‘Reading shop windows in globalized neighborhoods: Multilingual literacy practices and indexicality

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Abstract

Shop and café signs in multiple languages are familiar features of polyglot immigrant neighbourhoods. This paper examines such signs, presenting photographic, observational, and interview data from a multi-sited ethnographic study of language contact Ghent, an urban Belgian city. We analyze signs and notices in several immigrant neighborhoods as (a) literacy practices, attending to their contexts of use as well as to their interpretations, and as (b) examples of ‘indexical orders’ and ‘orders of discourse’, asking what hierarchical frames of interpretation and evaluation are brought to bear in the reading of such signs. We argue that shop signs and notices are complex indexes of ‘source’, ‘addressee’ and ‘community’. We address two general points: What does the study of indexicality bring to the study of literacy, when the latter is conceived as a polyglot communicative practice? Do concepts of indexical or discursive order contribute to our understanding of ‘globalized locality,’ a Late Modern condition?

Introduction

Shop and café signs in multiple languages are familiar features of polyglot immigrant neighbourhoods. What passers-by make of them, how they are read, is a question rarely addressed, but readings will surely vary by purposes of reading, prior experiences with such signs, and knowledge of languages. The field of literacy studies, in particular the ‘New Literacy Studies,’ argues that producing and interpreting text is a practice in which the textual and contextual are densely intertwined. Indeed, as currently understood, texts and contexts are so densely intertwined that it is appropriate to ask how, or whether, one can distinguish between ‘literacy practices’ and ‘communicative practices.’ A spirit of academic détente
might establish boundaries by saying that literacy practices are a subset of communicative practices, with the former studied more by those, typically found in and around schools of education, interested in reading and writing and the latter by those, often found in fields such as anthropology and sociolinguistics, more interested in spoken language or professional interaction. But this characterization does not do justice to the way in which current research is conducted, and it rests on a contrast between writing and speaking which is every bit as troubled as that between text and context. We propose to approach this question by asking another question, the implications of which we will develop throughout this paper: Does an emphasis on literacy versus communicative practice make a difference to what you thematize in analysing indexical meaning (that is, the meanings attributed to forms in contexts)?

Before taking up these general questions, let us give some details about the study and our approach. This paper is part of a larger, multi-sited ethnographic study of language contact in urban neighborhoods in the Flemish city of Ghent, one component of which was the study of multilingual literacy practices. It brings with it concerns with multiple languages and with the complicated forms of inhabitance, boundary drawing, and hierarchization found in polyglot immigrant and minority neighborhoods. We also conceive and conduct the larger study as well as the particulars of this study in an ethnographic spirit, by which we mean a commitment to situated inquiry into what people do and say and think, together with a work of connecting such necessarily partial particulars to broader arguments about language and contemporary society. Central to ethnographic inquiry as we understand it is a reflexive dimension, a necessary and productive epistemological awareness of the way in which knowledge is constructed (Slembrouck 2004).

Let us try to approach some of the issues addressed in this paper through two brief vignettes. When we began this project, simply by walking through immigrant

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1 The fieldwork for the research reported here was conducted with the support of a visiting researcher grant (BOF, University of Gent). It was conducted in May-June 2003 and continued in the Winter and Spring of 2004 within the framework of a joint research fellowship at the Royal Academy for Science and the Arts (KVAB, Brussels). We are grateful to the Academy and Ghent University Research Council for providing us with the opportunity and workspace to undertake this collaborative research. We are also grateful to the University at Albany, and especially the departments of Anthropology and Reading for making it possible for Collins to take a research leave in order to undertake the work in Winter and Spring 2004. We are grateful for constructive feedback from Yasemin Bayyurt. We also point out that this paper is fully cooperative: The order of authors’ names solely reflects alphabetical precedence.
neighbourhoods in Ghent, taking notes about street life, patterns of residence, and businesses, we quickly were aware of multilingual signs and notices occurring in shop windows in such neighbourhoods. One of us (Slembrouck), a native speaker of Belgian Dutch, was strongly aware of a particular aspect of the signs: the frequent presence of errors in the written Dutch. We subsequently found that teams of student researchers with whom we worked were also highly sensitive to written departures from Standard Dutch in multilingual signage, notices, and so forth. This is interesting for several reasons: Flemish Belgians are quite aware of considerable dialect variation in Dutch found in Flanders, and of their own national ambivalence vis-à-vis the ‘Dutch Dutch’ of the Netherlands; and further, Belgium is a known multilingual country and Flemish are noted for their polyglot ways, so it is common to encounter a range of proficiencies and competencies in differing languages. And yet a certain deficiency was what initially caught the eye (and the mind). What also caught our attention early on, however, was not a deficiency but instead a certain excess (and novelty) in what signs said. For example, signs announcing a ‘Warme Bakkerij’ or ‘Warme Turkse Bakkerij’ [‘warm’ or ‘fresh’ bakery, Turkish bakery] are odd because to an autochthone Belgian they seem to state the obvious: a ‘bakker’ or ‘bakkerij’, unless stated otherwise, sells bread that is ‘fresh-baked’, that is, baked on the premises. As we will see, however, the relation between a sign form and its meaning can vary according to who is looking. Interpretations given to the phrase ‘warme bakkerij’ differ, according to assumptions about who the likely audiences are. Some see the signs as simply informative, others see them as aimed at immigrants, who will not know the customs of the host country, and yet others see them as aimed at the Dutch, who suffer from mass-produced bread and will come to Belgium for proper sustenance, but need to be informed where to buy ‘echt brood’ (‘real’ bread). What these examples suggest is that signs, like language more generally, trigger assumptions about producers, their capabilities and incapabilities, and about consumers/interpreters and their likely state of knowledge.

