
Nationality and the European Union Competing Identities in the Visual design of Four European Cities¹

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In this study, we integrate visual and linguistic research to analyze the relationship between a city's regional, national, transnational, and European identities as the face of four cities depicts it. We explore the cultural identity of Brussels, Luxembourg, Munich, and Dortmund through the study of public signs found in these cities. We examine how the choice of language, layout, typography, accompanying images, and positioning of city signs reflect the tensions involving the change from a national or regional identity to a Pan-European identity. Our methodology combines an ethnographic approach and neutral observations with interviews of city inhabitants. By combining interpretive analysis with a meta-discursive approach to how signs are read and perceived, we consider both the production and reception ends of the signs.

Street signs, advertising posters, handbills, shop signs, placards, business signs all reflect and partake in creating the socio-cultural identities of a city's inhabitants. The literate and visual design of a city is thus a particularly eloquent witness in periods of political, social and cultural transitions of the beliefs and identities claimed for a city's inhabitants by its au-

thorities, businesses or entertainers. These changes in beliefs and identities can be read in the visual design of a city.

In the context of building the European Union, regional, national, and transnational identities have become a complex set of competing and transformative interactants within nation states. As in any period of transition, public discourse is being progressively transformed by the political, cultural, and social changes brought forth by the new political and economic structures. Our aim in this study is to examine these issues from two perspectives. First, we explore whether this transformation can be observed in the public discourse within the confines of the city. Looking at street signs, advertising posters, handbills, shop signs, bumper stickers and business signs, we examine the interplay between regional, national, and transnational identities as they are manifested in the cities of Brussels (Belgium), Luxembourg (Luxembourg), Munich (Germany), and Dortmund (Germany). Secondly, we investigate the impact of the public discourse on the development of the collective identities of the cities' inhabitants.

Public signs found in cities can be considered as political and cultural artifacts through

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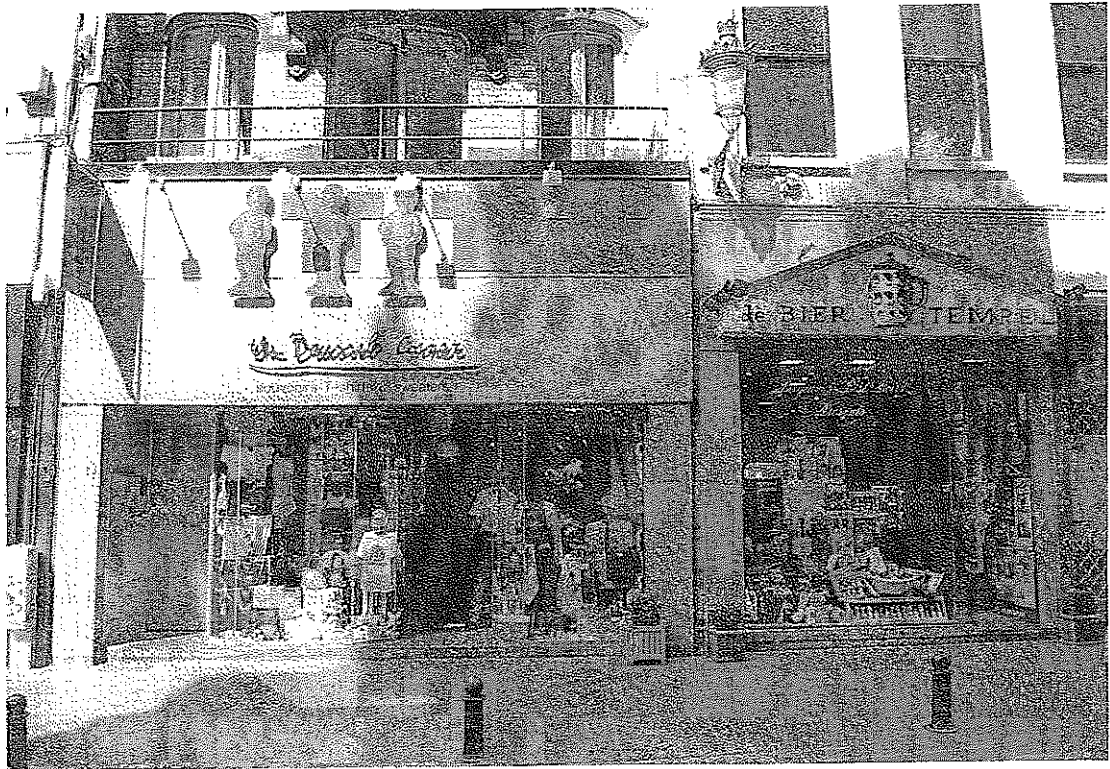


