981) suggestions about frames and situatedness, as we believe that they offer us interesting ways of converting the seeming stativity of the notions of space and scale into analysable, dynamic wholes with observable processes of social conduct. Next, we shall discuss Pierre Bourdieu's emphasis on situated contact as reflective of a determinate political order with effects of positioning (immediate situational effects and long-term implications). For Bourdieu, competence assessment is always at play in situated contact.

After having reviewed these bodies of literature, we will move on to how our approach can have an effect on established notions of multilingual 'competencies'. Given the different view on agentivity on which we insisted above, we argue that judgements about competence are themselves situation-based and sensitive to scale. Consider, for example, the differing judgements made on the basis of brief conversational or written exchanges versus national language tests, all of which are always subject to challenge and revision. Also relevant here are the studies cited above on crossing and truncated multilingualism: situations of translinguistic encounter where there are sharp differences in knowledge of relevant language varieties across a group of interactants. Although we are interested in repertoires and

skills as these are manifest in individuals and groups, we give priority to “what counts as competence” in real environments. Linguists and sociolinguists have well-known models of linguistic and communicative competence which, while undeniably part of any discussion of what it means to ‘know a language,’ are unsuited to our purposes, for we are interested in speakers’ and writers’ communicative goals *as understood in particular situations*; the competencies expected and attributed by participants in the given environment; and the processes of negotiation and repair that attend all communicative practices. This perspective gives us an entrée to the knowledge of language and how-to-speak that are focal concerns of older models of competence as well as commonsense notions of ‘knowing a language,’ but does so in ways that do not posit unrealistic uniformity in the knowledge of individuals or groups.

## ***2. From Trajectories to Scales***

As has frequently been observed of the contemporary period, we live in an era of globalization, resulting in transnational flows of capital, commodities, human populations, cultural artifacts, and linguistic practices (Bauman, 1998; Castells, 1996). One notable result has been increased cultural contact and conflict, increased linguistic diversity and tension, resulting in quotidian as well as formal public challenges to inherited Western assumptions about linguistic uniformity, cultural homogeneity, and national membership (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2000). Such tensions and conflicts must now be worked out in a context of increasing social and economic inequality in which minority status, diaspora identity, and social class conditions interact to form the dynamic “immigrant problem” found in most states in Western Europe and North America (Gal, 1989; Rampton, 1995) – states formally committed to the goals of sociocultural and economic integration as the basis for citizenship and a stable political order.

At the most basic level, our concern with space is part of an attempt to come to terms with globalization and diaspora *as features of sociolinguistic analysis*. It stems from an awareness that processes and phenomena such as globalization and diaspora are of a different order than, say, strictly situational forms of mixedness and hybridity, and that terms such as ‘trajectories’ and ‘flows’ do not adequately cover what is at

issue here. The issue, we believe, is one of *scale*. Processes such as diaspora are *structural* processes which develop over long spans of time and result in *lasting*, or at least more or less permanent, social reconfigurations. They thus also result in lasting sociolinguistic and discursive reconfigurations, perduring conditions for communicative practice so to speak, which have effects across wide ranges of situations for everyone involved. Thus, the presence of immigrants in an urban environment not only affects the multilingual repertoires of the immigrants (who find themselves confronted with the task of acquiring the communicative resources of the autochthonous population), but also those of the autochthonous population (who find themselves confronted with linguistic-communicative processes and resources previously ‘alien’ to their environment) and of local and national institutions (now facing administrative subjects with widely varying degrees of competence in the required communicative skills for administrative practice). It affects, in other words, the sociolinguistic economy of the *place*, not only of the individuals living or using it. It affects sociolinguistic patterns and processes at a *systemic* level, it reconfigures the sociolinguistic system (Hymes 1996).

The point merits substantial elaboration, for its potential effects are substantial as well. Let us first consider some of the wider background of the problem, and then move into sociolinguistics as a possible field of application.

Scale and scaling processes are a key concern in World Systems Analysis – WSA (Wallerstein 1983, 2000, 2001). In WSA, the world is seen as a system of capitalist production and exchange between structurally different parts of the world: centers, semiperipheries and peripheries. There are relatively stable (systemic) relations between these different parts, probably best caught under the image of a ‘division of labor’. Peripheries are parts characterized by a low level of accumulation of capital and the production of basic resources (e.g. minerals). Within the capitalist system, peripheries are economically dependent on other – central – parts. These centers are parts characterized by service economies, the production of finished (and thus high-profit) goods, and a high level of capital accumulation. Semiperipheries are parts ‘in-between’ centers and peripheries, with some level of high-profit production but with significant degrees of dependence on centers. Relations of dependence are primarily economic in WSA, but more recent globalization theories have extended the

range of objects of dependence to include immaterial goods – cultural and linguistic goods, for instance. The ‘value’ of goods from the centers is systemically higher than that of the (semi-)peripheries. In the field of language, such relations of inequality are expressed, for instance by the high prestige attributed to ‘central’ accents of English – UK and US – among non-native speakers, as opposed to the low prestige attributed to linguistically equivalent, but ‘peripheral’ accents such as Indian or Nigerian English.