These various assumptions and judgements about communicative participants, what can be taken for granted, and what is notable or distinctive raise of course the question of ‘context’: That which is always-with-language, as both a predictable and transformative, apparently rule-governed yet often unstable, ground for action and
interpretation (Hanks 1996:140; Duranti & Goodwin 1992). The question of context raises an old, difficult theoretical question: What is the relation between particular acts or events of communication and wider or otherwise perduring social categories, cultural understandings, and forms of social organization? There are numerous approaches to this problem, several seem particularly fitting for our subject.

Thinking micro and macro: Practices and orders

“Literacy practices, then, refers to this broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts.” (Street 2001:11)

“…’indexical order’ is the concept necessary to showing us how to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomena.” (Silverstein 2003:193)

“…though what [CDA] itself theorises in particular is the mediation between the social and the linguistic – the ‘order of discourse’…” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999:--)

In the debates about the nature and significance of literacy, which have raged for several decades, the effort to move beyond an overly text-focused account took the form of ethnographic studies of ‘literacy events,’ that is, communicative events in which inscription or decoding of text figured but was not necessarily central, what was central was the action-talk-text configuration, the event (see Heath 1983 for a classic study; Collins and Blot 2003, chapter 3, for a thorough account). This might be considered the ethnographic moment, and as elsewhere in Anthropology, in the 1980s and 1990s, a sustained effort was made to connect event-focused descriptions to more general forms of social analysis (e.g. Ortner 1991, 1999); one direction this effort took was a turn toward practice theory, a wide variety of efforts to conceptualise and analyze the inter-relations between agents-and-structures, self-and-society, subjectivity and institutional processes (e.g. Bourdieu 1980; Foucault 1975; Giddens 1984). In the passage from which the quote above is taken, Street distinguishes events from practices, the former being the domain of particular doings with texts, the latter
of that more general sociocultural framing that gives significance to particular acts (see also Barton 1994; Bayham 1995 for discussions). The challenge is always to link the particular acts of reading and writing to the ‘broader cultural conceptions’, ‘models’ of reading and writing located in various institutional fields and actually enforcing or potentially evoking a given frame of interpretation for an act of reading or writing (e.g. Bialostok 2002 on schools and class-stratified households; Boyarin 1993 on religion; Mertz 1996 on law). Put another way, reading and writing are always about more than ‘literal’ text. Indeed literacy as a phenomena linked to modernity is subject to powerful ideological construals (Bauman & Briggs 2003), and contemporary literacy studies, largely still an Anglophone enterprise, is a field of research marked by overt political conflicts (Allington 2001), because literacy is frequently associated in the minds of participants as well as analysts with vital figurai projects, such as ‘being a citizen’ ‘finding socio-economic well-being’. What this means in regards to the study of literacy practices is that such research frequently brings with it a concern for social reform or emancipation, taking the form, for example, of the critique of models of literacy which occlude or repress the knowledge and aptitudes of poor people, women, or ethno-linguistic minorities (Bialostok 2002; Rockhill 1993).

Critical Discourse Analysis is one prominent movement seeking to integrate language and social analysis with a project of political critique sharing affinities with the New Literacy Studies emphasis on literacy practices. A central concept in CDA has been that of ‘orders of discourse’, which, as the quote above indicates, refers to the “mediation between the social and the linguistic.” Early discussions of the concept (e.g. Fairclough 1989, 1992) emphasise that discourse and practice are connected by interdependent networks, called ‘orders’: ‘social orders’ refer to the structuring of social domains with associated types of practices; ‘orders of discourse’ analytically maps social orders in terms of a particular historically-contingent typology an hierarchical constellation of discourses. Orders of discourse can be analysed at various levels (e.g. domain-specific, local-institutional orderings [e.g. a legal hearing as a specific sequence of discourse types] or a society-wide ordering [a much-quoted example is that of ‘conversationalisation’ in which conventions drawn from everyday conversation permeate discourses in a range of formal settings and situations; e.g.
Tolson 1991; Alvarez & Prego 2003]). There are implications for ideas of agency or subjectivity: The analysis of a discourse practice as an effect of ‘order’ renders the language user as socio-culturally and ideologically positioned and as doing positioning work in relation to a historically-contingent state of play. For Fairclough (1995), the concept and the kind of analytical-interpretative attention which it invites, foregrounds both conditions of hybridity and processes of boundary marking in late modern capitalist societies (see for instance Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996 for a detailed analysis of bureaucratisation as a colonising discourse and the bureaucratic domain as colonised by discursive modes oriented to advertising and counselling; see also Rogers 2003 for a substantive analysis of a special education referral process in the US as an order of discourse).

