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Ico Maly

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Detecting social changes in times of superdiversity: an ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis of Ostend in Belgium

Ico Maly 

Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Superdiversity, on the one hand, calls for new frames, concepts, and methodologies to deal with a fluid reality characterised by rapid (social) changes. On the other hand, we also have a need to broaden our scope beyond the heavy focus on the urban metropolis as the locus of superdiversity. With this paper I want to contribute to the research addressing these challenges by infusing existing research within Linguistic Landscape Studies with a semiotic and ethnographic perspective and add to our existing knowledge of superdiversity by focusing on a ‘small’ Belgian city called Ostend instead of a cosmopolitan world city with millions of inhabitants. I argue that ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis (ELLA) enables us to describe, quite accurately, rapid social changes in complex superdiverse neighbourhoods. Moreover, ELLA enables us to move beyond a mere synchronic picture of superdiverse neighbourhoods and sketch a ‘stratigraphy’ and a historical perspective on them.

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Introduction

Literature on superdiversity is growing rapidly, as is the number of studies on linguistic landscapes. In this paper I connect these two literatures by arguing that an upgraded Linguistic Landscape Studies (LLS) can be an excellent methodological tool to study superdiversity. More concretely, the paper wants to enrich the existing LLS by infusing it with a semiotic and ethnographic perspective and contribute to the existing knowledge on superdiversity by focusing on a ‘small’ Belgian city called Ostend instead of a cosmopolitan world city with millions of inhabitants. The central space of analysis is the Ostend neighbourhood ‘Het Westerkwartier’ and even more specifically *de Torhoutsesteenweg*, the largest road cutting through the neighbourhood. ‘Het Westerkwartier’ lies in the centre of this small Belgian coastal city. The neighbourhood was the spearhead of social housing in Ostend and as a result it was known as a workman’s neighbourhood in the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, the harbour city and especially the neighbourhood under scrutiny are characterised by high unemployment, poverty and rapid social changes.

CONTACT Ico Maly  ico.maly@gmail.com

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I will first sketch the methodological challenges that superdiversity raises. Next, I draw an outline of my approach to LLS. After dealing with these theoretical and methodological issues, I guide the reader through Ostend with a focus on rapid social and demographic changes.

Superdiversity and the methodological challenge

In his seminal paper Vertovec (2007, 1025–1026) coined superdiversity as a ‘summary term’ to describe the enormous diversity he encounters while researching London. The pre-fix ‘super-’ introduces an *evolution* towards a ‘complexity surpassing anything ... previously experienced’ (Vertovec 2007, 1027–1028). Superdiversity is a historically specific phenomenon that arises within the geopolitical context after the fall of the Berlin Wall and later the fall of the Soviet Union. The new structure of the post-1989 world creates new migration patterns which results in the *superdiversification* of more and more cities around the world.

Several authors (Blommaert 2013; Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014; Arnaut et al. 2016) also link superdiversity to the changes in communication technologies within the same timeframe, arguing that new media add new layers of complexity. For one, to emigrate does not mean that one is forced to cut one’s ties to family and friends back home anymore to the extent that used to be the case before the emergence of new media. Migrants can now talk in real time with friends and family dispersed around the world about things that are happening right now, and all parties can be informed about these events by consulting the same media, regardless of where they are. On the other hand, we see that the internet, satellite-TV and cell phones have profound effects on cultural flows and processes of identity construction for everyone (Varis, forthcoming). These new media not only function as infrastructures of transnational lives, but they also create cultural niches within which translocal micro-populations flourish (Maly and Varis 2015). In other words, it is not only migrants who live superdiverse lives, but ‘stay-at-homes can become cosmopolitan too’ (Radice 2015).

Superdiversity thus points to a multidimensional perspective on diversity that goes beyond describing diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, language or religion, but also incorporates education, legal status, migration trajectories, human capital, employment and translocal micro-populations (Maly and Varis 2015).

Superdiversity has proven to be a very useful and productive concept to describe ‘the diversification of diversity’ in the latest phase of globalisation. The strength of the concept lies in its descriptive ability. It is ‘limited in “grand narrative” ambitions or explicit theoretical claims, committed instead to ethnography’ (Arnaut et al. 2016). The concept invites us to investigate, describe and analyse this process of diversification. One of the methodological complexities in trying to describe superdiversity is the fact that it equals rapid layered demographic and social changes (Blommaert 2013): the reality of today, is no longer necessarily there tomorrow.

Ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis (ELLA)

LLS offer us a very stimulating diagnostic methodology to study linguistic changes in the public domain (e.g. Landry and Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2007; Hélot et al.

2012) and to ‘uncover’ the superdiverse reality (Blommaert 2013). This diagnostic instrument enables us to label a street, a neighbourhood or a city as ‘multilingual’ or even as ‘superdiverse’. This ‘adjectivisation’ of superdiversity as Varis (forthcoming) calls it, can be useful. As Pocock (1984) reminds us, verbalisation is a political act. Adjectivisation thus puts the re-imagining of our world on the political agenda. Not many people for instance, including the autochthone inhabitants and Ostend politicians, would describe ‘Het Westerkwartier’ using the adjective ‘superdiverse’. Labelling this neighbourhood as ‘superdiverse’ inevitably questions a long-held image of the neighbourhood as in essence a ‘Flemish’ or ‘Ostend’ neighbourhood in which newcomers should integrate. This in turn questions the dominant political integration discourse and the integration policies themselves.

The study of linguistic landscapes not only possesses high descriptive potential, but analytic potential as well. LLS can be used to make space itself a central object and concern. Not as empty space, but space as an environment in which publicly visible written languages document the presence of (linguistically and semiotically identifiable) groups of people and the social, political and economic relations between them.