The point is that such processes of dependence and inequality occur not at one level – the world – but also at other, smaller levels. Center-periphery patterns valid at a worldwide scale also occur for instance within a geopolitical region (think of the expanding EU as a case in point), within one state (the capital versus rural areas) and even within cities, towns or neighborhoods (reflected, often, in real estate prices). They occur in all kinds of symbolic spaces too: Yale University is more ‘central’ than the University of Dar es Salaam, or even the University of Northern Kentucky, while the University of Northern Kentucky is still more ‘central’ than that of Dar es Salaam (Blommaert & Van der Donckt 2003 provide an example of such scaling patterns). And this relationship exists both in real terms – it is not unlikely that Yale is a ‘richer’ institution than the University of Dar es Salaam or of Northern Kentucky – as well as in symbolic terms, a point well established by Pierre Bourdieu. In fact, one could argue that the world is turned into a cultural artefact by organizing it along different hierarchically ordered scales.<sup>4</sup>

Though the various scales operate with some degree of autonomy and according to rules largely internal to them, the different scales are interlocked. State-level activities, for instance, such as policies in education, are responsive both to influences from higher-level, transnational scales (consider the growing concern with English in almost every education system in the world) as well as from lower-level, intra-national scales (the national and regional political dynamics, the predominance of particular parties over others, minority issues...). Hierarchical relations between scales are unpredictable: when there is a conflict between local and transnational (globalization) pressures on a government, for instance, it is by no means sure that the transnational influences will prevail. But the point is: scales are not neutral items, they attribute meaning, value, structure and characteristics to the processes that they are part of.

If taken in this sense, the notion of scale offers an important extension of notions of trajectories, networks or flows central to globalization theory (e.g. Appadurai 1990; Castells 1996). All these notions suggest spatiality and mobility across spaces, and are therefore valuable. But at the same time, they often do not address the characteristics of the spaces across which people, signs and goods move<sup>5</sup>. Flows do not develop in empty spaces, but must be seen as movements across spaces filled with all kinds of attributes and features, both materially and symbolically. Not all spaces are equal, as we all know. A move from Kenya to the UK is a move from the periphery of the world to one of its centers, and the ‘peripheral’ resources and features people bring with them in such a move get re-ordered and re-loaded, so to speak, in the ‘central’ economy in which they land (Blommaert 2003). Some spaces are wealthy and prestigious, others are not, some are open to all while others require intricate and extensive procedures of entrance (a university, the job market, welfare, for instance). And all spaces stand in some kind of relationship with each other – a relationship of power and value impossible to establish beforehand, but nevertheless real and in need of inquiry. The notion of scale precisely emphasizes the idea that spaces are ordered and organized in relation to one another, stratified and layered, with processes belonging to one scale entering processes of another scale – as when skin color, social class backgrounds or a particular regional (‘peripheral’) accent starts influencing real-time situated interactions (Gumperz 1982; Gumperz & Roberts 1991; Hall & Slembrouck 2002), when media reporting starts influencing how people actually talk about their life, or when everyday experience starts feeding into media reporting and policy (Blommaert et al. 2003). Spaces, and the scales at which they can be imagined, are semiotic sources from which all kinds of indexical meanings can be derived.

It is our aim to foreground this reality of spatiality. When talking about trajectories, networks and flows, it is important to see where precisely the trajectory starts and where it ends, across which spaces flows occur, and what particular spaces are connected in networks, knowing that the spaces themselves have an influence on what people can do and can become in them. An American lawyer living in Belgium represents a different trajectory than that of a Senegalese lawyer living in Belgium. The children of a Swedish immigrant will be treated differently in Belgian schools

than those of an immigrant from Albania or Bangladesh. The spaces where they come from, the spaces where they end up, and the relations between these spaces all have some effect on the capacity of individuals to construct identities, to communicate, to create social networks and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Let us now bring this down to sociolinguistics. Part of the ‘socio’ in sociolinguistics should address spatial aspects and dimensions of language and communication, assuming that every instance of human communication always has an intrinsic temporality to it (or even historicity – Blommaert 1999) as well as an intrinsic spatiality. Every communication event develops in some time-frame and in some space, and both, as we know, have effects on what happens and can happen. More in particular, what we suggest is to pay far more attention to space *as an agentive force in sociolinguistic processes*. Space is part of what we understand by ‘context’, and context, as Gumperz (1982) and others have argued at length, is not a passive ‘décor’ but an active, agentive aspect of communication. Context (including space) *does something* to people when it comes to communicating. It organizes and defines sociolinguistic regimes: every space would be characterized by sets of norms and expectations about communicative behavior – orders of indexicality - and entering such a space would involve the imposition of the sets of norms and rules on those who enter it and invoke potentially meaningful relations between that scale and others (e.g. the local versus the national or the global). This has effects on (a) what people can or cannot do, it imposes some forms of behaviour while it disqualifies or renders impossible other forms, it structures patterns of behavior; (b) on the ‘value’ and function of their sociolinguistic repertoires; (c) consequently on their identities, both self-constructed (inhabited) and ascribed by others. At this point, we emphasise that space *does something* to people, we realise also that people in interaction semiotically create and modify space (as we discuss below).