In later social-theoretical conversations with the oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular, Bourdieu’s concept of field, Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) modify the concept of ‘orders of discourse’ in ways which, in principle, make it more sensitive to ethnographic concerns with interaction spaces. Such spaces are seen as the locus where the intersection between several ‘fields’ is being articulated and this comes with a much more explicit emphasis on ‘orders of discourse’ as both a descriptive and a heuristic concept. Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999:114ff.) now see ‘order of discourse’ as the discursive facet of a field, a particular organisational logic that is itself an important terrain of struggle. Thus, if readings of a sign in a shop window alternate between those who stress the salience of language errors (and thus draw the signage into the fields of education – ‘language immersion classes’ – and politics – ‘integration’) or those who stress functional efficiency in a context where Dutch is used as a lingua franca (thus drawing the interpretation of the sign into the field of local commercial transactions), then such interpretative moments where particular connections are established between text and context, indeed reflect field boundaries (in which field are the practices being situated?) as well as highlighting meta-pragmatic struggles over field boundaries.  

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2 For instance, think of a view which renders an educational goal of accuracy in spelling subordinate to successful communication and insists that such a view principally informs curricular design in a language immersion class.
For our purposes, the theorizing of language and society represented by analyses of ‘orders of discourse’ is useful for its emphasis on three things: (i) That social life involves genre expectations, and that this is not simply a matter of static classification, but instead runs through encounters involving power, inequality, and struggle; (ii) That hybridity, the intermingling of genres and of discourses more generally, is pervasive and a feature of ‘order’; and (iii), finally, that institutional(ised) positions individual are enacted by language users. Notwithstanding such useful emphases, CDA analyses have not shown much sensitivity to “interpretative moments where particular connections are established between text and context” (Slembrouck 2001) or “meta-pragmatic struggles over field boundaries.” Fairclough, in particular, has been criticized for stipulating text-context relations, rather than considering options and motivating an analysis (see also Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000; Widdowson 1998) and for assuming as institution/field effects what are alternative metapragmatic framings (Verschueren 2001). This is where the Silverstein’s theorization of ‘indexical order’ becomes useful. Resting on a now substantial literature on indexicality (e.g. Gumperz 2003; Hanks 1990, 1996; Ochs 1992, 1996; Silverstein 1976, 1993; Wortham & Rymes 2002), the concept of indexical order refers to the essential interconnection between micro-analytic and macro-analytic phenomena and frames of analysis. For the former, the ‘micro,’ think of specific utterances, with maybe named intentions (‘speech acts’) or coming in two-part sequences (‘adjacency pairs’ and ‘turns in a conversation’) or as pronouns and other address forms (understood a indicating ‘power’ or ‘solidarity’); for the latter, the ‘macro’ think of durable social categories (of age, generation, gender, ethnorate, and so forth), or of social partitionings and the associated cultural values (rich and poor; ‘refined’ and ‘vulgar’: the entire project of Bourdieu’s Distinction, 1984). The interconnection is essential because the micro-order is not autonomous. Silverstein argues, correctly in our view, that we cannot stipulate in advance the meaning or function of a form, for that depends a great deal on interpretive framing, a meta-pragmatic apprehension which is strongly ideological and based in institutional and other social organization forms which are not micro-analytic. For instance, whether readers of shop signs notice spelling errors and attribute these to the social origins of the sign makers is connected to institutionally-reinforced selections of what is important about language.
use and people. One of the questions here is the extent to which immigrants are drawn into field-specific categorisations and concerns. However, fields are not constant in their constitution and effects. This is a point made by Chouliaraki and Fairclough, following Bourdieu. Silverstein makes a similar point, though not with explicit reference to field. We will phrase it as: the macro-order is not autonomous. Here Silverstein reveals his social-constructivist bent: Social categories do not have uniform, predictable effects on human actions and meaning-making, nor does social partitioning and value attribution. The social/cultural is constructed by what people do, it is ‘enacted’ in specific events of communicative conduct, and its effectivity depends on the conditions of enactment.

The notion of indexical order is one of ongoing exchange or interplay between specific acts and general framings or ideological construals. For there are multiple possible ‘orders’ ranging between a given ‘first-level’ indexicality, an understanding or meaningfulness of this situated language use (What this shop sign or announcement in two languages might mean), and in principle multiple ‘n-level’ indexical-ideological construals. The latter set of construals might be centred in official institutions or broad social fields or the quotidian realm of the ‘everyday’ (Might this shop sign be taken as a joke? An indication of amicable or tense relations between autochthone and allochthone populations? As indicating the origins and low education of the migrants who use the two languages?). The point is that (indexical) meaning is processual, not given by synchronic structure; it is contextual, and contexts are various and yet orderable. Finally, although indexical orders give a highly sophisticated and emphatically processual account of ordering as a phenomenon, Fairclough and CDA invite a more robust set of claims about specific eras or social formations, and institutions therein.

