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Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Linguistic Landscape

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Signage as event
Deriving ‘community’ from language practice

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Abstract

Our aim in this paper is to propose a framework to analyse the relationship between language choice on signs in multilingual environments, place, and notions of ‘community’. We focus on an interpretation of the goals pursued by sign owners, exploring how linguistic (and non-linguistic) resources are mapped onto communicative acts to target addressees and initiate some form of encounter or engagement. We approach signs as complex and multi-layered communicative events that are composed of different illocutionary acts, and take into account the local language ecology and place. We show how signs, as a form of practice, contribute to creating relations between sign owners and addressees, and can thus be constitutive of community.

Keywords: multilingualism, community, signage as event, encounter, engagement, multi-modality, Manchester.

1. Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to propose a framework to analyse the relationship between language choice on signs in multilingual environments, place, and notions of ‘community’. We follow critical approaches in the social sciences that seek to de-essentialise ‘community’ by linking it to practice rather than location or place of origin, by defining it as an imagined construction used to express shared belonging (as well as exclusion), and by approaching it as the object rather than site of investigation (e.g. Anderson, 1983; Brubaker, 2005; Anderson, 2013; Blokland, 2017; see also Bessant, 2018 for an overview).

Research has tended to approach linguistic landscape (LL) as an indicator of an established link between a language community and demarcated place (Landry & Bourhis 1997) and an indicator of the presence in geographical space of multiple communities (e.g. Backhaus, 2009; Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara & Trumper-Hecht, 2006; Barni & Bagna, 2009). Conversely, it has been suggested
that the use of multiple languages on signs can call into question the strictness of boundaries between language communities (Huebner, 2006), providing instead clues about the way language is used to convey experience and thereby create narratives of ‘community’ in the first place (Collins & Slemrouck, 2007; Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Maly, 2014). Such studies take inspiration from developments in sociolinguistic theory that do not regard ‘speech community’ as necessarily bound by time and place, but instead understand it as dynamic, temporary, and bound by certain aspects of linguistic practice (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Eckert, 2006). Blackwood (2018: 119) for instance discusses the impact that the presence of Guadeloupean Creole in Guadeloupe’s LL has had on the public recognition of a distinct community of people who use the language not just for speaking and reading but also, significantly, for writing. He argues that in the historical context of demands for recognition of Creole, the LL offers an opportunity to reconfigure conventional understandings of the group and to legitimise its shared value of using Creole, transcending ethnic lines that have typically formed the basis for informal categorisations of communities on the island. In this way, activity domains emerge as “spatial practices indexing a sense of community and, by extension, belonging” (2018: 111). When studying multilingual settings, the steadiness of ‘language community’ is called into question even further by the realisation that practice transcends language boundaries, while choices among linguistic resources within a multilingual repertoire may be indexical of place of interaction as well as other factors (Lanza & Svendsen, 2007; Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Kroon, Dong & Blommaert, 2015).

Building on these approaches, we take inspiration from Blokland’s (2017) definition of ‘community’ as a practice of urban settings that is achieved through performance and the construction of shared histories, which flag a sense of belonging and social identification. According to Blokland, the density and diversity of the urban environment create a setting for encounters that are fluid and unplanned, as well as for engagements that are characterised by conscious participation and a stable commitment to a shared purpose. These lead to various forms of social ties, which may be of a transactional nature and thus instrumental, featuring interdependencies, or they can be affective and sociable, showing emotional attachments and bonds. Characteristic of urban practice is the familiarity of public space, or ‘public familiarity’, which provides a frame for social identification. Social ties in the urban setting are arranged on a continuum of privacy (public vs. private) and access (anonymous vs. intimate). ‘Community’ is thus seen as the cultural performance of belonging and identity in the form of shared narratives and histories around the dynamic interplay of encounters, engagements, and social ties.
In the centre of our analysis is the sign as a communicative event (see also Matras, Gaiser & Reershemius, 2018). It is initiated by an owner/sender, who targets an audience of intended addressees/receivers in order to achieve a communicative goal. That goal is typically the initiation of some form of encounter or engagement, either fluid or durable, prompting transactions or representing affectionate bonds, or conveying degrees of privacy and access to shared knowledge domains. The communicative event represented by the sign is itself a form of practice through which the owner/sender signals shared positioning with target readers or constructs a narrative of shared belonging.

The event carried by the sign is often composed of individual communicative acts, each carrying their own illocutionary force.¹ In the multilingual environment, choices within a complex (multilingual) repertoire of linguistic features are mapped by the owner/sender in meaningful ways onto individual acts and illocutions. Aligned with place, the choice of language on signs can set limits to certain uses of space that regulate access or that define, modify or appropriate public familiarity. The sign can thus serve as a performance of belonging and of shared histories through which the sign owner/sender constructs a community of potential addressees.