Whenever we focus on space as an agentive force in sociolinguistic processes, we involve issues of scale. Every human interaction develops strictly situationally, at a microscopic scale of social structure. Yet, it is always embedded in larger patterns – linguistic, social, cultural, historical – and draws meaning from these larger patterns (the fact that an interaction develops in the same language variety, for instance, is a higher-scale influence on a strictly situational event). So the specific space in which

interactions develop becomes the nexus of influences from various scales,<sup>7</sup> some strictly situational and uniquely creative, others conventional and tied to larger scales at which orders of indexicality operate. Single spaces are meaningful in relation to other spaces, and such connections involve different scales.

In fact, one could argue that indexicality – as the connection between signs and contexts – will always involve scalar aspects. Some signs will index strictly situational things, others will invoke the national order of things (as when people switch into standardized varieties of languages), features of transnational cultural or social spaces (e.g. business elites, popular music), and/or blends and mixtures of all of these. A shift in topic or event structure may thus occasion a shift in scale, for instance from a strictly situational scale to a transnational one, involving shifts in the orders of indexicality valid at each of these scales.

Consider this example, taken from a spam advertisement for a fast language learning program. A scene is sketched of someone – a male, Anglophone business executive – flying to another country to conduct a business meeting.

“A soft, cotton cloud landing and worry falls away. You’re in a foreign country now, but things don’t seem so foreign. You’ve planned well. Confidence is on your side when you speak the language. “Take me to the hotel, please...keep the change”. A concierge later and you’re in bed watching their local news, humming “It’s a small world after all”.

A bit of free time, then that important meeting. Shopping. Definitely! You take in the sights and bites, flash camera lights, and wander through a market’s door. Chocolate, cheese and bread. So many favorites to bring back, but the setting sun lets you know this satisfying day is almost done. You take a quick detour in search of nightlife and spark enjoyable conversations with the locals. You talk and laugh – a variety of subjects – but when jetlag catches up with you, you know it’s time to call it a night.

Today’s your big day. You warmly greet everyone in their native tongue and engage them with the most tasteful anecdotes from your evening escapade. Everyone’s laughing before you signal that you’re ready to begin. Your

proposal resonates with all. You could've translated it, but what's the point? They learn those business terms in English, any way.”

The advertisement invites us to imagine subtle shifts in space – from one country to another, from one social domain and activity type into another. The subject here travels from, say, the US to Belgium. The main purpose is business, but apart from that he has to take care of everyday things – catching a taxi and checking into his hotel – and has to engage in mundane local activities – shopping and going out. These domains are presented as developing in the ‘local’ language: in order to blend into the local economy of social life, the preferred order of indexicality is one in which use of the local language is important (in order to be ‘happy’, according to the corporation airing this ad). However, as soon as the subject engages in activities within another domain, that of business, the local language is sidelined, because the locals “learn those business terms in English, any way.” So we are facing a typical instance of ‘truncated multilingualism’ and we see in this example how such multilingualism is structured and regimented by spaces and relations between spaces. The businessman travels, and this displacement encourages him to ‘learn’ a particular linguistic resource, Dutch. Dutch only functions in the place where he conducts his business, Belgium; it would be of no use if the meeting were held in Germany or France – the ‘local’ language is by definition not exportable, it is a low-mobility resource. Moreover, the deployment of Dutch is in strictly ‘local’ and individual-centered activities, activities at the lowest scale of social structure. His deployment of English, in contrast, is subject to other orders of indexicality. The meeting might as well have been conducted in Germany or France, its structure and regime of language would be identical. The activity is ‘translocal’, the linguistic resources mobilized for it operate at a higher scale and require exportability and mobility across spaces and situations. The shift from Dutch to English is a hierarchical shift, a case of ‘upscaling’ from a local-individual to a translocal, institutional and transnational order. Note, however, that in the advertisement Dutch and English are presented as equivalent, both are ‘languages’ (“when you speak *the* language”). This suggestion of ‘full languageness’ for Dutch obviously obscures the fact that we are facing two very different,

hierarchically ordered resources. The function and value of both ‘languages’ is very different.<sup>8</sup>

Our emphasis on space as agentive in shaping and organizing regimes of language is at odds with many of the basic assumptions in past and current research on multilingualism. To their credit, the vast literatures on multilingualism have long ago called into question the nationalist obsession with “a language and a people.” Researchers surveying Europe (Fishman 1978) and North America (Ferguson and Heath, 1981) have shown that the normal order of things is for linguistic multiplicity within groups, and, more particularly, within those large-scale entities we call nations or states. Nonetheless, within such formulations, there is still an emphasis on skill and competence as *properties of individuals*. A person is said to know this or that set of languages; to have varying degrees of competence with a repertoire of codes, to have control over a particular kind of multilingual set of linguistic resources. This kind of statements – that multilingualism, or knowledge of language in general, is a feature or a form of property of an individual – is a central assumption in linguistics. While such statements express their own truths, they presuppose the individual and his or her knowledge or skill a stable entity and secure starting point for analysis. The study of multilingual groups is still the analysis of groups of individuals who are varyingly multilingual. Problems with multilingualism are presented as problems of individuals, whose linguistic repertoires are assessed as to their degree of fit with norms, rules and expectations. Linguistic and communicative problems are individualized (often also pathologized – Kress 2002), and the solution to such problems is often one in which the individual ‘repairs’ or expands his/her linguistic repertoire and skills (“learn a new language in ten days!”).