However, before we can arrive there, our diagnostic instrument needs upgrading. It is at this point that ethnography comes in. Ethnography is more than just a mere collection of methods (doing interviews for example) (Blommaert and Dong 2010; Blommaert 2013; Varis 2016). Following Hymes (1996), I understand ethnography as an *approach* to analyse language in its wider context. It falls beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this ethnographic approach in full detail (Briggs 1986; Hymes 1996; Blommaert and Dong 2010; Blommaert 2013 provide a useful and illuminating stack of literature), but the following points deserve emphasis:

- (1) Ethnography is more than a complex of fieldwork techniques; it is a total and theoretically inspired programme of scientific description and interpretation. *Ethnography is a paradigm*. In this understanding, fieldwork amounts to more than collecting pre-existing knowledge, and is always a work of *interpretation* of complex social phenomena in specific, methodologically, ontologically and epistemologically grounded ways (Hymes 1974).
- (2) As Blommaert and Dong (2010, 7–10), one important consequence of the *ethnographic ontology* is that language (understood in its broad semiotic meaning) is seen as ‘a socially loaded and assessed tool’ that enables humans to perform as social beings. Within ethnography, language is understood as the architecture of social behaviour. The description of the meanings and functions of linguistic resources is thus always an undertaking in understanding them within their contexts (see Blommaert 2005, 39–67 for an in-depth discussion). Language cannot be contextless, and what is more, context is an integral part of language (Gumperz 1982, 130–162). As a consequence part-whole relations are central to any good ethnography. An ‘interview’ is thus not per se ethnographic; to make an interview ethnographic is to analyse and interpret it within its contexts (see Briggs 1986 for a seminal discussion). This is of course true when we try to interpret signs in general. Barthes (1957, 111–116) already pointed out that the sign as ‘language-object’ can be affected by myth, ‘meta-language’ or use-in-context and as such acquire different meanings for those in the know.

- (3) It is at this point that the *ethnographic epistemology* enters the picture: knowledge of meaning – within an ethnographic paradigm – is processual and historical knowledge (Blommaert and Dong 2010, 9). The ethnographer tries to find out things that belong to the implicit structures of people's lives. This is a *process* and it is based on a careful analysis of an archive consisting of potentially very diverse sets of data: fieldnotes, pictures, interviews, and so on (see below for further details).
- (4) Ethnography, Hymes (1996, 7) stressed, is *****'open-ended, subject to self-correction during the process of inquiry itself. All this is not to say that ethnography is open-minded to the extent of being empty-minded, that ignorance and naivete are wanted. The more the ethnographer knows on entering the field, the better the result is likely to be'. Two lessons follow from this. First, ethnography does not start with interviews, long-term participation or observation, nor can it be limited to these. Ethnography starts long before entering the field with the gathering of knowledge. In this pre-fieldwork phase the researcher gathers as much information as possible on the field and the larger context. The better one is prepared, the better the end result will be. Second, researchers should be prepared to reconsider their initial framework. Ethnographic research is dialectical, based on a feedback loop or an interactive-adaptive method usually referred to as ethnographic monitoring (Van der Aa and Blommaert 2015).

By infusing traditional LLS with ethnography, we thus add a qualitative, historical and semiotic perspective that enables us to understand linguistic landscapes as social, cultural and political spaces – as spaces that offer, enable, trigger, invite, prescribe, proscribe, police or enforce certain patterns of social behaviour (Blommaert 2013). A linguistic space is never a no-man's-land, but always somebody's space. It is a space of power controlled by, as well as controlling, people (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014).

Ethnography thus compels us to a sociolinguistic take on language and semiotics. In social space there is no such thing as a 'flat' or equal distribution of linguistic resources and semiotic materials (Blommaert 2010, 12). In this light Blommaert and Maly (2016) remind us that every sign can be analysed on three axes.

- (1) Signs always point towards their producers and the modes and conditions of the production of the sign. This *history* of the sign is visible in the sign. The language that is being used, the design and the materials are all indices of the sociolinguistic conditions of production.
- (2) Signs always point towards the *future*, to the intended addressees of the sign. Signs are intended to result in certain behaviours by a certain group of people while excluding others. Chinese signs in London, for instance, are made to address Chinese-speaking people in London and by definition exclude Arabic- or Dutch-speaking populations.
- (3) Signs evidently also point towards *the present*, towards the de facto emplacement of the sign. The physical placement of a sign is not a random given; rather, signs are placed and found in particular places for particular reasons and purposes.

Addressing these three axes turns LLS into a historical and ethnographic undertaking. ELLA enables researchers to identify, with a very high degree of accuracy, the constantly

changing demography of a neighbourhood and to gain insight in the particular dynamic relations and infrastructures that function as the pillars of a superdiverse neighbourhood (Blommaert and Maly 2016). Moreover, ELLA allows us to draft a sociolinguistic stratigraphy. Globalisation comes with a layered and stratified sociolinguistic distribution of languages and signs (Blommaert 2010, 12). Prestige variants of a language are deployed on a certain scale level, and not on others, and the same is true for any semiotic resources deployed. For instance, prestige (standard) English in combination with high-end semiotic material found in the shopping area indexes a different producer and addressee than a handwritten bit of truncated Dutch on a piece of paper on a window in a peri-urban area. Language in the real world is marked by inequality and ELLA allows us to map this inequality.

One effect of the ethnographic perspective is that what could be considered as a mere detail in the traditional LLS – the presence of a particular type of commercial poster in a shop window for example – can be a very revealing and important piece of data in an ELLA approach. In ELLA, the signs themselves are given greater attention both individually and in combination with each other (as part of the landscape, in other words).

Fieldwork and the archive

This paper is part of a project called *Ander Land* set up by *De Toekomstfabriek* [The future factory]: a collaborative platform of civil society organisations in Flanders, Belgium. The Ostend project is an extension of previous ELLA – research carried out in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels (Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014). It was especially set up to extend that research by adding a focus on a ‘small Flemish town’ that is not understood as diverse or superdiverse. The Ostend research project lasted for over 1 year in total, with a peak when a 20-person-strong – team of cultural scientists, camera men, editors, social workers and students operated for 1 week in the field as a data-gathering – research team.