Our interest is in these actions of the sign owner/sender and the way in which choices of language resources reflect the owner/sender's goals and intentions. While oriented toward achieving an effect on an audience of addressees/receivers, at the point of encoding or production these choices can be analysed independently of the actual effect that the sign may have had on its readers, in much the same way as the composition of a literary or artistic production is open to critique and analysis independently of audience reactions. While we recognise audience reactions as an interesting area of research in its own right, it is not part of our present investigation, which focuses on the choices made by owners/senders. To that end, our analysis relies on prolonged ethnographic observations in the settings in which owner/senders and addressees/receivers come together, and on a series of participatory and engaged immersion and interviews in a variety of sites (see below).

We select for discussion three types of relationship between signs as events, and place. The first are ‘spatially convergent’ events. Here, place and spatial proximity to other signs play a role in the choice of linguistic resources on LL and thereby in shaping performance and constructing shared narratives. The second type is ‘dispersed’ events. Here, the choice of linguistic resources links events in discontinuous space, demonstrating the disassociation of performed practice community and shared identity narratives, and place. The third type is

¹ We use the term as defined by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).
'performing participation’. Here, the choice of language resources links the site of an establishment such as an institution, a landmark, or a retail outlet, with the owner/sender's interest in regulating the participation of certain audiences in the event as a whole or in certain segments of it. The sign helps to compartmentalise engagement and to perform degrees of appropriation of shared narratives.

In relation to all three types, our interpretation of choices and configurations is contextual and takes into account the surrounding linguistic ecology (cf. Hult, 2009) as well as statements from participants representing the initiators, owners or co-owners of signs (see below). Rather than approach language choices on the LL as representing established communities, we show how they serve to perform histories of belonging and in that way to construct communities around participation in certain practice routines. In this way, we seek to enrich the discussion of Linguistic Landscape by adding a dimension that theorises signs as points of communicative interaction in a multilingual setting, and such interaction as a form of urban practice through which relations among individuals are shaped, defined and performed along different scales of familiarity, durability, and social bonds.

2. Research sites and observation methods

We draw on data from two different research sites, Manchester (UK) and Jerusalem, which represent two distinct histories of multilingualism and two distinct socio-political and spatial configurations that shape language practices. Manchester is one of the world's first industrial cities. Its social fabric has been shaped by immigration since the mid-nineteenth century, with subsequent migration waves from South and East Asia as well as other areas in the post-colonial period. The city has continued to attract new generations of immigrants as a result of refugee movements, globalisation and EU enlargement. While English is clearly its established majority language and the language that dominates its public face, Manchester is now home to some 200 languages, the largest language groups including Urdu/Panjabi, Chinese, Arabic, Polish, Bengali, Somali, Persian, and Kurdish (Matras & Robertson, 2015). Greater Manchester is also home to one of the world’s largest Yiddish speaking populations. The city's LL features more than fifty different languages, with various degrees of geographical concentration in particular areas of settlement as well as distribution across particular commercial and cultural outlets (see Gaiser, 2014; Gaiser & Matras, 2016; Matras et al., 2018).

Jerusalem’s multilingualism goes back to antiquity and its LL reflects numerous traditions of literacy and liturgical practice going back many centuries (see
Rosenbaum, Nadel, Cooper & Fishman, 1977; Spolsky & Cooper, 1991). The role of English in the colonial period has shaped contemporary language practices, as has the status of both Hebrew and Arabic as official languages, lingua francas and majority languages in the western and eastern sectors of the city respectively. Language practices have been further shaped by Jewish immigration waves into West Jerusalem, most recently (since the 1990s) of speakers of Russian, Amharic, and French, and are also impacted by labour migration and a strong dependency on the tourist industry. Multilingualism is the default rather than exception and an array of different repertoires can be found in both domestic and institutional contexts.

We rely on experiences of first-hand observation, interaction and immersion in various population groups in both cities going back twenty years, as part of personal networks of contacts, institutional links with public service providers and voluntary sector initiatives, as well as through years of linguistic documentation fieldwork on a variety of languages. For Manchester, we are also informed by links cultivated as part of university public engagement activities run via the Multilingual Manchester research unit including research co-production with key public service providers, a support platform for community-based supplementary schools that teach heritage languages, and a student volunteer and placement scheme. For both sites we also rely on several concentrated LL fieldwork expeditions carried out between 2014-2018 in which we collected annotated images, supported by the LinguaSnapp mobile application and web-based database that allows us to archive and tag annotated data and visualise the location of individual signs on an interactive map.2