In asking how events link to ‘broader cultural expectations,’ in emphasizing generic expectation, hybridity, and positioning, and in giving analytic primacy to the micro/macro dialectic in language, concepts of literacy practice, discourse order and indexical order provide alternate, overlapping perspectives on the literacy practice of ‘reading shop windows.’ As we will show in the next section, such readings reveal considerable variation in the resources used for making meaning as well as for the meanings made. They reinforce a simple but important point about literacy and
reading, and they suggest that mundane spaces of multilingualism can provide ethnographic/sociolinguistic material for both empirical grounding and theoretical engagement vis-à-vis leading concerns in literacy studies, discourse analysis, and the anthropology of language.

Profiles of readers and readings
In discussing shop signs, we begin from a simple observation made earlier: When different people are asked to comment upon or otherwise interpret such signs, they provide substantially different accounts. As noted, our research is part of a larger ethnographic study of multilingualism in five urban, immigrant neighbourhoods. In the initial stages this involved numerous neighbourhoods walks in which we made notes and took a substantial number of photographs related to shops windows, posters on display, public service notices, etc. Our interest in what users would make of such signs was motivated both by the initial interpretive concerns which we detected in our own readings (see the introductory vignette but also the fact we faced languages in which we lacked proficiency). At a summer workshop in 2003, Slembrouck was fortunate enough to meet and consult with a colleague from Istanbul, Meryem, who was kind enough to spend a couple of hours looking at digital photos of shop signs. Her interpretations were interesting in particular because while she was explaining the ins and outs of lexical items and grammatical form, she also read shop signs as indexing a rural-urban split in Turkey. This split, rural-urban, brought along a number of presumed contrasts: centre/margin, uneducated/educated, traditional/modern, non-standard/standard speaking. If the interview with Meryem was prompted by our need for detailed linguistic-grammatical guidance, her readings suggested a need on our part for other accounts, most importantly, from someone within the neighbourhood, and, because our larger project is concerned with ethnolinguistic majority/minority relations, we also wanted to consult with a Flemish Belgian about their readings. In the process of the fieldwork in the winter and spring of 2004, we met and subsequently interviewed, Nezat, a Turkish-Belgian man in his mid forties who has
lived most of his life since early infancy in Ghent, although he was born in Istanbul\(^3\).

Nezat was interviewed by Slembrouck and Collins in a neighbourhood office. Collins interviewed Herman, an Antwerp Flemish man, who works as a courier and support staff in a number of offices in Brussels, and with whom we had struck up an acquaintance and had frequent brief conversations about life in the US and Belgium and Collins’ rocky road learning Dutch.

In the interest of exposition we are going to discuss particular signs and responses thereto. Common themes which emerged with reference to particular signs include: the ways in which language errors are (not) attended to and how they are made sense of, readings of neighbourhood-based commercial activities and their intended audiences, and geographical scaling and the historicities invoked in support.

(i) **BAGSEVEN FINANS** (see Appendix – figure 1)

This picture details the front window of a bank in the neighbourhood of Rabot. It features Dutch and Turkish descriptions of services offered: insurance, mortgages, banking, and accounting. Meryem’s response upon seeing the sign was that the language was unexceptional, that the name ‘Bagseven’ was a family name, and ‘finans’ is now a fashionable word, probably of French origin. Otherwise, she noted that these were economic functions which would be kept separate in Turkey. She could see how real estate and insurance would go together, but the combination of accounting and loans was unusual from her point of view. She thought that maybe the company worked like general brokers for people who did not speak the local language, and linked to this was her suspicion that they exploited such customers. Nezat commented on ‘Bagseven’ as a family name, noted that the sign listed the services offered in both languages, assuming translation from Turkish to Dutch. He said the terms would be the same in Turkey. The bank would be for Turkish customers mainly, and in his view the grouping of services was typical, though equivalent businesses elsewhere in Ghent might include travel agents as well. He also

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\(^3\) We know that Nezat has Belgian nationality, but considers himself Turkish. He speaks Albanian and learned Turkish partly at weekend school while in Belgium. He appears to be equally proficient in Dutch and Turkish, as well as having considerable proficiency in English and French. He has recently started a family with a recent emigré from Turkey.
noticed the ‘Krefima’ signs at the bottom of the window, which name a Turkish bank, and assumed that ‘Bagseven finans’ serves as a branch or subsidiary office of the larger banking concern. Herman said little about the language beyond noting it was a bilingual sign, he commented on the grouping of functions as not typical for (autochthone) Belgians, but he then went on to attribute it to the way in which Turks were ‘buying up’ available housing, for the purpose, in his view, of housing a steadily inflow of ‘illegal’ Turkish immigrants.