Before entering the field, the neighbourhood was discussed with key figures in the neighbourhood, a research framework was set up and every bit of information available on the area was collected. We explored the neighbourhood for the first time on 31 March 2014 by capturing it in pictures and talks with people there. In the first week of June 2014, the data-gathering team fully engaged with the neighbourhood, as shopkeepers, their customers and inhabitants were interviewed and hundreds of pictures were taken. The interviews were always collaborative work and are in this paper therefore referred to as such (Ander land 2014a–d). We photographed and filmed the neighbourhood, talked to passers-by, politicians and civil servants and set up cameras in shops to observe customers and the dynamics of interactions there. We visited people in their homes, spent time on squares and walked through the neighbourhood. Every day, the team reflected on their experiences together and shared information and findings with each other. Afterwards there were regular contacts with different locals through mail, telephone and face-to-face conversations, thus creating a feedback loop on the research findings.

We also made use of Google Street View which allows us to visually go back in time. The first time Google photographed the neighbourhood was in 2009, when the Google Car mapped the *Torhoutsesteenweg* four times: in April, May, Blommaert and October.

In 2013 the street was archived in August and September, and in 2014 it was photographed in September.

The result of this endeavour was an enormous ethnographic data archive. Hundreds of photos, extensive field notes, flyers, formal and informal conversations. In total, we have more than 80 hours of video interviews with social workers, civil servants, inhabitants and users of the neighbourhood, shopkeepers, hairdressers and students. This extensive archive was supplemented with literature on the city, demographic statistics, policy plans and reports we collected in the pre-fieldwork phase.

In the post-fieldwork phase this archive was analysed and on several occasions the findings were presented to different informants in Ostend and in Ghent (Belgium) to have feedback and to make adjustments. It is this complex data archive, together with the field-notes, reflections and feedback moments, that enables us to move away from a traditional LLS approach, towards an ELLA.

Introducing the field

Ostend is not a multimillion city, and with its 77,000 inhabitants it is no metropolis either. In its post-war existence, Ostend has seen different migration waves settling in and restructuring the city. But especially in the last decades it has become a superdiverse city: global evolutions restructure the city on a demographic, social, cultural and religious level. The metaphor of ‘a layered city’ is very helpful in understanding the restructuring of Ostend in the twenty-first century.

A layered city

In the seventies, Belgium and Ostend in particular witnessed a small influx of Indian and Pakistani people (Vandecandelaere 2012, 282). Most of these migrants came from Great Britain. Some of them had fought on the side of the Allies in the British Army, migrated to Great Britain after the Second World War and acquired the British nationality. In the eighties, new waves of immigrants with Indian and Pakistani roots arrived in Ostend. This second wave of Pakistani migrants fled an unstable Pakistan and in some cases persecution. The Indian refugees did not only come from India itself, but were also fleeing the regime of Idi Amin in Uganda (Vandecandelaere 2012, 293).

The first migrants with Indian and Pakistan roots came to Ostend for the job opportunities. They found work in the fish market or the harbour industry (fish processing plants and rope weaving). In the course of time, these immigrants have worked their way up to the Ostend middle class and in some cases even to the upper middle class. These families and their offspring together with indigenous inhabitants of Ostend now form a stable, but of course internally diverse, first layer visible in the neighbourhood. They are often home- and shop owners. Several of these migrants have become landlords and rent their houses, apartments, shops and in some cases mattresses to new migrants. These populations are also closely intertwined in the city fabric. They take up (prominent) roles in different political parties, sit in advisory boards of the city and have their own places of worship. These populations are part of the Ostend middle class and sometimes play a key role in the reception of new migrants.

After 1990, that we see very rapid changes in migration patterns and in the countries of origin of the migrants (Vertovec 2007; Blommaert 2013; Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014). The first major migration wave that ends up in Ostend after the fall of the Berlin wall comes from Bangladesh (Ander land 2014b). Ostend is not unique in this respect; Bangladeshi migration was a global phenomenon since the 1970s. In the nineties refugees from Bangladesh also arrived in Ostend. They did not have many contacts with civil society organisations in Ostend and most of them only stayed there for a few years and then headed off to other places (Maly 2014).

The next migrants that arrived in Ostend were of Iranian descent (Ander land 2014b). These migrants were wealthy and highly educated. They were fleeing the new theocratic Islamic regime in their country. People belonging to the circles of the Shah, liberal and socialist Iranians fled their country from the 1970s until the 1990s. While these well-off migrants fairly quickly engaged in the Ostend society, for example through taking Dutch lessons at the Social Services for Foreigners in Ostend, they only remained there for a few years. For some of these migrants Ostend was a place of transit on their way to America and Canada, while others moved to larger Belgian cities such as Brussels.

The fall of the Soviet empire meant that migrants from the former Soviet republics and Russia dispersed around the world. These global changes also materialised in Ostend and up until today they strongly influence the city's demographics and the total cityscape. The migrants from the former Soviet Union have their own shops, and other shops sell products catering for their needs. Most of these migrants come from the Russian Federation (417 official inhabitants) followed by 133 Albanian migrants (SDV 2013, 6). At the end of the nineties, the Russian migrants were followed by Chechen migrants fleeing the war in their country. Within the latter group a distinction can be made between the first Chechen migrants who were often highly educated and the later groups of migrants who came from Dagestan and Ingushetia (Ander land 2014b). These latter groups are rather poorly educated and often Islamic. These immigrants were recognised as war victims by the Belgian state.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ostend has also seen an influx of migrants from Nepal (Ander Land 2014b). In the first years of their stay, they were forced to live as illegal migrants without papers. After a few years, and definitely after the regularisation campaign of 2009 by the Belgian government, most of these migrants were finally given legal permits to stay. In 2012, almost 150 Nepalese residents live in Ostend (SDV 2013, 6).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see entirely new migration flows building up. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the US intervened with the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq and Afghanistan. These wars resulted in a worldwide diaspora of Afghans and Iraqis and this migration still continues up until this day. Several years after the invasion in Afghanistan, the first Afghan immigrants arrived in Ostend and more have kept on arriving ever since. In 2013 already 298 Afghans and 251 Iraqis (SDV 2013, 6) are registered as official inhabitants of Ostend. The labels 'Afghan and Iraqi migrant' are misleading though, as they homogenise internally very diverse groups.