The examples discussed in this paper were selected from corpora of over two thousand annotated images collected in each of the two sites, the compilation targeting signs that displayed any language other than or in addition to English, in Manchester, and any sign that showed a language in addition to Hebrew in West Jerusalem or Arabic in East Jerusalem. The full corpus can be accessed via the online LinguaSnapp maps for the two cities. As part of our LL fieldwork expeditions, we also interviewed participants about their motivations to initiate multilingual signage, and we are able to take their statements into consideration for some of the examples discussed below.3 Our selection of examples for the

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2 [www.linguasnapp.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.linguasnapp.manchester.ac.uk) and [www.linguasnappjlem.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.linguasnappjlem.manchester.ac.uk)

3 Our purpose in this paper is to present a qualitative and local analysis of language signage, and we are following Blommaert (2013) and Blommaert & Maly (2014) in using unstructured interviews and longitudinal ethnographic observation and immersion to inform our interpretation of LL. Since interview data are not our primary source of data, we will not devote space to a description of the overall experience of data collection through interviews, nor do we provide a quantification of interviews. Instead, details of
present paper is not intended to offer a representative profile of either of the two investigation sites, though of course, as noted above, the local language ecology plays a pivotal role in our analysis of the images and the events that they represent. Instead, we draw on the combined corpus to identify examples that illustrate key qualitative configurations and allow us to extract patterns that link language choice with place and ‘community’ construction. Comparing two sites with very different histories and realities of multilingualism affords our selection an element of general and non-random validity.

3. Spatially convergent events

We define ‘spatially convergent’ events as those where the language choice and patterns of language configuration on signs are shaped by the specific local positioning of the sign in proximity to other signs. Their spatial proximity means that the signs and the patterns of language choices that they display act as a cluster of practices that converge into an integrated whole in a shared spatial configuration. This configuration aligns the performance of shared history and cultural practices with an appropriation of place, contributing to the ‘community’ effect. North Manchester and neighbouring Salford are home to a large Jewish population, many of whom belong to Hassidic (so-called ‘ultra-Orthodox’) denominations whose everyday language of interaction is Yiddish while the liturgical and written language used in public announcements is Hebrew. Since around 2015 there has been a rise in the number of Hassidic immigrants from Israel to the area, whose language of domestic interaction is Israeli (Modern) Hebrew alongside Yiddish. Consequently, English, Yiddish, and Hebrew are heard and seen on public and private signs in the area.

A large segment of the area around the Higher Broughton neighbourhood is populated almost exclusively by Hassidic Jews. It includes residential properties, religious and educational institutions, and a concentration of commercial outlets. A common feature of the residential streets is the use of Hebrew-alphabet name plaques on the doors of private homes, featuring the family name accompanied by the Hebrew (and Yiddish) title ‘family’ (see also Matras et al., 2018). Indeed, in several streets, each and every household, with hardly any exception, displays such a sign. From our conversations with residents we are aware of a mixture of backgrounds: some are Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews of central-eastern European descent, some are recent immigrants from the United States, some are Hebrew speakers from Israel, others are of Sephardic Jewish background from France and other countries. They share participation in Orthodox Jewish interaction with senders/owners accompany our discussion of the individual examples below.
religious life including affiliation with relevant institutions that have a presence in the neighbourhood and certain consumer habits oriented toward the local Jewish owned outlets. The study of Hebrew scripture and literacy in liturgical Hebrew is one of the foundations of their shared cultural practice.

Striking is the functionality of the Hebrew name plaques: By identifying the family name they define ownership of the residential property and ostensibly give access to information on such ownership, except that this information is privileged, and might be defined as inward-looking (see Gaiser & Matras, 2016) as it is only accessible to those who share reading knowledge of Hebrew, and by implication who partake in the full set of practices in which such knowledge is anchored. This contrasts with the common use of family name plaques to help identify ownership for purposes such as delivery or maintenance services.

Figure 1. Hebrew and English residential signage, Salford, Greater Manchester

Figure 1 shows an example, featuring a complex display of signage on a residential outlet. The top sign is permanent and professionally produced and carries the Hebrew word ‘family’ accompanied by the family name, both in Hebrew letters. As described above, this mirrors the practice of almost all households in the same street and in neighbouring streets. Below are two temporary signs welcoming family members who have returned from a trip. This too is a ubiquitous practice in the neighbourhood (see Matras et al., 2018), where
intensive transnational links mean that family members often travel abroad, and upon their return children are usually prompted to design Welcome notices. A commercially produced illustrated notice in English appears above a home-produced artwork carrying the phrase ‘Welcome’ in Hebrew. While the English note is purchased, its material composition indicates its temporary purpose, like the one in Hebrew below it. The combination of the two can be taken to represent the linguistic ecology in which English dominates in commercial settings, while the practice of displaying the Welcome signs is particular to the locality and is aligned with the local residents’ range of shared Jewish Orthodox cultural and religious practices. Finally, at the bottom of the door, beneath the mail slot, we find a further notice in English, saying ‘No free newspapers please, Thank You’. While appearing to be slightly unstable in terms of its physical fixture, its material composition as a piece of laminated paper places it on the continuum of permanence in between the name plaque and the Welcome notices. Once again, identical notices can be found on many doors on this and neighbouring streets.