(ii) **BESTE KLANTEN WE ZIJN VERHUISD NAAR NR. 171** (see Appendix – figure 2)

In this photo we see an announcement that a shop has moved up the street a short distance ‘We zijn verhuisd’: We have moved…. For both Meryem and Nezat the semantics of the sign were simple: it announced a move. It was the Turkish form ‘otedeyiz’ which attracted most comment. Meryem thought it should have been written as one word and that it was grammatically irregular or sociolinguistically marked (she contrasted ‘ötedeyiz’ as ‘rural’ and ‘ilerdeyiz’ as ‘urban.’) She then speculated about the Turkish being a translation from Dutch. The idea that the term otedeyiz might be a ‘literal translation’ from Dutch was offered by Nezat. Reading the signs in both languages, he argued that it was likely the work of someone whose Dutch was better than Turkish, and then went on to suggest that it might be the work of someone from Anatolia, a rural region, who ‘spoke Turkish differently’. Herman, for his part, also regarded the Dutch as unexceptional, but he commented enthusiastically on two design features: That the Turkish was in small letters and placed below the Dutch. For him this showed that the writers ‘respect’ that they ‘are in a Flemish city.’ It was a sign of successful assimilation, which he attributed to the benign social relations of the city of Gent, which he here and elsewhere contrasted with the other Flemish cities: ‘aggressive’ Antwerp and the ‘ghetto’-filled Brussels, where he asserted that such signs would be only in the immigrant language. (We note in passing that Ghent has in the past had large numbers of residents voting for the ultra-right Vlams Blok, an anti-immigrant Flemish nationalist party; and the large,
multi-ethnic commune of St Gilles in Brussels have many multilingual shops signs, in which French, if not Flemish, is prominently displayed).

(iii) **TELLEFOON CABINE** (see Appendix – figure 3)

This sign occurs on the window of a call center, a place where calls can be placed, to various foreign countries, with assistance from staff. In Belgium such shops are common in immigrant neighborhoods and cater especially to people who do not have fixed phones. In our experience, it is very rare for them to advertise call services for the affluent West – UK or US destinations are unusual. The sign itself is interestingly ambiguous as to what language it is in: ‘Telefon’ is a Turkish form, while ‘telefoon’ is a Dutch form; and ‘cabine’ is perfect in Dutch, the Turkish equivalent would be the similar ‘kabini’. Meryem felt that the spelling ‘tellefoon’ was unusual: in ‘telefoon’ or Turkish ‘telefon’ there is only a single –l-. In Meryem’s view telephone shops were very uncommon in Turkey, except in tourist areas. Nezat also spotted the error in the spelling of ‘tellefoon’, attributing it to someone who did not know Dutch very well ‘Iemand die niet goed Nederlands kan.’ In his view, however, the spelling error was probably due to the fact that such shops are typically run by Pakistanis. Herman, for his part, initially commented on the type of enterprise, saying that call centres are ‘100% immigrant phenomena’. When his attention was directed to the sign, he read ‘Tellefoon cabine… is Dutch’ and then went into an enthusiastic discussion of the city of Ghent, which because of what he characterized as its genial ambience, encourages immigrants to assimilate to majority mores and language, of which assimilation the use of ‘tellefoon cabine’ was an index.

(iv) **HILAL WARME TURKSE BAKKERIJ** (see Appendix – figure 4)

This sign excited considerable philological comment from Nezat and Meryem, because of the term ‘Hilal’ and the differing script used with this word. According to Nezat, the form ‘hilal’ is Arabic, because of the absence of vowel harmony, it might be a surname or more likely it means something like ‘kosher.’ Self-identifying as someone who did not ‘go to mosque very often,’ Nezat nonetheless commented on the
moon over the ‘I’ in ‘hilal’ as ‘definitely religious.’ Meryem also picked up on the moon symbol over the ‘I,’ along with noting the diacritic sign over the ‘A’ as marking a soft vowel. These features, together with the Ottoman calligraphy, renders the sign as archaic for her (for Nezat, however, the calligraphy was just decorative). Myriam glossed ‘hilal’ as meaning ‘new moon.’ Herman, for his part, merely asserted that ‘hilal’ was the owner’s name. Nezat translated the phrase ‘warme […] bakkerij’ into English for the interviewer with limited Dutch (Collins). Otherwise, he viewed the term as simply and adequately descriptive: It simply announced that an establishment sold fresh-baked bread. Herman, however, shared Slembrouck’s (autochthone?) sense that ‘warne bakkerij’ was not ‘typical Belgian’ usage, though in his case he assumed that the phrase was aimed at ‘Holland[er]s’. Accordingly to him, ‘most of the bread in Holland is made in big industrial bakeries,’ and in search of decent bread the Dutch would travel into Belgium on weekend excursions. In this scenario the explicit ‘warm bakery’ helps to guide the neighbouring foreigners to an establishment that prepares its own bread.