### ***3. Scales, space and situational frames***

We propose a different starting point: That knowledge of language is rooted in situation, that it is dynamically distributed across individuals as they engage in practices. This position begins from an old sociolinguistic insight: That how people use language is strongly influenced by the situation in which they find themselves. Put otherwise: Some situations call forth our speech; others silence us. This

sociolinguistic fact was shown over thirty years ago by Labov, in a critique of quasi-experimental studies of minority language deficits, in which he showed that a small African American boy who was silent and inarticulate in an interview with an unknown researcher grew excited and voluble when joined by a friend and the interview was reframed as “part-of-play” (Labov 1972). But it was Goffman, in the essay “The neglected situation” (Goffman 1972) and much else of his work, who insisted on the central importance of co-present others in spatial arrays, of interaction and space, for the practice and meaning of speech. For example, at a crowded party or reception people form conversational groups, showing with their arrayed bodies whether or not a newcomer is welcome or not to join the talk. Or consider the postural, facial, and verbal demeanor of college students once a lecture or discussion has started versus their clustering and animated talk in hallways just before and after classes. Focusing on space inserts language into semiotic complexes, including participation frames, topics, genres of discourse, material and symbolic resources, and so forth (Scollon & Scollon 2003).

The emphasis on communicative situation is not new. It has been explored in the large literature on the ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics (Bauman & Sherzer, Hymes 1974, Brenneis & Myers 1986). Similarly, the insistence that knowledge display, creation, and sharing is a situated interactional accomplishment was early on insisted upon by ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967, Sacks, 1999, Schiffrin 1999). Both emphases have been taken up by the new psychological work emphasizing learning as situated practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Holland et al 1998). Studying learning outside of formal educational settings, e.g. among tailors in Liberia and office workers in the United States, they found that the knowledge trajectory from novice to expert requires participation in groups, often beginning “on the periphery” of spatial-action configurations, and that such groups often constitute “communities of practice”, that is, communities that construct themselves around certain spaces in and for the doing of something, whether it be making cloth, in learning not to be a problem drinker, making software or learning the world of romance in college.

Goffman’s enormously rich and complex concepts of ‘frame’ and ‘footing’ can be fruitfully applied in the discussion here (Goffman 1986 [1974], 1981). Frame

analysis is fundamentally congruent with the idea of a spatial analysis in which individuals are seen as inhabiting and traversing physical spaces in the course of a day's and night's social activities. Note that the very idea of a 'frame' is a spatial metaphor. Frame is thus potentially a powerful concept for connecting (i) space as already there before any activity begins and as designed to routinely embody the triggers for certain activities and courses of action to typically unfold, and (ii) space as inhabited, appropriated, shaped and (re)configured by occupants for the purposes of and during social activities. If frame offers a double outlook on the organisation of social experience, a view on the pre-situational (*the frame within which to work*) and the situationally-produced (*a frame which is put around/layered over*), then 'footing' brings out how interactants are positioned and monitor their positioning (verbally or otherwise). Applied in combination, the two concepts accompany the analytical eye in moving from observations of physical space and its constraints for activity over participant-configured (culturalized) activity contours and frames of reference to the production and interpretation of sequentially-implicated moves in interaction. Goffman's insistence that the facts of interaction have to be considered relative to "the full physical arena" (1981:136) brings out the complex dynamics of interdependent participation frameworks, as organised by, around and within spatial delimitations. Note that the exercise can easily be performed at the level of immigrant neighbourhood<sup>9</sup> and be repeated for each item in the range of sites within its spatial contours, some with more open 'traffic', others relatively secluded. The attention to situational complexes of activity encourages us also not to divorce verbal and other interactive behaviour from the flux of moving/acting bodies in physical spaces (Goodwin 2000). In fact, one must begin to start addressing the indexicalities of talk which was (over)heard or seen but not understood. School teachers often note how a switch into, say, Turkish, is felt to be excluding, threatening or conspiratorial in the absence of knowledge of that language (see also the second case discussed in Haviland (2003) where the code-switching into Spanish by domestic workers in a nursing home in Oregon resulted in dismissal because residents found communication that they could not understand to be upsetting<sup>10</sup>).

Frame analysis draws attention both to how physical spaces are part of the conditions for establishing social activities (e.g. a doctor's cabinet with a desk, chair,

PC, stretcher-type table, etc.) but views the establishment of social activities equally as outcomes of interaction. In this sense, frame is at once locus, outcome and focus of situated interaction. It is the locus within which the frames of situated social activities are established and organised, often sequentially-implicated in bodily movements across physical space. For instance, a medical consultation is typically initiated when in the doctor's cabinet and not while the doctor accompanies a patient in the lobby of the practice. Frames are also the focus of interaction in the sense that Goffman invites analytic attention to the dynamics and flux of implicit and explicit spatial boundary marking as part of the monitoring and mounting of activities, often with short- or long-lived relationships of inclusion and exclusion as a result (the dynamics of 'chalk lines' drawn around participants, objects, behaviours, etc., when participants shifts between frames or when frames are 'keyed' in a particular way). An example here are the various sub-groupings and regroupings which may occur in the interactional flow of a morning's activities in a classroom. These are bound to leave visible traces in the room and will be attended to by participants; at various points they will even constitute the topic and focus of the talk. Such (re)configuring activity tends to be structured along fairly predictable lines, but this is by no means a foregone conclusion. The questions that can be raised are to do with leeway for departure from established practice and the relative permanence/transience of any alternative or competing configurations. Alternatively configured spaces typically come with a "memory" of a default, a temporary injunction with a more dominant frame 'on standby'. However, more than Goffman, we wish to emphasise the conditions that follow from pre-situational frames at various levels (physical spaces, activities, allowable departures, etc.).