The combination of signs on the door can thus be split into three separate communicative acts, each with their own illocutionary force, each targeting its own group of addressees, each with its own material composition and degree of temporal stability, and each showing a distinct choice of language aligned with the surrounding language ecology: The name plaque is permanent, Hebrew only⁴; it is inwards looking in that, while seemingly naming the property’s owners, it is in fact directed at those who are already familiar with them and as such its actual illocutionary purpose is to display belonging to the immediate surroundings and the ‘community’ of neighbours who share cultural practices, heritage and history. It is thus an emblem of a durable social connection involving strong bonds.

The Welcome notices target an individual addressee, a member of the family, through a perlocutionary act; they are temporary and makeshift, and combine a shared orientation toward the surrounding (commercial) ecology (purchased labels) with personal creativity anchored in family-based tradition. In addressing the single event of the person’s return to the household, they represent an encounter that is fluid yet anchored in a strong and stable, intimate and affectionate connection.

⁴ The Hebrew word for ‘family’ is also used in Yiddish, and both languages use the Hebrew alphabet, and so arguably, the sign is simultaneously Hebrew and Yiddish, though from our observations we know that the format is also used by families that are not Yiddish speaking, and therefore the overarching and primary pattern can be defined as Hebrew.
The ‘No newspapers’ notice is a commodity artefact that targets outsiders or non-residents who do not partake in any of the practices that the property residents call their own. It is outwards looking, representing an instrumental approach to fluid encounters that have no private meaning to the sign owners and indeed it carries a prohibitive illocution aiming at constraining access.

The three communicative acts, the illocutions they represent, their degree of permanence, and the choice of language resources that accompany them, are all part of a stable package of communicative event configuration that is found on the doors of residential properties throughout the area, all inhabited by Hassidic Jews. Their cluster effect of identical practices in convergent space performs a sense of shared history and appropriation of place, aligning it with a range of shared cultural practices, thereby contributing to the ‘community’ effect. It separates insiders from outsiders, identifies family-based practice and traditions that are shared with neighbours, and regulates unplanned instrumental encounters with outsiders.

We now turn to a square around Manley Park, in the residential area of Whalley Range in South Manchester. Around 30% of residents in Whalley Range are of South Asian background, and the ward has been represented continuously by at least one elected councillor of Asian background since 2004. Commercial outlets in the two streets that are adjacent to the park as well as a number of public notices feature text in Urdu (Figure 2). The council signs in Urdu in Manley Park appear to be among the earliest public acknowledgements of the language in Manchester, and our conversations with city council officials indicate that this is connected to the history of political representation. Official signs in languages other than English are otherwise rare in the city (see Gaiser & Matras, 2016).
The council notices at the entrances to the park (top right side in Figure 2) officially frame the local space as one that is co-owned by Urdu speakers. (It should be noted that Urdu is spoken as a family language often alongside Panjabi, Potwari, and Mirpuri, and is used a lingua franca among Muslims of South Asian background including speakers of Bengali, Gujarati, and other languages, and as an informal medium of instruction in local Madrasas or religious schools that teach Quran recitation in Arabic). The top sign prohibits the feeding of animals, while the one below names the location and demarcates the park grounds. Moving clockwise on Figure 2, we see a makeshift handwritten notice on a grocery shop advertising a stock of Pakistani Kulfi; a semi-permanent advert for a hairdresser located next door; temporary printed posters marketing cultural events; a temporary printed notice in English situated in the window of a city council meeting and events facility announcing a regular meeting group for seniors, to which hand-written text in Urdu was added in a pre-set blank area of the page; and a permanent shop sign advertising a clothes retailer, with adjacent English and Urdu versions. These signs represent a diversity of owners and a range of illocutions including behaviour regulation and prohibition, naming of a landmark, and prompts for commercial transactions and cultural activities. They also show a range of material composition that links to the stability of the signs; and they represent a variety of encounters and engagements, from public access (landmark and regulation) through to fluid transactions (product and service
specification), affectionate engagements of a social and cultural nature, including some that are potentially private/intimate and durable and others that are singular public events.