**Discussion**

It should be clear from the discussion above that making sense of shop windows is a practice involving specific events and ‘broader cultural assumptions’ about reading and writing. As an educated Turkish woman, indeed one of who has made a specialist study of the history of Turkish orthography, Meryem construes bilingual Ghent shops signs in terms of very specific assumptions about standard and non-standard forms of the language, contemporary and archaic forms of orthography, as well as a cosmopolitan perspective, a geographical scaling, in which Istanbul is a centre with regard to rural Anatolia, and Turkey is a centre with regard to its substantial diaspora – a diaspora in which, she intimates, simple people lacking linguistic resources are subject to exploitation by foreigners as well as their own kind. An independent-minded, college-educated man, working a service sector job that gives autonomy rather than status, Herman brings to the interpretive task a familiar enough populist
anxiety about ‘foreigners.’ In one sense, Herman and Meryem have complementary linguistic resources: he knows Dutch, but not Turkish; she knows Turkish, but not Dutch. Contrary to our expectations, however, Herman does not focus on departures from Flemish-Dutch pragmatics (e.g. his explanation for ‘warme bakkerij’) or spelling (e.g. his response to ‘tellefoon’), instead he construes the signs as indexes of the state of autochthone/allochthone relations. He sees an unusual grouping of financial services as enabling foreigners to ‘buy up’ Belgian properties in order to profit off of their incoming co-nationalists. When he encounters aspects of the signs which do not confirm his expectations – for example, that immigrants do use Dutch along with allochthone languages in the signs (e.g. ‘tellefoon cabine’) and, further, that they show a seemly deference in placing the immigrant language below Dutch and in a smaller script (e.g. ‘we zijn verhuisd’) – he constructs an explanation in terms of an account of regions and cities within Flanders. In his view, because Ghent is unlike ‘aggressive’ Antwerp or ‘ghetto’-ridden Brussels, it encourages the right kind of assimilation and sociolinguistic order.

The lesson we want to draw from the encounter of Meryem and Herman is that all reading is a contextualised interpretative practice that may draw on frames of interpretation that are organised inter alia in terms of assumptions about geographic scale, as well about historic social relationships organised in terms of major ethnic divisions. Such framing may also be sensitive to long-term institutional projects such as that of schooling, which still profoundly shapes how we think of literacy as a practice. This state of affairs has implications for our exploration of both ‘indexical order’ and ‘order of discourse’.

In addition to showing that making sense of the humblest of literacy artefacts involves frames of interpretation that range widely beyond the given event and, of course, involve much more than ‘purely’ linguistic knowledge, the examples above show a subtle interplay of the social and the linguistic that is best elucidated using the

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4 Anyone spending much time in contemporary Western Europe will pick up many references in government debates, newspapers, television news, and conversations to what might be called ‘the immigrant question.’ In a thoughtful analysis, Pinxten & Verstraete (2002) analyse such populism in terms of economic restructuring, nationalist uncertainty in light of EU ascendance, and the rightwing ability to mobilize politically on ‘identity’ issues among a displaced autochthone working class. They note it is a phenomenon found in a number of small, affluent Europeans countries and regions: Northern Italy, Austria, Denmark, and Flanders.
notion of indexical order. Observe above how Meryem and Nezat move between judgements about grammatical (structural) competence, multilingual proficiencies, and social origins. As Silverstein argues, to interpret an utterance as an instance of a given language, a Saussurean *langue* (grammar or model of competence in the generative idiom) is to bring a ‘macro’ frame of analysis to bear, for *langue* /competence is characterized as a set of rules or norms that hold for an entire (homogeneous) speech community. But all users of language also operate with a sense of a social-linguistically differentiated world of actual and potential interlocutors, and this schematization of difference is always available for making sense of a given utterance, for ‘contextualizing’. Thus when evaluating ‘ötediz’ Meryem alternates between judging it as grammatically irregular or as ‘rural’ (in contrast to urban ‘ilerdeyiz’). Interpreting the same form, Nezat, who speaks and reads both Dutch and Turkish (and speaks Albanian and serviceable French and English), initially notices something odd about ‘ötediz’. He attributes this to the writer’s Dutch being better than their Turkish, a judgement about linguistic competencies, and about translation, since he infers that the translation has been directly from Dutch into Turkish. Subsequently, he qualifies these judgements, saying that maybe the oddness is due to the writer’s origin in Anatolia where they ‘speak Turkish differently’. In a similar vein, when he notices the misspelling of ‘tellefoon’, he attributes this to the fact that that call centres are often owned by Pakistanis. The general point we wish to make regarding the notion of indexical order, which emphasizes the processual exchange between macro frames of categorization and the micro-interactional aspects of language use, is that it enables a useful theorization-and-analysis of such phenomena: In this case, the close interplay between judging utterances in terms of a plurality of available structural-grammars and the indexically-organized social-geographic differentiation of speakers. This process is richly shown in our data, as it was in other well-known work on situated inference in multilingual encounters. (Gumperz [1982] repeatedly

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5 Anecdottally, we have encountered related grammatical/sociolinguistic explanations among Flemish people as well. In response to Collins’s often struggling attempts to interpret rapidly spoken Dutch, sympathetic interlocutors would attribute difficulties not to his lack of grammatical proficiency, but rather to difficulty hearing the ‘thick’ accents, either of urban, northern Antwerp or the rural, western Flanders counties. East, west, north, south, it all depends on ordering: Grammar can be rendered as sociolinguistic difference, and sociolinguistic difference can be judged ungrammatical, as in ‘they don’t really speak the language.’
argues for the need to see the close interplay between social and linguistic categories in contextualization processes, multilingual contact forming a primary empirical base in his work; subsequently [2003], he has explicitly recast these insights as involving indexical processes.