The first Afghan migrants came from Kabul, but gradually migrants from all corners of Afghanistan arrived in the city. All these migrants have very different profiles, from highly educated city people to analphabetic farmers. The years 2013 and 2014 were very difficult years for the Afghan migrants in Belgium, as the Belgian General Commissariat for

Refugees did not consider the whole of Afghanistan to be a war-zone and only granted about 60% of the Afghan refugees a legal permit. The declined refugees set up several heavily mediatised actions to fight for their right to stay in Belgium and to obtain documents.

The same diversity is detectable within the group of Iraqi migrants. The first Iraqis fleeing their country have different migration reasons than the ones following them from 2005 up until today. Whereas the first groups migrated as a result of the US Invasion, later groups fled the Islamist violence in the country. In the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ostend also saw an influx of Kurdish Iraqis. Although they also applied for asylum, they did not intend to settle in Ostend. Most of them had their minds set on a life in Britain or Canada (Ander land 2014b). Different migration reasons reflect different ‘types’ of migrants ranging from Saddam Houssein followers to Iraqis identifying themselves with the occupying forces or Kurds.

Anno 2014, more and more Syrian refugees arrive in Ostend, fleeing the war of Assad and/or the violence of DAESH.

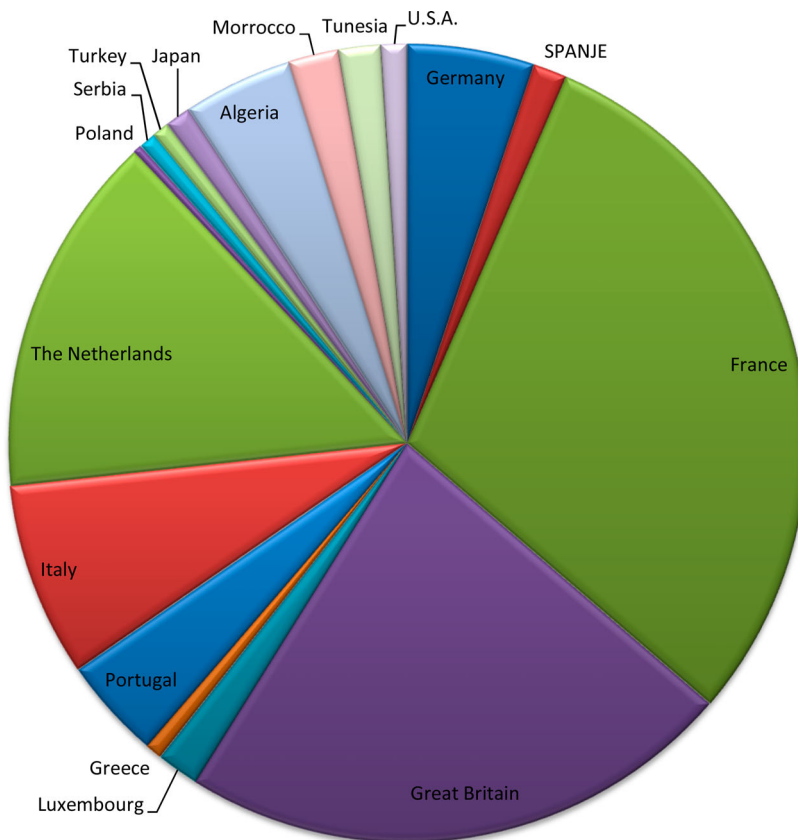


Figure 1. Presence of Foreigners in Ostend (1990) (Based on Npdata 2010).

Superdiversity and numbers

As a result of these migration flows, 130 different nationalities are in 2012 registered in Ostend (SDV 2013, 6). As we have seen, this has not always been the case. In 1990, only 17 nationalities were represented in the city (see Figure 1). In total, these migrants made up less than 5% of the total population (NpData 2010). Residents from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were not living in the city, there were no cars with Romanian licence plates driving around, and no Internet cafés or ‘ethnic shops’ on the *Torhoutsesteenweg*. All that has changed. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the nineties results in the arrival of people from the Russian Federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro in Ostend. The world has a new structure and that is immediately visible in the migration flows and in new migration patterns.

The city looks and sounds very different than in the nineties. In 2009, already one in four children born in Ostend is from non-Belgian origin. In 2011, 14.54% of the Ostend population has a foreign past (NPdata 2011). The two largest groups of migrants in the city are from Russia and Serbia-Montenegro. The third largest group consists of people from the Netherlands (NpData 2011). The statistics from 2014 show that already 16.8% of the official population in Ostend has roots abroad, and according to