Figure 1: A "national" figure for tourists: the Manneken Pis (Brussels).

which regional, national, or transnational identities are (re)produced. Their design, layout, content, language, and positioning is indicative of the beliefs and socio-cultural identities claimed for a city's inhabitants by its authorities, businesses and entertainers. The shape of the semiotic landscape is thus bound to vary from one city to the next as different signs reflect and partake in creating different socio-cultural identities (Pan 1998; Scollon 1997). The public signs of Brussels, Luxembourg, Munich, and Dortmund accordingly represent particular cultural identities.

Several easily detectable impressionistic tendencies emerge when observing the four cities. These illustrate aspects of the cultural identities of the four cities, manifest in administrative signs, commercial signs or advertisements. In Brussels, for instance, the administrative signs are written in Dutch and French, revealing the social, cultural, and linguistic realities of this Dutch-French bilingual city. In Luxembourg, official administrative signs are likewise written in its two national languages, German and French. Whereas the official administrative signs in Munich and Dortmund are written in German only.

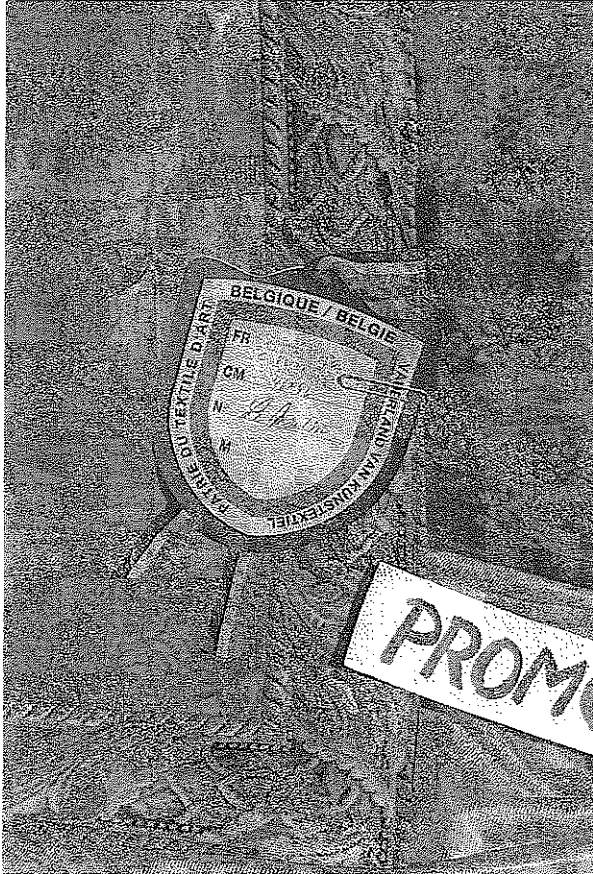


Figure 2: Price tag for a tapestry in the color and shape of a Belgian flag (Brussels)

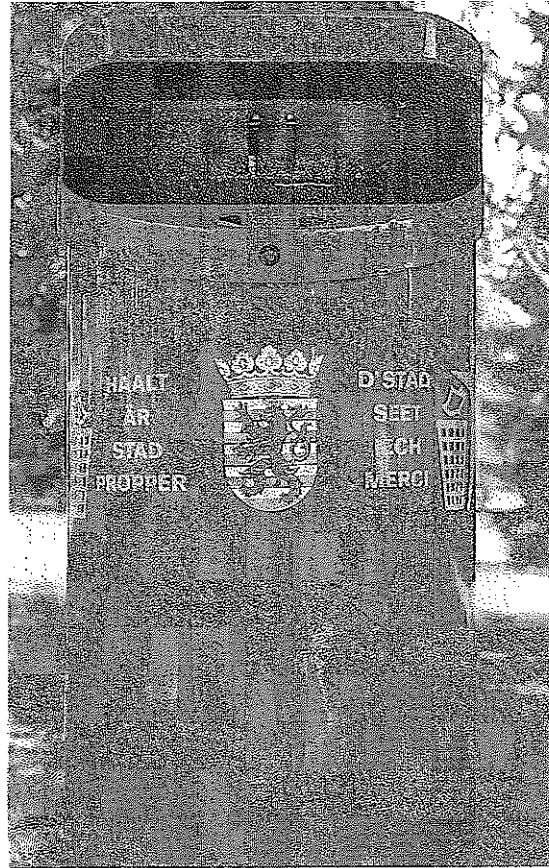


Figure 3: Bilingual trash can with Grand Duchy logo (Luxembourg)