Our conversations with participants around the park give the impression that the positioning of temporary notices in Urdu is triggered and licensed not just by the presence of Urdu speakers and the Urdu-dominated soundscape but also by the permanent presence of Urdu signs. With various actors contributing to a range of locally recognised practice routines, the multi-layered LL seems to symbolically acknowledge the status of Urdu in the location and to create and perform a bond among users of the language. The cluster of Urdu signs linked by place thus creates a sense of public familiarity around practices that are associated with a particular language, lending a sense of a cut-up space in which “particular rules and codes operate in relation to specific audiences” (Blommaert 2013: 43), often described as an “ethnic space” (Amos, 2016: 127).

4. Dispersed events

Dispersed events are linked through the overlap of choice of language, pattern of encounters or engagement that are represented by the sign, and the contribution of language choice to forging identity narratives and shared histories; but they appear in discontinuous space, demonstrating the disassociation of performed practice community and place. We discuss two examples from Jerusalem, both connected to the wave of immigration from Russia that began in the early 1990s.

Figure 3 shows examples of makeshift, temporary, printed, private notices in Russian that are fixed to lampposts (and occasionally, though rarely, to walls or, transgressively to public notice boards). We have dubbed them the ‘lamppost networks’, since identical notices and clusters of notices can be found on lampposts across the city (for an overview see the online LinguaSnapp corpus for Jerusalem, where images can be filtered for position and language).
Of the examples featured here, two signs offer temporary and part-time employment opportunities (one flagging knowledge of Hebrew as an advantage) and the third advertises a cultural circle that offers practical exercises around music and general wellbeing. The material composition of the notices and their positioning are indicators of the fluid and impersonal encounters that are served by the communicative events, which however at the same time can serve as a potential entry point to more stable or durable interaction routines of different kinds – transactional and instrumental, in the case of employment, or more intimate and potentially affectionate, in the case of the cultural circle. Other Russian lamppost notices in the corpus advertise lessons, reading groups, and informal social and cultural associations that meet on a regular basis. Arguably, the functionality of the notices is to turn an accidental, spontaneous and short-term engagement with the makeshift notice that appears in the public space, into a continuous private relationship around a commitment to a shared purpose, be it instrumental or cultural. In this way, each notice aims at building a ‘community’ united around particular practices. Two aspects are notable in the relationship of language and place. First, the choice of Russian (exclusively) limits access to those with shared language background. In that way, it performs a narrative of shared history as a point of departure around which new links around particular practices are to be forged. A practice community is in that way anchored in the community of shared heritage. Second, while the presence of each notice in its particular position on a lamppost is likely to be short-lived, the availability of Russian lamppost notices advertising these and similar activities is a permanent fixture of the city (or at least in West Jerusalem’s commercial
districts around the city centre and adjoining markets). It thus signals a long-term appropriation of public space for individual private communications without the claim of ownership of individual locations or places. This is possible owing to the permanent presence and configuration of a chain of individual makeshift events (signs with an exploratory reach and target audience), which together constitute a local routine: using lamppost notices as an entry point toward durable engagements with individuals of shared language heritage and past experience.

Our second example of dispersed, linked events represents a group of retailers specialising in shoe repairs and related services (selling and repairing belts and other leather items). Figure 4 shows an assembly of images of shop fronts taken around West Jerusalem’s city centre (for precise locations see LinguaSnapp Jerusalem online map, where images can be filtered by outlet). The sign texts, though concise, typically contain several communicative acts and illocutions. At the top we find the outlet name in Hebrew, either as a plain service categorisation ('Shoemaker’) or accompanied by a unique identifier consisting of the owner’s name ('Shoemaker Eliahu’) or an additional unique name ('Shoemaker Yitzhak Express’). The service categorisation is repeated in English and in Russian, leaving out the unique identifiers. Some of the signs show an additional service specification in Hebrew ('repairs of shoes and belts’) or contain an orientation position consisting of the outlet’s address (in Hebrew) and telephone number.