The set of distinctions between 'dominating/subordinate communication', with 'focal' and 'non-focal activity' (in the form of 'by-play between ratified participants', 'side-play involving non-ratified participants' or 'cross-play involving a non-ratified and a ratified participant') not only stress the complex multiplicity of simultaneous and sequentially-unfolding frame layers, the set also encourages one to think in terms of hierarchical relationships subject to assessment, sanctioning and disciplining. It is a dimension of Goffman's work that can be developed thematically in an ethnographic take on the local, enacted politics of interactional economies,

especially when complemented by an analysis of contextualisation practice vis-à-vis multilingual repertoires. Thus, distinctions made between ‘focal’ and ‘non-focal activity’/‘dominating’ and ‘subordinate activity’ bring out the need to address multiple points of view on the legitimacy of space-partionings as well as multiple interpretative takes on a singular ‘set of events’. For instance, seen from within the dominant classroom frame, an immigrant pupil’s question about a concept raised in a presentation by another pupil may count as a request for clarification; from within a subordinating frame, the same question may articulate a protest against social exclusion; a similar interpretative duality may reside in the frame break accomplished by the pupil who started dancing on the classroom tables or, in a less out-of-frame variant, the glances of mutual understanding exchanged between two friends in the third row.<sup>11</sup>

Goffman’s original frame analysis came with the presupposed homogeneity of an intra-group perspective, with ample attention paid to the intricate dynamics of activity-staging and delineation but with little attention paid to overt and covert conflicts over and policing of framed and frameable spaces. While the Goffmanian idea of “frame space” (Hanks 1996:170) states the range of roles that can be occupied legitimately by social subjects in a situation and the leeway they have for stretching or keying these in particular directions, it says fairly little about the politics of departures from these – both in situations where frame space is stretched beyond certain boundaries or in situations where interactants fail to occupy a frame space. This happens, for instance, when in the multilingually constituted classroom, code switching away from the dominant language in side-play is being interpreted as indexical of ghetto-like aspirations or as threatening to certain policy-stated goals of social integration. The same applies in the courtroom context when a linguistically disadvantaged defendant’s silence in court is interpreted as self-condemning non-contestation, as in another case detailed in Haviland (2003). What needs to be added is a view on frame dynamics in interaction as patterned, as value-laden, as subject to multiple points of view and interpretations, as implicated in determinate political orders and as irreversibly and accumulatively transformed in the sociolinguistic systems of new multilingual urban zones.

In addition, the interactional dynamics of space partitioning involves complex forms of behaviour which result in including/excluding participants from a focus of activity (it may also result in establishing alternative, competing foci/activities). Goffman has drawn attention to how specific interactional moves affect frames (expand, narrow down or realign who can participate and what the nature of the activity will be). Code switching is listed among them. Processes of inclusion/exclusion are a central concern for analyses of multilingualism, although such a concern clearly needs to be followed up well beyond the contours of frame analysis (cf. our discussion of ‘linguistic paranoia’ above). Goffman’s analytical scope was largely restricted to conditions of co-presence in the here-and-now flux of social activities. The set of attendant analytical pairs which he developed in his writings (centre/margin, focus/background, simultaneous/interdependent and permanent/transient), however, can be fruitfully extended and developed to address the scale at which micro-processes are being read. For instance, Goffman’s work alerts us to such possibilities as that centre/periphery-relations in neighbourhood group relations may be replayed in the seating arrangements in classrooms (this may involve pupils securing they remain within earshot of preferred overhearers – and teachers trying to effect the opposite). The plot (or description) thickens when such a situation results in the establishment of interdependent frames which compete for attention. In such a situation it is not all unthinkable that different ‘codes’ function as major signalling devices for the enactment of frames, and that considerable differences emerge among participants in the ways an interactional moment, or an episode in a spate of activity, is being contextualised (and recontextualised afterwards).

Finally, that spaces come with preliminary restrictions on participation not only hints at central relationships of inclusion/exclusion, it is also a concern which harmonises with questions of access and this provides an immediate link with the production of communicative legitimacy: who gets to enter the space in the first place. Important distinctions here can be drawn between, on the one hand, those who regularly inhabit spaces and who can be said in some sort of way to ‘own’ them in that they also can exercise more control over frames and framing activity, and on the other hand, *users* whose presence in a space is very much tied to cycles of clienthood. Note

that this distinction also comes with scaling effects, for instance, in terms of access to participation frameworks and activities which are typically oriented to higher scales (examples here are doctors who also report back and liaise with policy makers at the town hall; teachers who are also the recipients of statements of educational policy). Correspondingly, there is also the issue of control over scaling as a dimension of framing practices and the capacity to render them consequential as ‘social facts’ (cf. Wortham 2001).