In Brussels, a national Belgian identity is difficult to find.² There are few shop signs that display the Belgian colors (black, yellow and red) in their windows. What comes closest to a visual representation of a national dimension in the city of Brussels is the selling of so-called 'national products': chocolate, lace, and beer. Since the stores are geared toward tourists, most of the shops selling these products also have shop banners in English (see Figures 1 and 2).

In contrast, the national Grand Duchy identity of Luxembourg is encountered everywhere in the city center (see Figure 3). This identity can be found in and on shops selling the most varied products, in the names of banks incorporating the word "Luxembourg," or on administrative signs such as streets named after important historical figures of Luxembourg.

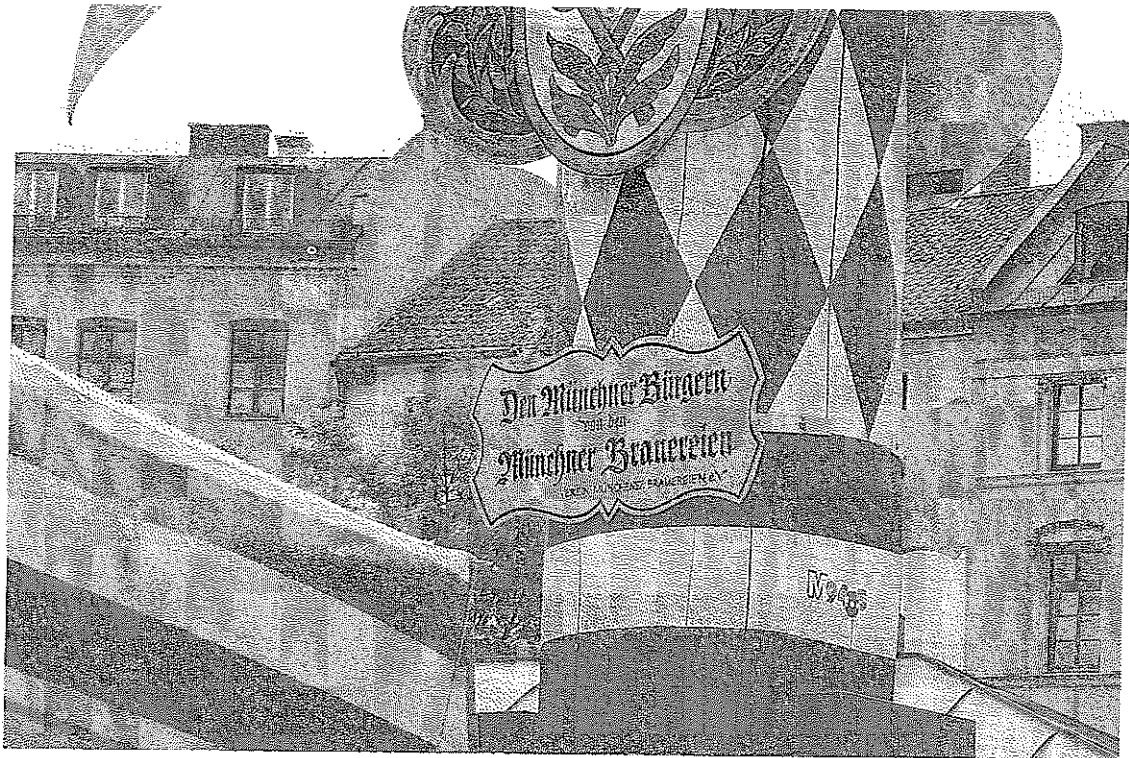


Figure 4. "Old German" script, blue and white colors and rhombic shape (Bavaria, Munich). The sign reads: "For the Munich inhabitants, by the Munich breweries".

In the two German cities, the interplay between regional and national identities is found in the use of colors, language, and design. In Munich, for example, the regional Bavarian identity can be found in the use of the old German script, the Bavarian dialect, or the use of the regional colors (see Figure 4).