The Hebrew and English components are embedded into the overall language ecology of West Jerusalem’s commercial district: Hebrew is the principal language of public life, including transactions and administration. It appears top in the visual positioning hierarchy; it is used to connect to the publicly scripted mapping of locations and street names; and it is used for unique reference to the individual outlet, representing familiarity with local space and symbolic personalisation of practice routines including services. English is part of the same configuration: West Jerusalem’s central commercial district, in which these repair shops are found, emerged during the British Mandate period in the first part of the twentieth century, when English, alongside Hebrew, was the official language of public life. Most outlets, including not just retailers but also and especially those offering professional services (such as lawyers and doctors) feature English alongside Hebrew for service categorisation and sometimes also for unique reference (outlet name). In the local language ecology, the inclusion of English is thus part of the valorisation of a professional service.
We approached the shop owners to enquire about their motivation to include Russian on the signs. It appears that the owners of all relevant outlets are immigrants from Bukhara in Uzbekistan, who arrived in the 1950s. Their home language is Tajik, often mixed with Uzbek. Having been socialised in the Soviet Union, they also speak Russian. The shop signs were updated in response to the wave of immigrants from Russia in the 1990s, in an effort to capture their custom. The use of Russian thus performs a history that is shared with a target audience of clients, while at the same time it narrates the shared history of the community of Bukhara-origin shoemakers. In replicating near-identical configurations of language mapping to signs and portions of signs, the owners create a seemingly integrated network of routine events that are spread across separate locations, in effect a spatially dispersed ‘community’ of retailers who share both a common history and current professional practice. While the signs, as they address clients, are there to instigate fluid, short-lived and impersonal, instrumental transactions, the entire network of signs amounts to a permanent display of a long-standing bond around shared background and professional engagement, serving in effect as a kind of trademark, dislocated from a specific place yet embedded into an overall urban ecology.
5. Performing participation

Under this heading we discuss how the mapping of language resources onto communicative events and individual communicative acts on signs that are linked to particular establishments can compartmentalise audience engagement and regulate access to practice routines and knowledge domains. In Jerusalem, Hebrew, Arabic and English routinely appear side by side on all municipal signs that feature place names and regulate circulation, such as street names and directions, public car parks, recreational spaces and historical sites. Jerusalem’s modern light rail system follows the same policy: Most signage inside trains and on stops, including travel information and ticket machines, as well as recorded audio announcements of stops inside trains, are in three languages. However, many landmark signs – those on historical streets, squares and public buildings – depart from that generic parity of languages and show asymmetry instead.

Figure 5 depicts such a sign from Jaffa Street, one of West of Jerusalem’s principal commercial streets linking the city’s western highway coming from Tel Aviv, with the Old City, stretching through the commercial city centre. The event consists of two separate communicative acts. The first conveys the name of the street, thereby providing both orientation and identification of a landmark; consistent with general municipal policy it appears in three languages (and scripts). The second act appears in smaller print, and exclusively in Hebrew. This is a propositional act, providing historical information about the name Jaffa (‘Jerusalem’s port city in ancient times’). Access to this heritage narrative is restricted to readers of Hebrew, enacting an illocution-based separation of target audiences. While for those who are not Hebrew readers the encounter is fluid, short-lived, and strictly instrumental, through the compartmentalisation readers of Hebrew are invited exclusively to partake in a performance that links the historical narrative with place, thereby enacting it as shared heritage transmitted via the Hebrew language medium. This pattern is common not just in Jerusalem but on street signs in cities across Israel. It constitutes a practice routine in its own right, one that supports the construction of a national ‘heritage community’ by cultivating a link between place and the narrative of Hebrew-Jewish revival that is the foundation of the Israeli state.
Manchester airport is one of the UK's largest international transport hubs outside London-Heathrow, catering for numerous destinations. In 2016, the local airport authority introduced signs in different languages alerting passengers to security restrictions on the content of hand baggage. From interviews with staff in the relevant department we learned that the trigger for this innovation were complaints about repeated delays due to searches carried out when inadmissible items were found. Searches were linked to passengers’ scanned boarding passes and in that way to destinations. On that basis, the airport authority postulated a link to a set of languages, operating on the assumption that failure to comply with regulations derived from a lack of (linguistic) understanding of those regulations. We understand that no investigation was carried out to verify that assumption, nor was any data collection carried out to establish how effective the measure has been in preventing delays since its installation. Nevertheless, the airport continued for several years to maintain regulation signs in different sets of languages, dispersed among its three terminals based on the destinations that they serve. We have identified such signs in Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Polish, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Turkish (see LinguaSnapp online map). The signs were then removed in mid-2019 to make way for a new digital visualisation system (which is still being installed at the time of writing).

Figure 6 provides an example of such a sign, in Turkish. This particular sign consists mainly of a single albeit sequenced communicative act, combining a textual instruction ('no large liquids, 1 person – 1 plastic bag – 1 ltr maximum in containers of maximum 100ml – substance of more than 100ml not allowed') with visual prompts. The multimodal presentation underscores the emphatic nature of the illocution as well as the owners’ determination to ensure that the message comes across clearly. This is also behind the consideration to create separate signs in each target language, alongside the practical goal of flexible distribution across terminals (as flight destination schedules can potentially
change) and avoidance of over-crowding on individual signs, itself a consideration of clarity driven by the same health and safety agenda. Overall, the theme behind the measure is the compartmentalisation of audiences in order to ensure effective compliance with regulations. In effect, the owners are constructing a fragmented practice community, reaching out to each designated target audience separately on the assumption that it requires a bespoke intervention in order to ensure that it partakes in the same scripted institutional practice.