In the case of shop signs and notices in multilingual, immigrant neighborhoods, we have an interesting mix of the generically taken-for-granted accompanied by the unexpected juxtaposition. On the one hand, the signs are easily intelligible because they are organized on very general principles of layout (see Scollon & Scollon, 2002, for a good basic discussion of such design features): There is often a combination of surname and type of activity; activities are given in vertical lists; bilingual messages are organized by equivalent form: parallel lists or other framing (see the role of the arrow in ‘Beste klanten we zijn verhuisd naar nr. 171’). On the other hand, for the case we analyse, plurilingualism and cultural differentiation are the normal state of affairs. This means that there is more at issue, however, than the usual genre mixing of much advertising (in which, for example, a ‘conversational’ opening and lifestyle evocation on front page is combined with dense legal language, small print, on the back page (Fairclough 1995b, or your latest credit card advertisement)). We argue in particular that the plurilingualism and cultural differentiation we discuss are characteristic of globalised neighbourhoods, that is, immigrant neighbourhoods reflecting Late Modern intertwining of locality and international process. Depending on their language proficiencies as well as their sociocultural positioning vis-à-vis Belgian ethnic relations and the Turkish diaspora, our interviewee-readers attend selectively and comment in detail, drawing thus quite different interpretations of what is ostensibly ‘the same’ sign. Their readings are the result of a mix of conditions of familiarity and disorderly novelty, and accounts are constructed out of this mix. As we have noted earlier, the value we see in the CDA concept of ‘orders of discourse’ is that it draws attention to genre expectations, yet emphases hybridity, and points also to the process of subjectivity/positioning in language use vis-à-vis shifts and continuities in the macro landscape of field-specific and larger socio-cultural orderings. In the case of our shops signs, genre-based reading is evident enough, though the activities indicated can occasion comment: In making sense of ‘Bagseven Finans’, Meryem has no difficulty recognizing the nature
of the enterprise and the listed activities, but she questions the grouping of activities; Herman similarly recognizes the name and activities but questions their grouping. They provide differing interpretations of the anomalous grouping of activities. The meaning of, or sense made, of linguistic diversity varies: Herman welcomes the linguistic hybridity of signs, if they conform to a certain map of ideal order of ethnic relations; both Nezat and Myriem attend to linguistic form and see in certain departures from the normative or presupposed evidence of interlingual transfers, either ‘direct translation’ or a loss of Turkish proficiency due to the migrants sociolinguistic position in Belgium and a projected ancestry in rural Turkey. In making such evaluative (ideologically-informed) judgements, as we argue all language users do, they are both classifying signs, sign makers, and (likely) sign readers, and they are placing themselves vis-à-vis immigrant neighbourhoods, countries of origin, and host societies. They are the source of discourses through which those entities are enacted, evoked, and reflected.

Conclusion
For Fairclough, micro-hybridities observed in texts, real interaction, and so forth reflect macro-social shifts and processes, such as that public sector enterprises and discourses are increasingly modelled upon and colonised by private sector organisational logic and principles. We point instead to a more nuanced process in which global flows of people and linguistic resources, bottom-up anti-immigrant populism and prosaic small-scale marketing efforts can nonetheless be said to characterise an order of discourse or indexical ordering which includes the reading practices we have described above. Our analyses in this paper give a glimpse of an important facet of a contemporary Late Modern ordering of discourses in one particular context of multilingualism in the present era. The picture we have provided is of course partial and selective. Even within the City of Gent there are neighbourhoods unaffected by such hybridity, and a larger account of such orders, positing nations, such as Belgium, as a unit of analysis, would require attention to a complex sociolinguistic field, with users shifting between different ‘modes’ of reading and in which not all geographical areas are affected by global population and cultural-linguistic flows. A problem with CDA as we read it are that it treats market-based
processes and public spheres as unaffected by differences in national policy or regional, metropolitan, and even neighbourhood-based forms of variation and hybridity. What we are saying is that there is something about spatially-based distributions of forms, textual artefacts and indexical readings that deserves serious study, and may elude the boundaries of fields or societal domains (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2004a,b).

What we foreground in our analyses are the interpretative connections and gap-filling efforts of real language users – here cast in the role of ‘overhearers’ (Goffman 1981) – in situations where multilingualism has resulted in challenges to the language proficiencies which they bring to their readings of neighbourhood shop signage. One result is that they can only attend selectively to various aspects of these signs. Depending on the language proficiencies which they are able to draw upon extensively (broadly speaking, Herman: Flemish only; Nazet: native Flemish and Turkish-as-used-in-the-diaspora; Meryem: native Turkish), these ‘overhearing’ language users respond differently to a situation where they can only attend selectively and so establish plausible connections with less straightforwardly interpretable dimensions (e.g. signage in a language you do not know). This results in both partially-overlapping and substantially different interpretations of what is ostensibly ‘the same’ sign. Each of Meryem’s, Herman’s and Nazet’s readings is the result of a mix of conditions of familiarity and entropy. Coherent accounts about social and linguistic realities are constructed out of this mix, and the ones highlighted also bring out the personal trajectories: that of an autochtone Turk reading allochtone Turkish-in-the-diaspora while on a professional visit (Meryem), that of an allochtone Belgian Turk reading bilingualism in an adjacent neighbourhood (Nezat), that of an autochtone Fleming reading allochtone Turkish in another part of the country (Herman). Each of these reading positions offers a plausible take on neighbourhood signage in globalized neighborhoods, in which residents and business people frequently have transnational economic links and cultural allegiances, as well as uneven polyglot linguistic resources. Each of these reading positions also brings out a point about contemporary orders of discourse: thus the distinction between shops signs seen as ‘written Turkish’ and as ‘Dutch as a lingua franca’ is itself a reflection of boundaries and conflicts over boundaries which Fairclough argues are part of
orders of discourse and Silverstein would see as part of indexical ordering. The point is that seeing shop signs as written Turkish is one large-scale schematisation of language community and understood and permissable variation, one bounding of the social and linguistic phenomena. Seeing shop signs in terms of Dutch as a lingua franca also calls to mind a potential speech community with internal linguistic variation, but one which is differently situated vis-à-vis institutional processes and lifeworld experiences. The point is that these boundaries are in play in situated discursive practices, but participants are not necessarily aware of them. Researchers may too easily accept them as self-evident and thus overlook a vital aspect of contemporary orders of discourse.