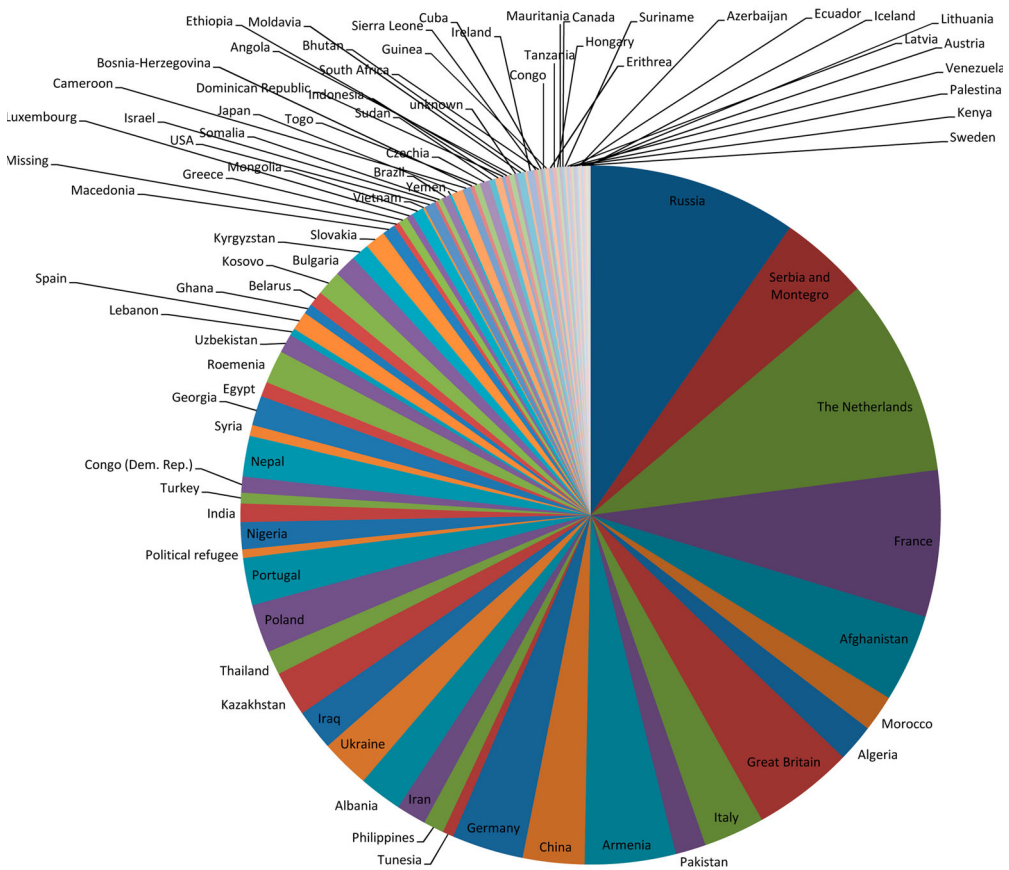


Figure 2. Presence of Foreigners in Ostend (2011) (Based on Npdata 2011).

the Ostend integration service that number has mounted up to already 17.6% in the same year (Ander land 2014a). The following charts help visualising that evolution towards superdiversity. [Figure 1](#) shows the presence of migrants in Ostend in 1990. In [Figure 2](#), we see the situation in 2011.

These two charts show the fragmentation of the population in Ostend on the basis of nationality. While documenting the presence of many small groups of migrants with such charts is an established way of illustrating ‘superdiversity’, such charts based on nationality are of course misleading in many ways. The most evident critique is that by focusing on this one dimension one creates and sustains an illusion of national homogeneity (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Meissner and Vertovec 2014). Moreover, many migrants in this new phase of globalisation are not sedentary and thus do not show up in such statistics.

Examples from the field can help demonstrate the ways in which a narrow focus on numbers alone simplifies actual realities. The origins of migrants do not, in fact, tell us much about who they are and how they live and structure the city. Some of these migrants – company CEOs for example – truly move on the higher scales of globalisation: they get wages connected to a global market and they can live wherever they choose. Low-skilled migrant workers who are employed by companies operating on transnational scales, operate on lower scales of globalisation. Polish workers for example are employed to clean in Ostend. They receive Polish wages, that is, while their labour is mobile, their wages are not. And neither is their official place of residence: while they officially live in Poland, they de facto live a large part of their lives in Ostend without any political representation or full social rights there. Other residents of Ostend – refugees and asylum seekers – have, in a context of restrictive global immigration regimes, high chances of becoming victims of exploitation. In practice they do not have rights (Ander land 2014a). Lewis et al. (2013) introduce the concept of extreme or hyper-precarity to describe these very complex situations of exploitation in times of superdiversity. However, while the CEO, the Polish cleaning workers and the Afghan refugees do not appear in the statistics, they do structure the city albeit in very different ways. ‘Non-recognition’ has very different effects depending on the status of the subject. The non-recognition of the Afghan refugees leads to harsh exploitation (Ander land 2014d), while the CEO is welcomed. These are all indications of how superdiversity does not annihilate inequality but, on the contrary, in a neoliberal world of nations, superdiversity and inequality go hand in hand, and inequality is reflected in the linguistic landscape.

The infrastructure of superdiversity

It is a well-established fact that a population creates an infrastructure that meets its needs (Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014). Concretely, this becomes visible in the emergence of, for instance, certain types of shops, restaurants and religious sites: the presence of affluent people leads to the emergence of fancy restaurants, while a Western Union agent signals the presence of people without a legal permit or family in countries without traditional banks. It is this kind of infrastructure that creates structure and order in the complexity and the apparent chaos in times of superdiversity (Blommaert 2013). Let us now take a look at some infrastructures in the Ostend neighbourhood, and how an ELLA approach can help us understand and detect such infrastructures by examining semiotic

materials as indexes of the social, economic and political position of the populations they target.

One infrastructural manifestation of the short-term presence of migrants from Nepal in the neighbourhood – the local Hindu temple – is hardly visible from the outside (see Figure 3).

The temple is housed in a mansion and advertised by a modest handwritten note on the front door in truncated English. The semiotics deployed do not index a wealthy producer: the sign is locally made, handwritten and targets very specific addressees, that is, English-speaking Hindus in Ostend. This religious infrastructure and the small sign not only informs us about the recent influx of a small group of migrants from Nepal, but, especially when we compare it with other infrastructures in the neighbourhood, it also informs us about stratification there.

A very different kind of infrastructure is for example Diwan's, the local Pakistani grocery shop. This shop is an excellent illustration of evolution from an ethnic towards a superdiverse infrastructure. In 1998, this shop appeared to start catering for the needs of the Pakistani owners themselves: in Ostend, it was very difficult to get the spices and ingredients to make Indian and Pakistani food which is why they started their 'Asian' shop, hoping that other members of these populations would experience the same needs. After a few years, the owners became aware of Eastern European migrants arriving in the district, creating a demand for new products. The store tries to answer their needs by adjusting its product range. According to the owners, the store now has 'a little bit of the whole world in her shop' (Ander land 2014c) which can be read as an index of the superdiverse population of the neighbourhood.