Likewise, the regional identity of Dortmund is evidenced through the use of the dialect and regional characteristics within the signs (Figure 5)

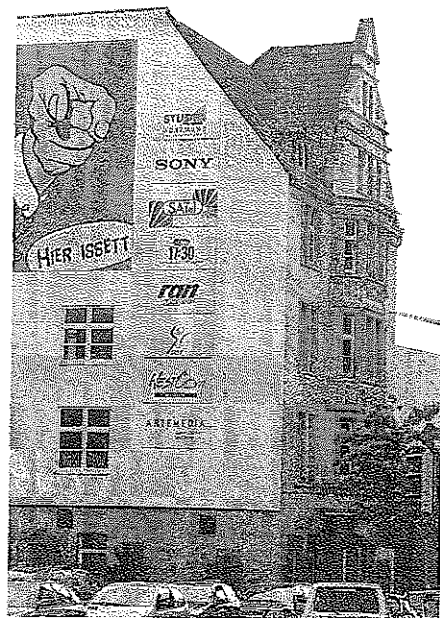


Figure 5. The use of dialect and a pointing hand in order to attract attention. The sign reads "here it is". (Dortmund)

The European identity, however, is only slowly emerging in Munich and Dortmund. In these cities, as in Brussels and Luxembourg, many license plates bear the European logo (the circle of the 12 yellow stars on a blue background), prices in large chain stores are indicated in both the German Mark and the Euro, and brochures about the Euro are available in banks. This is currently the magnitude of the visual expression of an emergent European identity in these two cities.

In Luxembourg, the European identity is much more prevalent but is visually localized on the "Kirschberg Plateau," the neighborhood where the European institutions are situated. Brussels, on the other hand, fully reflects its position as European capital. A myriad of European artifacts can be found in souvenir shops. There are also numerous shop signs,

company names, and administrative signs appropriating the European logo to advertise, sell, or inform. The European identity in this city is pervasive (Figure 6).

In this study, we will further examine the interplay between the local, regional, national, transnational, and European identities. We argue that these identities might be best theorized as different interpenetrating orders of discourse (global market commodity discourse, local nationalistic discourse). By taking into account how cities' inhabitants view the design, content and positioning of city signs, we also focus on the reception of signs. Our analysis of inhabitants' discourse about signs and the representations they reveal shows that the collective identities of the cities' inhabitants are being shaped largely without them being aware of the ideological positioning the signs imply.



Figure 6: European kitsch and Euro-logos (Brussels).

Research Method

This study is part of a larger comparative project investigating how socio-cultural changes in a society are evidenced in the public discourse of city signs. Methodologically and theoretically, it draws upon the research documented in Scollon and Scollon (1998), Scollon and Pan (1997) and Pan (1998), investigating changes in the public literate design of Hong Kong and mainland China (particularly the changes induced by the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty).

As part of this project, we photographed city signs in the four cities already mentioned: Brussels, Luxembourg, Munich and Dortmund. We chose these cities on the basis of two main criteria. On the one hand, they differed widely in their socio-cultural settings. On the other hand, we chose cities with which we, as researchers, had a connection (one of us had either lived in or close to one of these cities before, or knew some informants who had been living in the cities for a long period of time). The reasoning behind this latter criterion was that the ethnographic approach we had adopted called for a long-term acquaintance with the cities examined.

We combined ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, contrastive observation, focus group discussions, and face-to-face interviews, as means of data construction. Thus, we achieved triangulation through the use of multiple methodological and theoretical perspectives. As proposed by Ruesch and Bateson (1968) and developed in Scollon (1998:278-291), the following combination of various forms of data collection are crucial for mutual triangulating checks:

- Members' generalizations (normative data)
- Neutral observation (objective data)
- Individual members' experience (subjective, concrete personal data)
- Researchers' interactions with members (contested data)

Accordingly, we adopted a perspective put forth in Scollon (1998:chapter 9, 2000), which takes methodological interdiscursivity as a tool

to counteract the weaknesses that each methodological and theoretical viewpoint might present individually.