We have been grappling with shop signs as a piece of situated language contact. Following Gumperz (1982) we suggest that to understand discourse you have to look at individual encounters and examine people’s socially-differentiated responses. In this way, you may explore the interpretative traditions they draw upon and the differences between them. That is a methodological aspect of understanding discourse strategies. By posing the question, ‘Does an emphasis on literacy versus communicative practice make a difference in what you thematise in analysing indexical meaning?’, we are forced to ask under what conditions is the fact of inscription foregrounded? Meryem is a highly-educated scholar and interested in orthography. She brings to bear a knowledge of institutional history within Turkey on her readings. This includes a political history in which an orthographic break with an Islamic Ottoman tradition played a vital role in 20th century nationalism and modernization. With Nezat and Herman, on the other hand, there is less of an apparent awareness of the literacy artefact. One question here is: is Nezat aware of the Dutch-Turkish contrast in the sign because he speaks both languages or because he is faced with written language in both? With Herman, the details of the writing matter very little, except as an indicator of inter-ethnic contact and hierarchy which is tangibly experienced in signage. The relationship between literacy practice and communicative practice, understood as a broader field, has to be argued for in terms of particular local meanings as well as institutional values attached to forms and facts of inscription within an ongoing communicative practice. What is language practice and what is
literacy practice is itself a question of situated boundaries drawn by research subjects and researchers alike.

Of course, readings which emerge from interviews done in front of the computer or using print-outs of pictures spread out on the table, cannot be simply be taken as substitutes for the kind of indexical readings which passers-by (not necessarily real users of the shops themselves) construe for themselves when in the streets. The practices we have described above are based on reflection and conscious interpretation, unlike the activity-embedded, habitual nature of much routine reading. We argue, nonetheless, that there are affinities: all reading is from a position and involves an evaluative interpretation of indexicals as well as ‘what the text literally says’. Put another way, it is impossible to separate indexical meaning from whatever else a texts says, and indexicals must be studied as situated communicative practices.

The point of our exercise lies not in a claim to interchangeability of all forms of reading but instead rather to underline “the dialectical plenitude of indexicality in micro-contextual real-time” (2003:227), in which particular ‘micro’ contextual meanings are always construed in terms of a potentially open and sequentially-enacted series of higher-order ‘macro’ contextual assumptions. What we have tried to include in our account is not solely the interpretative variation among our interlocutor ‘subjects’, nor just the greater certainty of triangulation due to comparing their accounts, but also the place of ourselves under the conditions of globalisation which enabled this research: the conference-based contact with a colleague from Turkey, the office-contact with Herman, Collins’s own road to Dutch, and Slembrouck re-walking the neighbourhood adjacent to where he used to live, now with predominantly English-speaking overhearing academic audiences in mind.

As a concluding remark about our current intellectual terrain, note that the concept of ‘orders of discourse’ as initially postulated by Michel Foucault in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, sought to address the processes and social mechanisms through which a fear of uncontrollable meaning is channelled and constrained: rituals of establishing speech, processes of inclusion and exclusion, selection and distribution all function to control or contain meaning. According to McNay (1994:86-88), Foucault’s arguments about ‘orders of discourse’ marked a crucial step in the transition from an archeological programme oriented to
decipherable meanings locked into discursive formations to the analysis of genealogies in order to bring out the exteriority of meaning. This includes a dependency on non-discursive relations which form the conditions for the possibility of discourse. We see the current work on literacy as a practice, on orders of discourse à la CDA, and especially on indexical ordering, as marking a similar concern with ‘the exteriority of meaning,’ that is, its necessarily emergent and contingent quality in a world in which the mechanisms structuring a text’s meaning do not necessarily relate directly to the textual artefact.
 References

Foucault, Michel, 1970. L’ordre du discours. Paris :


Appendix

Figure 1 – BAGSEVEN FINANS

Wondelgemstraat, Gent, 05/2003
Figure 2 – *DEAR CUSTOMERS WE HAVE MOVED TO NR. 171*

Wondelgemstraat, Gent, 05/2003
Figure 3 – *RABOT TELEPHONE BOOT*

Wondelgemstraat, Gent, 05/2003
Figure 4 – WARM TURKISH BAKERY HILAL