#### ***4. Scales, capital and accumulation***

Bourdieu (1986a) lists, among the central conditions for the production of discourse, the mutual recognition of the presence of legitimate participants in expected roles as well as the recognition by participants both present and overhearing that the legitimate speech forms are being produced. In this respect, Bourdieu can be said to echo Goffman’s experiential outlook on the production of ‘frames’ (activities being enacted and being recognised as taking place by those involved), while casting such a double-outlook on situated activity more explicitly in terms of its political consequences when addressing situated effects of symbolic violence. A similar two-faced outlook underlies his theoretical concern with, on the one hand, the conditions of a determinate sociolinguistic order which emphasises pre-situational distinctions and repertoires which are brought to bear on a communicative situation (a market with value-determining mechanisms), and on the other hand, the strategic dimensions and accumulative effects of situationally-adjusted behaviour, as internalised over time in response to recurring market conditions for symbolic exchange (Slembrouck 2004).

The concept of ‘habitus’ captures the latter. Among other definitions which Bourdieu offers, it can be argued to entail schematic knowledge about how to act in a situation and how the actions of the self/others are received evaluatively. This concern with value harmonises well with our expressed interest in the indexical dimensions of contextualisation practice which we prefer to see as scaled in nature and organized in orders of indexicality. Except for a number of writings very late in his career, Bourdieu’s concern with the effects of market conditions have been mostly confined to intra-state realities, offering very perceptive remarks about for instance the

standard-speaking bourgeois mayor entering the dialect-speaking working class neighbourhood. To some extent this can be traced to Bourdieu's problematic relation to ethnography which is echoed in his presentation of for instance *Distinction* as “a sort of ethnography of France” and its former colonies (Bourdieu 1986b: xi; cf. Goodman 2003, Blommaert 2003, Stroud 2002). And, even though his theoretical programme suggests a need to take into account the finer complexities of processes of diversification tied to spatial trajectories (even offering a few suggestions as to how scalarities may enter the picture – e.g. the standard speaker from *la province* who can dominate locally but experiences stigma in his encounter with the Parisian standard speaker), the applied end of Bourdieu's work on sociolinguistic contact has mostly been concerned with relatively unified, monoglot symbolic markets.

As important as the work we have reviewed here is for having shown that knowledge, skill, and competence are acquired, displayed, and evaluated in situated practices, there are problems due to (in Goffman's case) a lack of attention to how the social order structures and ‘formats’ situations and practices or (in Bourdieu's case) a tendency to over-estimate the case of the unified symbolic market. As a correction of Bourdieu's framework one can add the notion of scales, more in particular, the idea that markets are stratified across different scales. This may result, for example, in the fact that a unified national educational field is crosscut on the one hand by real regional and local differences expressed in dialect or accent as well as in easier or more difficult access to particular kinds of education, and on the other hand by globalized economic markets and transnational labor migrations; or listing another example, that a diversified local educational practice is crosscut by the policy imperatives of ‘language integration’. These dynamics, in turn, result in a diversity within hierarchy, well-represented by the new forms of multilingualism which we are addressing here. Works on such phenomena in Spain (Woolard 1985), Egypt (Haeri 1997), Morocco (Gross 1993), and Mozambique (Stroud 2002) have directly called into question Bourdieu's notion of unified markets and fields.

### ***5. Scales and competence***

Let us now relate our discussion of space, scale, situation, and practice to the concepts of multilingual skill or competence. Our overarching interest is in how people are *positioned* and the communicative potential they display and have attributed to them in diverse, scale-sensitive situations and practices. In order to develop this line of argument, which puts us in conflict with standard assumptions about language skill and competence, let us review two examples.

First, an ethnographic example from our Ghent fieldwork. It concerns a Bulgarian immigrant in Ghent who gestured for a group of student researchers to enter a café where she worked, but she was later characterized by the researchers as “having no language”. That is, this woman, who spoke Bulgarian, probably Turkish, and likely Russian, was judged to have “no language” because she spoke none of the researchers’ languages: Dutch, English, or French. Contrast this with our language advertisement discussed earlier. It presents an imaginary polyglot cosmopolitan who, descending from the skies, has facility with the local language (Dutch) for the necessary practices. These linguistic practices include directing taxis, going shopping, eating and drinking and, “breaking the ice” in the next day’s business meeting by addressing the locals in Dutch before turning to the business at hand in the language of business: English. In the case of the Bulgarian woman we have the limiting case of a failure to grant her any skill or competence because of her position as immigrant in a poor, minority neighbourhood who is encountered by Dutch-speaking (majority members) researchers. In the case of the business traveller we have a revealing simulation: The multilingual elite whose skill and competence in ‘language’ is based on specific and limited language practices (called metonymically ‘a new language’), in particular, purchasing services and objects, exchanging greetings, opening meetings, in scaled settings in which Dutch is figured as the ‘local’ language necessary only for such perfunctory practices, which allows some degree of mobility across scales.

In either case, *competence is about being positioned, not about general or open-ended potential*. This requires that we distinguish our concerns from well-known formulations about language competence. The standard conception of *linguistic competence* is a theoretical construct about the knowledge attributed to an ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community (Chomsky 1965). As a

theoretical abstraction, the competence concept has permitted linguists to focus attention on core structural features of language. Additionally, the notion of “native speaker competence” provides a salutary emphasis on a kind of agency, a common human potential for acquiring, producing, and understanding language. However, the construct is simply unsuited to our purposes. By definition it is not concerned with speech situation or practice; it gives no purchase on cases of partial, hybrid, or multiple language abilities.