![Figure 6. Manchester airport security sign, Turkish](image)

An event type that is commonly encountered in Manchester (as well as in other Western urban centres where institutions ‘celebrate’ diversity) is the use of multiple languages for the expressive illocution of greetings. While in many outlets, in Manchester and beyond, we have encountered displays of multiple translations of ‘Welcome’ into a seemingly random assembly of languages,
emblematically signalling a general openness to the world, Figure 7 shows an example where such display is localised to target a particular audience of addressees. The primary school is located in one of Manchester’s many ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. The sign represents this diversity visually through the various shades and colours on the images of children at the very top. The main greeting message appears in English along with the naming of the school, identifying the establishment. The word ‘Welcome’ then follows in (from right to left) Arabic, Somali, Panjabi, Gujarati, and Urdu/Persian, the principal languages other than English spoken in the neighbourhood and among the school’s pupils in their homes.

Figure 7. Multilingual greeting, primary school South Manchester

The selection of target languages demonstrates the use of local knowledge on the part of the sign owners in a planned effort to demonstrate localised inclusivity. As Jaworski (2015) suggests, such ‘welcome’ messages on signs serve to market a unique, personal experience to readers, allowing readers to be singled out from audiences and addressed as individuals. The repetition of the minimalist core of the expressive illocution in several languages performs a gesture of reaching out to all actors who participate in the establishment’s space, signalling the goal of establishing a durable shared space and sense of belonging to the specific establishment while acknowledging the diversity of background histories. Such celebratory deployment of language resources builds a practice community around the ethos of respecting diversity, with the multiple repetition of a simplex act serving as an icon of bringing together audiences that are distinguishable through their separate historical narratives and practice routines.
Our final example comes from a shop front of a grocery and minimarket in South Manchester where a sign advertises the services of an in-house butcher (Figure 8). Many small and middle-size food stores owned and operated by people of South Asian or Middle Eastern background in Manchester contain a separate butcher shop unit which often advertises its own products and tends to operate a separate payment counter from the rest of the outlet that accommodates it. The sign is composed of three communicative acts. At the very top is an expressive-recitative act consisting of an Islamic religious phrase in Arabic (‘In the name of Allah the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful’). Its prominence in terms of position and font size frames the outlet as one that is observant of strict Islamic laws on meat products, and thereby prompts transactions from an audience of observers of shared practices. It is accompanied by the generic images of a lamb and chicken, a non-verbal illustration of the service category. The next line identifies the service category in three languages (from right to left): Urdu (‘halal meat’), Arabic (‘halal meat, chicken’) and Somali (‘halal meat & chicken’). The neighbourhood is predominantly South Asian and there is no obvious link between the choice of languages other than Urdu and the shop’s immediate spatial vicinity; nor does the shop attract customers of these backgrounds from further afield, as far as we have been able to ascertain. In fact, the sign was produced upon commission, following a template that serves similar shops (i.e. Muslim butcher shops) across the city. It is noticeable that English is missing.
from the text-based service categorisation and the nature of the shop's products is only inferable to those who do not know Urdu, Arabic or Somali from the sign's iconography. The tiered presentation thus targets a Muslim audience, and then, separately, particular audiences (all individualised sub-groups of the overarching Muslim audience) through a performance of their respective background histories, represented by the three languages. By contrast, the final communicative act, that of orientation, represented by the final line, is exclusively in English (though note the spelling mistake in ‘openning’, suggesting the producer of the sign is a non-native user of English). We thus have an example of what Blommaert (2008) identifies as ‘grassroots literacy’, illustrating how LL can serve as an indication of sign-writers’ skills (cf. Spolsky & Cooper 1991).

By using a tiered structure in the event and compartmentalising language resources, the sign owner/producer seeks to target particular audiences who are likely to be interested in purchasing products, on the basis that they share certain interests and needs. This is achieved by evoking different layers of practice that come together in this encounter around a transaction that is impersonal and instrumental by nature, but is at the same time anchored in a context of faith-based practice that lends it a more durable, affective and ideational bond. The higher-tier spirituality is conveyed by the Quranic quote at the top. The reference to product categorisation acknowledges division by background, albeit repeating the qualification ‘halal’, thereby re-anchoring shared faith. The delivery of the orientation act in English relates to the shared, neutral, and secular transactional environment, and to the dominance of English in the surrounding language ecology. The language choices on the sign, and their mapping onto individual acts and illocutions, all in relation to a single local establishment, thus establish a hierarchical sense of belonging where different aspects of practice are compartmentalised and shared with different groups of participants.