Diwan's functions as an ecumenical and not so much as an 'ethnic' infrastructure targeting well-established and stable populations in the neighbourhood instead of only newcomers. Ostend hipsters – regardless of their ethnicity – as well as older Belgian inhabitants and Polish newcomers go shopping there. World cuisine is part of the cultural practices of individuals from very different ethnic backgrounds, and grocery shopping and the infrastructures available for that a good illustration of how the neighbourhood is not just a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, but a superdiverse one with a superdiverse infrastructure (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Hindu – temple in Ostend.



Figure 4. Diwan's.

It is worth noting that the front of Diwan's uses a monolingual regime of standard Dutch, the lingua franca of this superdiverse neighbourhood. Sociolinguistic stratification becomes clear when we compare the deployment of prestige Dutch in the professionally constructed panels on the front of Diwan's, with the front of the Hindu Temple. Whereas the temple answers the religious needs of a recently arrived small population, Diwan's front indexes something entirely different. On the one hand, it indexes the social mobility of the owners in the dominant 'Flemish context', and on the other hand their socio-cultural and linguistic integration in this superdiverse, polycentric and stratified neighbourhood is being flagged:

- (1) The monolingual Flemish front can be read as an emblem of 'Flemishness'. Speaking Dutch is a core requirement within the dominant integration discourse of the Flemish government (Maly 2009), and the mobilisation of prestige Dutch thus flags their integration in 'Flanders'.
- (2) The products that are being sold index the many different populations living in the neighbourhood. With the monolingual English regime on their website (www.diwans.be) the owners target a different audience than offline. The mobilisation of different semiotic and linguistic resources indexes not only different addressees but also the linguistic and financial resources of the owners of Diwan's.

Here we should also point to the impact of new media adding new layers of complexity. As I already pointed out, the internet functions as a key online infrastructure supporting new translocal and interethnic micro-populations (Maly and Varis 2015; Maly and Varis, in preparation). Such populations materialise in the offline world, and they do not only use ecumenical infrastructures such as Diwan's, but some also have their own infrastructures in the neighbourhood, such as the Vision Street Wear shop in the *Torhoutsesteenweg* which was the first Belgian skate shop and functions as an infrastructure of the Belgian

skate population (Maly and Varis, in preparation). Another, more recently emerged example of such an infrastructure is Kamp Noord – a creative atelier, bike shop and a space for art expos – which functions as an offline infrastructure both for ‘hip’ youngsters in Ostend, and for an online micro-population, the hipsters. Kamp Noord is managed by the son of Phillipine migrants and two of his friends. The owner with Phillipine roots wears the classical identity emblems of the hipster micro-population, including an ironic mustache and beanie hat (Maly and Varis 2015).

The superdiverse or cosmopolitan lives of natives and migrants, as Radice (2015) calls it, materialises in a superdiverse and translocal infrastructure which cannot be understood with ethnic or multicultural labels or without reference to new media. If we compare the semiotics of this shop with Diwan’s, we see the social stratigraphy more clearly. Kamp Noord is not just integrated in the neighbourhood or Ostend as a city, but is also part of a translocal high-end hipster culture. On their Facebook page for example, they deploy prestige Dutch and ‘cool’ English in combination with vintage pictures and art. The same semiotic and linguistic resources occur off-and online and simultaneously index both locality and translocality. The life buoy in the logo and the name Kamp Noord for example index locality [the Ostend harbour] and authenticity, whereas the fixies hanging on the wall behind the owner or on the statue of King Leopold II in Ostend in the Facebook banner of Kamp Noord are truly global emblems of hipsterness (see the Facebook page www.facebook.com/Kampnoordoostende for more examples).

A superdiverse neighbourhood is a polycentric, layered and a stratified neighbourhood. Next to ethnic and religious infrastructures or infrastructures targeting translocal micro-populations, we also encounter superdiverse ecumenical infrastructures. These ecumenical infrastructures provide different functions for different (micro-)populations and as such they are truly material manifestations of superdiversity. Internet cafés and money transfer agencies are some of the traditional ecumenical infrastructures of superdiverse neighbourhoods (Blommaert 2013; Maly 2014; Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014; Blommaert and Maly 2016). They are used by autochthone and allochthone residents, by different sub-groups of residents (such as students, hipsters and skaters), legal newcomers and migrants



Figure 5. Cyber @ Café August 2013.



Figure 6. Cyber @ Café April 2014.

without a legal permit. They agglomerate several dimensions of superdiversity: ethnicity and country of origin, legal status, transnationalism and the technological and cultural changes underscoring superdiversity.

In the remainder of this paper, we will zoom in on the cybershop Cyber @ café in the *Torhoutsesteenweg*. This focus is motivated by the fact that this and other internet cafés operate at the intersection of the two major drivers of superdiversity: on the one hand migration and social changes, and on the other hand new media and translocal communication.

Introducing cyber @ café

‘Cyber @ Café’ seeks to address a superdiverse audience by providing a wide range of services (sending money, faxing, photocopying, renting computers to chat, surf and Skype) and by using the shop window as a multilingual communication tool. The windows of such stores are often polyphonic multimodal signs (Backhaus 2007). This cybercafé is no exception, as can be seen in Figure 5.

The various advertising stickers and posters from the telephone – and money transfer companies create a multifunctional store window. The window hosts a collection of signs produced under different conditions by different persons and companies. In general we can distinguish two categories of signs: signs created by the shop owner himself, and signs created by the companies that provide the services and products. The end product, or the ‘total sign’, fits a specific communicative genre: the cybercafé window in a superdiverse neighbourhood (see Blommaert 2013; Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014 for very similar fronts in other cities)

The store has clearly invested in its communication, and many of the signs produced by the staff themselves are quite professional: the neon light, the lettering and website. We see several ad hoc produced signs as well: the list with prices and some small posters are

testimonies of that. All these ad hoc signs index very recent changes, as the shop owner wants to lure in newly arrived migrants.

The second category of signs – the industrially produced signs – dominate the shop window. The semiotic and linguistic resources of these signs are of ‘high quality’. They are standardised, made in large factories and are the product of multiple persons. Layouters, copywriters, marketers, translators and many more people have contributed to the production of this level of quality. The English, Dutch, French, and as far as we can judge the Russian that is used on the window of the shop are of excellent quality. The Lycamobile, Ria Money Transfer and MoneyGram advertisements are clearly of a different standard in comparison with the locally produced signs. They index that the shop is embedded in a global network of professional banking and phone companies.