The related concept of *communicative competence* may initially appear more suited to our topic. As originally formulated by Hymes (1967), communicative competence qua concept posited a generalized knowledge of appropriate language use under community-based norms. It was explicitly concerned to widen the notion of knowledge of language to include knowledge of how to use language in specific, culturally-variable situations, for example, how to greet in Wolof as well as Dutch, make requests in Japanese as well as Yucatec Maya, provide accounts in Chinese as well as English. Although it is a more user-friendly concept because of its emphasis on language *use*, it nonetheless has faced serious criticism about the fundamental assumptions regarding norms and communities – pre-given groups which would share (and predictably apply) knowledge about language use. Despite the popularity of the communicative competence idea in ELF and ESL research, it is precisely in multilingual and multi-dialectal settings, increasingly common in the contemporary world, that assumptions about shared knowledge and stable communities are most problematic (Gumperz, 1982; Rampton, 1995, 1998).

Instead, we must begin with the actualities of practice, in situations of hierarchical scale and changeable framing. To paraphrase Bernstein’s (1996) discussion of the relation between competence models and socially-conditioned performance, we are concerned with *position* as well as *potential* (Collins 2000). We assume that agency results from the interplay between people’s situated intentions and the way the environment imposes particular regimes of language. We assume that people have varying language abilities – repertoires and skills with languages – but that *the function and value of those repertoires and skills can change as the space of language contact changes*. Recent classroom ethnography by Creve & Willaert (2003) has shown that children’s linguistic and literacy practices in Eastern European as well

as African languages and Turkish can simply be erased from classroom procedure, they are dismissed as ‘non-languages’ in the school (while the same resources are immensely valuable once the children leave the school and enter their neighborhoods). Returning to our examples, knowledge of Bulgarian, its varieties and routines, is not the same in Sofia as in Gent, nor, for that matter, would the businessperson’s Dutch have the same communicative value in a Flemish home or university seminar.

If, as we have suggested, Late Modernity is an era of globalization, of increased material, and cultural flows, of increased linguistic contact, diversity, and tension, then the question of language competence must include notions of scale-based agentivity – what is valued and devalued in given environments – and the notion of negotiation and repair – what is or will be done in response to competence assessments and situated expectations. We have already discussed the issue of what is valued and devalued in given environments, so let us say something more about negotiation and repair.

These should be understood as including the common processes in everyday conversation in which participants adjust what they say in light of expectations and responses. In conversation-analytic traditions dealing with monolingual speakers, it is argued that speakers ‘repair’, that is, change what is said or emphasized in order to reach a common topic or shared sense of activity (Schiffrin 1999). In multilingual exchanges, speakers also monitor each others conversational exchanges in light of what speech participants say (Gumperz 1982), but they are also likely to *scale* their expectations, that is, to shift varieties as repertoires allow, in order to reach a sharable code (as in cases where some variety of English or Dutch is the medium of exchange, whether in dinner settings with speakers from different backgrounds (House 2003) or a multilingual playground).

Processes of negotiation and repair are not, however, restricted to relatively egalitarian conversational exchanges, for they are also part of institutional and more broadly political responses to linguistic diversity (Collins 1999). We may regard, for example, the provision of adult education courses in the ‘host language’ as a programmatic attempt to ‘repair’ a perceived language deficiency, similarly also intensive courses in the host language, in our case Dutch, for incoming immigrant

schoolchildren. Each will be accompanied by both official, written forms of language (competence) assessment as well as in-the-classroom or on-the-playground judgements about which languages and repertoires are available and acceptable. Based on initial ethnographic work in Ghent we know, for example, that there is a commonly announced policy of ‘Dutch Only’ in classrooms, but that on playgrounds immigrant children may use their first languages, or they may, as in one neighborhood school, use a very simplified variety of Dutch as a lingua franca even for play (see also Creve & Willaert 2003).

The general point we wish to emphasize is that situation-sensitive expectations and judgements about competence in language(s) occur at a variety of scales and in light of diverse framing of communication. Relevant discourse practices include face-to-face communications among intimates, among youth in peer groups, in shops and cafes; official exchanges between social service, health, and education providers and their ‘clients;’ and also the planning activities of institutions and the policy statements of political parties and offices. In short, competence must take into account the interactive processes of evaluating language use, in which negotiability-in-principle operates.

## ***6. Conclusions and implications***

Let us recall the general issue that motivated our attempt. In order to address globalization as a sociolinguistic problem, we need to come to terms with space and differences and relations between spaces as aspects of communication which, like the other well-known variables in ethnographic research, exert influences on what speakers can do in communication. Recognizing that space is context and therefore a potential for semiotization, we argued that it must be seen as something which generates indexical meanings. Such meanings, we argued, are *scalar*, they involve important differences in order and scope, some being purely situational and others translocal. Furthermore, what happens in interaction is the deployment of spatially organized – scalar – indexicalities in ways that both reflect pre-inscribed conditions of use as well as opportunities for the interactional construction of meaning. We then brought this down to discussions of knowledge, skills and competencies and insisted

that position rather than possibility should be used as a tool for understanding the situated assessments of people's competences.