4. Conclusion

Above we interpreted the goals of sign owners when mapping language resources onto communicative acts in order to engage target audiences in a variety of practices. Our point of departure was an understanding of signs as communicative events that can be complex and multi-layered, composed of a variety of illocutionary acts and often accompanied by non-linguistic modality, all embedded into the local language ecology. Rather than approach language choices as tokens of established language communities, we regard the communicative events that are represented by signs in the multilingual environment as practices that are intended to contribute to forging relations
between sign owners and groups of addressees, and thus as constitutive of ‘community’ in the sense of a cultural performance of shared narratives of belonging, as defined by Blokland (2017). Our interest was in particular in the relation between such performance, and place, following up on earlier discussions of the role of language in indexing shared experiences and contributing to narratives of ‘community’ (Collins & Slemrouck, 2007; Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Maly, 2014, Blackwood, 2018).

We approached signs as events and thus as a practice in their own right: In the urban setting, signs inform, name, celebrate, and prompt addressees to take action. The mere engagement with signs (even just from the perspective of the owner, who makes the effort to produce the sign) is a linguistic-cultural practice. The sign's configuration, including the choice of linguistic features and their alignment with communicative acts, performs the owner’s narratives about past experiences as well as intended outreach to others, as discussed already by Blommaert (2013) and by Pappenhausen, Scarvaglieri and Redder (2016). At the same time, signs give insight into the range of practices for which they stand as a means of instigating encounters, engagements, and social ties between the owner and audiences, or amongst intended addressees. This double function of the sign makes it a valuable artefact through which practices can be identified. In the global city, language serves as both a medium through which practice routines are enacted, and a token and often indicator and emblem of past experience, place of origin, cultural values and transnational links, among others, and thus as both a channel for action and a mode of identity performance. In the multilingual urban environment, with its density and diversity of linguistic and cultural repertoires and the opportunities for spatial segregation as well as for single-site integration, the selection of language features on the sign, coupled with a pronounced relation to place, offer insights into the ways in which notions of belonging are performed and thus into actors' ways of constructing ‘communities’.

Our examples do not pretend to offer an exhaustive compilation of types of alignment of community performance through language and links to place, but rather, points of interest that show that such alignments can take a variety of shapes and configurations. As spatially convergent events we discussed signs that derive their configurations (in terms of the composition of communicative acts and the mapping of language choices onto them) through clustering in proximity to one another, owing their performative meaning to their positioning in a specific place and environment, or a local sense of community. We demonstrated how dispersed events can form networks that represent communities of actors who aspire to come together around shared histories and particular forms of encounters and engagement. We showed how language choices made by sign owners on behalf of a particular establishment can serve to
compartmentalise access to forms of practice and thereby as emblems of various
degrees of belonging that are regulated by the owners of that establishment.

The choice of language on signs has been shown to organise space and social
relations in different ways, and for different purposes (Gaiser & Matras, 2016),
and to demarcate areas as well as audiences (Blommaert & Huang, 2010). By
addressing and exploiting the complexity of language use in the diverse urban
setting, the LL can contribute to developing familiarity in public space,
positioning actors in relation to others even when they do not interact in the
form of more durable engagements. By performing shared interest in products
or services and shared identification with narratives of past history, the choice of
language on signs can provide a frame for social identifications, enabling actors
to present themselves and their expectations about others, or, to use Blokland’s
(2017: 1) words, to “do community” rather than to constitute community.

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Skurcimos (Abstract in Romani)

Ande kado lil kamas te sikhavas jekh metoda te šaj keras analiza: so si e relacija maškar e čhiba kaj arakhas len po semno (ande kodola thana kaj vorbil pe but čhiba), o than, taj sar dikhen pe e manuš pe peste sar grupa. Rodas so kamen te phenen kodola manuš kaj thon e semne avri, save alava von len te šaj maladen pe le avere manušensa taj te vazden peski komunikacija lensa. Pa amaro gindo, e semne si len but kotora; sako jekh lendar si les peski funkcija po divano maškar le manušen, taj pe čhiba kaj arakáhdžon ande kodo than. Ame sikhavas sar o semno si praktično buči, kaj vazdel e relacija maškar kodola manuš kaj hramon o semno, taj kodola kaj roden les; kade, o semno žutil te vazdel o identiteta le manušengi kaj train khetane ande jekh than vaj foro.

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