The services offered by the café and the companies are aimed at an audience far less integrated in the high scales of globalisation. The store not only provides money transfers, Internet services or sells cell phones cards. One can also go there to fax documents. In Western Europe, the fax has had its time as a major communication tool, but in other parts of the world this is less the case. In Africa and Japan the fax is still very much in use (Hayes 2014; Velghe 2014). This service can be read as an indication that the store itself is aware of this global reality and that it jumps into that niche to make revenue. Similar things can be said of other products and services that are announced. The shop not only advertises Internet services, but further specifies that one can also Skype, use MSN messenger, print and copy. Through this differentiation one addresses different types of potential clients. Students can use the shop to print and to copy, while newcomers are targeted by the possibility to send money or communicate with friends and family around the world. The differentiation in internet products should be understood in the same light. Certain internet cafés block or forbid certain services such as Skype in order to sell telephone cards or to keep the noise down in the shop.

The front of the store thus reveals a deep integration into a global market, and indexes the presence of a superdiverse local clientele and the transnational nature of their social relations. However, by employing ELLA, we can move beyond a distributional image of the population and sketch a *stratigraphy*. To this end, we can start examining the semiotics of the shop in 2013, when the front of the shop displayed English, French, Dutch and Russian:

- (A) *Dutch* is hardly visible on the shop window. Only small stickers and printed notes are in Dutch. The shop licence acquired from the Belgian government is an example of top-down communication in Dutch. Another example is the note addressing youngsters hanging around the shop (see below). The use of Dutch thus not only indexes ‘the (power of the) government’, it also indexes Dutch-speaking locals (natives and migrants) using the infrastructure. Dutch thus indexes a stable and powerful layer in the neighbourhood, but also one that is not at the top of the priority list to lure in. The addressees of Cyber @ Café are different from the ones Diwan’s addresses.
- (B) *French*, the second national language in Belgium, has a more visible place on the shop window. It can be read as an index for Belgian tourists and as an index for migrants from the former French colonies. Remarkably, French almost completely disappears from the front of the shop in June 2014.

- (C) *Russian* is used in a professionally crafted advertisement banner on the shop window: an index for the stable presence of Russian-speaking immigrants since the nineties. This population is indeed very visible in the neighbourhood and in the statistics, and the shop owner, conscious of this reality, addresses his potential customers in their own language.
- (D) *English* is without question the dominant language on the window. This is striking, for not only is Dutch the official language in Ostend, but in the Westerkwartier also functions as a lingua franca. The language regime of this Internet café is an exception in the neighbourhood which underlines the fact that the products and services are especially targeting newcomers, poor migrants and migrants without an official address in particular. This Cyber Café is not only a functional collective infrastructure for people who cannot afford a computer and a personal internet connection, but also provides migrants without a legal permit the possibility to transfer money. Here, English functions as a global lingua franca and is supplemented with semiotic communication in the form of country flags to target specific audiences.

The shop window in 2013 targets different populations. It not only reaches out to stable populations in the neighbourhood – the Dutch- and French-speaking autochthones and migrants on the one hand and the large Russian-speaking populations on the other – but it also targets newcomers in the neighbourhood. They are addressed by mobilising two ‘global lingua franca’: French and English.

Cyber @ café as an index of rapid social changes

The store constantly adapts itself to the superdiverse neighbourhood which makes it an ideal indicator of rapid social changes in the neighbourhood. Concretely, this becomes visible when we compare the front of the shop in 2013 with the front in April 2014 (see Figure 6).

The first changes that catch the eye are the self-printed A4 papers with SEND MONEY FREE printed on it. Next to these words, we see an upright A4 with a rather amateurish layout and the text ‘Free Money Transfer Pakistan, Philipine, Nepal’ printed in different colours. Global English is thus still mobilised to target potential customer populations.

Below this text we find a phone number and the text ‘adres in Torhoutsesteenweg 127’. What, at first sight, seems like an English text, is in reality much more complex. It contains both English and Dutch and has remarkable constructions in both languages. Not only is ‘Philipine’ not spelled correctly, but we also see truncated Dutch entering the picture when one writes ‘adres in Torhoutsesteenweg’ [Address in *Torhoutsesteenweg*]. Adres is perfect Dutch, but ‘Adres in Torhoutsesteenweg’ is not. In Dutch one should only write the name of the street, or write ‘adres: Torhoutsesteenweg’. However, while ‘Adres in’ thus does not make sense in standard Dutch, the text is of course perfectly functional for its imagined addressees.

The producer of these texts – the shopkeeper himself or his staff – is probably not a native speaker of Dutch or English. The product is an example of *grassroots literacy* (Blommaert 2008). The producer ‘knows’ these languages, and produces them to the best of his

ability, but has no productive command of elite versions. However, there are other pieces of Dutch on the window that are of a significantly higher quality, suggesting that there is possibly a second producer.

Let us take a closer look at a hand written note hanging on the shop window in April 2014. The note says ‘Please don’t hang around in the close neighborhood of the cybercafé. The police will immediately be contacted in case of noise pollution or vandalism’. The text has clearly been prepared by someone who is familiar with Dutch, the laws of the country and with the sensibilities of the neighbours. The text is probably produced by someone educated in the Flemish educational system. We can deduce this from the fact that virtually no spelling errors are to be found. Even the notoriously difficult conjugation of the verb ‘worden’ in the lower sentence is correct. The fact that one is able to apply the infamous ‘dt’-rule, proves that the author is not only capable of producing homophony, but has a thorough knowledge of Dutch grammar. Yet, most probably the producer of this sign has a different ‘mother tongue’. This can be concluded from the fact that some errors which are highly typical for non-native Dutch speakers, such as writing ‘de cybercafé’ instead of ‘het cybercafé’, appear in the shop’s communication.