In constructing this argument, we have reversed the usual order of thinking about multilingual situations. Multilingualism is not what individuals have and don't have, but what the environment, as structured determinations and interactional emergence, enables and disables them to deploy. Thus, eminently multilingual individuals – such as the Bulgarian woman in one of our examples – can be declared to have 'no language' in particular environments. The woman's linguistic competence was assessed using the (Belgian) students' criteria of a language regime valid in a particular national order. Similarly, the children in schools whose linguistic repertoires were disqualified and who were declared 'language-less' were assessed on the basis of criteria belonging to the national order – in Flemish schools, the only allowable language is Dutch. Such observations are obviously based on an optimal, realistic view of language learning as situated practice involving: mutual engagement, a joint, negotiated enterprise, and a shared-but-structured repertoire of negotiable resources, and resulting in not-necessarily 'full' and 'general' competence, but in specific and functionally-diversified competencies (Gumperz 1982, House 2003, Wenger 1998).

Thinking about space in semiotic terms means thinking about scales, about delicate but highly meaningful distinctions in 'rank' for particular spaces, activities and repertoires valid there. We have seen this in the example of the language learning advertisement, where different linguistic resources (both called 'languages') were in fact clearly demarcated and hierarchically ordered, one being appropriate for a particular set of activities at one, low, scale, and another on another, higher scale. These distinctions involve power differences: the higher-scale resources would typically be seen as more useful, more valuable than the lower-scale resources. And thus, we are facing conditions of access, restrictions on distribution and so on – things for which schools and other gatekeeping institutions provide us a privileged locus of observation. The notion of scaling, in its emphasis on non-equivalence and power differences, allows for a dynamic, highly differentiated account of social structure dynamically related to interaction (as "orders of indexicality" dynamically relate larger social order to micro-interactional processes).

The purpose of this paper was exploratory, and several areas of research could be envisaged as fertile fields of application. Educational practice and language policy are a prime (and obvious) target, as are language-political rhetoric and language practice in their interrelatedness (esp. the selectiveness in the ways in which one impinges on the other in real situations). At a more micro-level of analysis, phenomena of mixedness, simultaneity and hybridity could be looked at afresh, bearing in mind that often, what is mixed is not a set of equivalent resources but hierarchically stratified resources producing different indexicalities and connecting with different speaker roles, degrees of authority, restrictions on participation and so forth. Throughout all of this, one should not forget that scalar phenomena may be the clue to understanding the ideological and political layers of language in society.

We will be studying such issues as part of our ethnographic research on migration and multilingualism in contemporary Belgium, developing analyses of orders of indexicality and immigrant literacy practices, language ideologies and translation/interpretation practices in health care procedures, scale and multilingual repertoires in immigrant shops, scale and the assessment of multilingual competencies in the asylum application procedures, etc. In this light, we invite vigorous response and criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> The term is borrowed from Kroskrity (2000).

<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork was done by the authors and a seminar group of second-year students from the African Studies program in Ghent, who undertook an assignment on ‘multilingual neighborhoods in Ghent’.

<sup>4</sup> Irvine and Gal (2000) use the term ‘fractal recursivity’ to describe the ideological process by means of which distinctions operating at a higher level can also be made to operate at lower levels (e.g. left-right distinctions can also be applied within ‘ultra-left wing’ groups). We would add that such fractality involves moves across scales as well, and often in systemically specified directions, from top to bottom, from center to periphery.

<sup>5</sup> See however Robertson 1990 on ‘globalisation/localisation’ as well as Appadurai’s orientation to *scapes* as complementary to flows and as invested with viewpoint at different levels (Slembrouck 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Recent research in multilingual classrooms in Belgium revealed that teachers often had a ‘mental map’ of the world, from which they projected images of linguistic competence and cognitive ability onto their pupils. This led to statements such as ‘Children from Mongolia are doing very well’ or ‘African children are hard to work with, they are slower and less attentive than Turkish children’ (Creve & Willaert 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Scollon’s (2001) concept of ‘nexus of practice’ provided inspiration for this view.

<sup>8</sup> See Silverstein’s (2003: 121-122) comments on the marketing of ‘corporate standard register’, which he calls “indexical Viagra for the yupwardly mobile”. By acquiring a set number of ‘power’ words per day, people are suggested to gain entrance to an exclusive space: that of middle management in big corporations. In our advertisement imagining a linguistic world, the speaker acquires some phrases and routines and thus ‘knows’ the Dutch language, that is: he becomes an elite multilingual.

<sup>9</sup> During fieldwork, for instance, there was an acute and widely shared sense that we – ‘autochthonous’ member of the majority – were ‘out of place’ in such immigrant neighborhoods. We ‘didn’t understand’ the semiotics of the place and felt like ‘aliens’ there. Entering the immigrant neighborhood had turned us into ‘strangers’ there – an identity we not usually have in environments we consider ‘ours’.

<sup>10</sup> Haviland (2003:771) defines this as ‘linguistic paranoia’, a “presumption that when copresent persons use a language you cannot understand, it can only be because they are saying something they do not want you to understand, probably because whatever is being said is ‘against’ you.”

<sup>11</sup> Recall at this point also Scott’s (1990) notion of ‘hidden transcripts’ and note that in the examples given by Scott, the distinction between ‘hidden’ and ‘public transcripts’ of social relations is a matter of staging them, with strong spatial restrictions. The ‘public transcript’ will be performed in the public space, while ‘hidden transcripts’ belong to secluded, in-group spaces.