This multilingual window addresses a superdiverse audience by mobilising a multitude of languages and non-linguistic signs. We can establish that next to professional or industrially produced signs, the shopkeeper also responds to rapid demographic changes by producing ad hoc signs on the spot. Observation confirms that this multilingual regime is very functional, and helps create an ecumenical place where people from very different backgrounds meet. The shop is used by Russian migrants who have been living in the neighbourhood for several years, by autochthones and by second- and third-generation migrants with Pakistani roots who speak the local Dutch dialect fluently and wear hipster emblems. The shop changes alongside the neighbourhood and as such reflects demographic changes and social relations there. In June 2014 (see Figure 7), for example, we see that the ad hoc produced signs of April 2014 are replaced by industrially produced advertising, pointing to a relatively stable presence of these new populations.

The self-printed A4’s with the text Send Money Free were replaced with industrially produced stickers with the text: ‘Best Money Transfer’. Several new languages (Arabic,



Figure 7. Cyber @ Café June 2014.

Urdu, Romanian and Filipino) and country flags appear on the window. These new posters consist of linguistic ('Send money to ...') and non-linguistic signs (the country flags). The service to transfer money to Pakistan and the Philippines is still present, but is announced through professional communication. The existing advertisement for sending money to Nigeria is now accompanied with advertisements for similar services to Ghana, Romania, Bangladesh, Morocco, and a whole range of Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic.

The arrival of these new populations is not unique for Ostend: migrants with similar countries of origin have also arrived in the Wondelgemstraat in Ghent, Belgium (Blommaert and Maly 2016). Within the same timeframe, African stores and churches opened in Ghent too. Before these new infrastructures appeared there, posters advertising cheap calls to Ghana and to a lesser extent Nigeria showed up in the neighbourhood. And just like in Ostend, Latin American migrants were arriving. The first index of their presence was a poster advertising cheap calls to Latin America (Maly, Blommaert, and Yakoub 2014). A few months later, the shop Latin Corner opened its doors. The owner pointed out that the majority of those Latin American migrants fled their countries in the 1980s and moved to Spain. The same migrants, as a result of the economic crisis in Spain since 2008, now migrate to Ghent and Ostend. Small local signs thus index global political and economic changes.

Conclusion

From the nineties onwards, Ostend has seen a systematic influx of immigrants. This migration has a very fragmented character: people from dozens of different countries have arrived in Ostend over a period of a couple of decades. Although the absolute numbers per nationality are not very large, they create a visible and detectable diversification of Ostend and the neighbouring villages (Ander Land 2014d).

Whereas traditional LLS stop at the description of the distribution of languages in a certain area, ELLA gives an extra edge by providing a historical and stratified perspective. ELLA allows us to analyse linguistic and semiotic infrastructures as indexes of changes in the different historical and demographic layers of the 'synchronic' neighbourhood. Diwan's, for example, is an infrastructural manifestation of the pre-1989 Pakistani migration. It adjusts itself to the superdiversification of the neighbourhood and has evolved from an ethnic shop to a superdiverse one. The quality of Dutch and the semiotic regime on the front of the Diwan's shop index integration in the local Ostend neighbourhood. This contrasts with the semiotic regime of the Hindu temple, indexing the short presence of these groups in Ostend and their inability to comply with the demands of the dominant integration paradigm. Kamp Noord, on the other hand, functions as an infrastructure for both the high-end hipster micro-population, and the local Ostend youth.

Employing ELLA in the analysis of the cybershop reveals the rapid social changes the neighbourhood has witnessed in recent history. The shop started out with a quadri-lingual ecumenical regime, but in a period of two months, this quadri-lingual regime transformed into a multilingual regime mobilising 10 languages. This change not only indexes very rapid demographic and social changes in the local neighbourhood, but also shows how the shop now specifically targets new populations.

The changes compel us to think about scale and history. Spanish and different Latin American flags not only index the newly arrived migrants from these countries, but also informs us of the grave effects of the *financial and economic* crisis in Spain in 2008. Similarly, the professionally crafted Russian-language advertisement on the window of the Internet café indexes Russian immigrants living there for almost two decades as a result of the fall of the Soviet Empire. In an ELLA perspective, such details can be understood as indexes of larger *political* processes that restructure the local neighbourhood. ELLA shows different historicities operating at different speeds on different scales coinciding in one social space.

ELLA both draws attention to such complexities and detects these different scales and historicities, and can also be used to construct a 'stratigraphy' (Blommaert and Maly 2016): we can distinguish small populations (migrants from the Philippines and Nigeria) from bigger ones (migrants from Russia and Pakistan), powerful socio-economic and highly visible groups (native Belgians and some second- and third-generation Pakistan migrants) from almost invisible and marginal populations (migrants from Latin America and Afghan refugees). Sometimes small posters advertising phone cards are the only indexes of their presence: these populations – at that time in that space – are not powerful producers of public signs, but are only visible as addressees. The ethnographic focus thus reveals inequality within superdiversity.

ELLA enables us to describe, quite accurately, rapid social changes and do this long before these populations appear in the statistics. The layered and stratified population can be connected to an equally layered and stratified picture of the infrastructures in the neighbourhood. For instance, Pakistani migrants are deeply integrated in the socio-economic fiber of Ostend and their presence manifests itself in the quality of their infrastructure: professional supermarkets, restaurants and large mosques. In contrast, the infrastructures of migrants from Afghanistan, Syria or Nepal are hardly visible and use far less professional communication. At the same time we see micro-populations of hipsters and skaters mobilising 'hip semiotics' in their infrastructures.

Superdiverse neighbourhoods are complex, dynamic, layered and stratified spaces not ruled by one set of forces but by multiple ones. On the shop window of Cyber @ café we saw top-down communication from the government next to advertisements for multinational companies, and the ad hoc notes by the shopkeeper warning his customers to be quiet in order to maintain peace with the neighbours. ELLA enables us to understand these social functions of language use in a layered and stratified translocal context and thus allows us to detect and unravel the complex fiber of superdiversity.

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ORCID

Ico Maly  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7984-0974>

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