On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork, we selected representative sets of pictures (out of approximately 100 photos per city) and showed them to inhabitants. Using the selected photographs as a basis for interaction, we audio-taped several hours of focus group discussions (aiming for a sample of interviewees from different generations, gender and occupational backgrounds). We transcribed and analyzed the content of these focus group discussions for our analysis. Furthermore, we talked to administrative offices, pedestrians, store clerks, and sign makers and collected other forms of public discourse such as pamphlets, handbills, matchboxes and the like. We recorded the content of these informal interviews by taking ethnographic notes.

Theoretical Framework

We adopted Scollon's Mediated Discourse Theory (1998, 2000) as our theoretical framework. Mediated Discourse Theory combines insights from linguistic theories such as Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982; Tannen 1989), Intercultural Communication (Scollon and Scollon 1995) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995); and non-linguistic theories such as Mediated Action (Wertsch 1991) and Ethnography of Communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1972). In Mediated Discourse Theory, discourse (text) is understood broadly. It is used to refer to any semiotic system of representation (discourse as talk, discourse as written text, visual and multi-modal representations). At the core of this perspective on discourse is a focus on (a) actions and on (b) mediations. Actions are moments in which texts and social practices are appropriated by people literally to "do something." Focusing on actions shifts away from focusing on texts and social practices themselves to investigate how and for what purpose people appropriate and use texts at particular moments. Examining how people appropriate texts and use them permits

us to avoid the danger of abstracting texts away from what happens in real-time and concrete uses of the texts.

Within this perspective, virtually all actions are taken to be mediated (Scollon 1998:6). Mediated does not refer here to discourse of the (mass) media (although this discourse can be seen as one form of mediation) but to any mediation involved in performing common, everyday action. A text in this view is always mediated in multiple ways (Scollon 1998:5-6): for example, by a technology (a pen, paper, computer, fax machine, a scanner), by a form (it can be a letter, an art object, a road sign), by a language (English, French, Chinese) or a mode of communication (speaking, writing, computer-mediated communication). Technology, language, modes of communications etc. are referred to in Mediated Discourse Theory as mediational means or cultural tools (the terms are used interchangeably). As cultural tools (i.e. tools with a certain history of use, certain prospects and constraints which enable or preclude certain meanings within certain social groups), these tools bring to bear on individual mediated action a number of socio-cultural practices reflecting the larger society in which they are used (Wertsch 1991, 1994a, 1995a, 1995b; Scollon 1998). The double focus on actions and mediations thus allows us to concentrate on how broad social, historical and cultural dimensions enter unique, local and temporally situated actions.

A third tenet of Mediated Discourse Theory is that mediated actions are productive of certain social identities. Mediated actions are perceivably carried out within Communities of practice. Communities of practice are (sometimes overlapping) groups of people that share a number of social practices and gather over a period of time for the purpose of achieving some common goal. A community of practice is a place of socialization into the knowledge and practices of a community. Actions within communities of practice are thus productive of identity and membership. By learning how to behave according to the social practices of the community, one becomes part of this commu-

nity and one's on-going positioning in the community structure evolves through actions taken within the community (Lave and Wenger 1991:97-100).

In the remainder of this article, we consider the triple coordinates of action, mediation and identity through three interrelated theoretical notions pertaining also to the theoretical apparatus of Mediated Discourse Theory:

Orders of discourse (Foucault 1973a, 1973b, 1976, also referred to as "Discourse with a capital D" (Gee 1996) or "Reality set" (Scollon and Scollon 1995)).

Interdiscursivity (Bakhtin 1986; Fairclough 1992).

Sites of engagement (Scollon 1998).

Through the first two notions, we examine the complexities within the signs themselves, focusing on some of the broad socio-cultural dimensions which come together in the cultural tools that these signs constitute. Next, we investigate how inhabitants use pictures of signs in action: we examine how inhabitants claim identities by appropriating signs discursively during focus group discussions. Finally, we show how these three dimensions come together in the case study of one street sign.

Orders of Discourse

The theoretical notion of orders of discourse is a useful tool to investigate how identity, social practices and mediation (by a language or by a semiotic system such as visual phenomena) are organized as meaningful wholes. Gee defines his own version of orders of discourse (which he terms "Discourse with a capital D") as:

Composed of ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times, so as to display or to recognize a particular social identity (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996:10)

One order of discourse displayed in the city signs of Munich is that of Bavarian culture. This Bavarian dimension is displayed in city

signs through the use of "Old German" script, the use of the Bavarian dialect or the use of the color blue and white (the Bavarian colors found on the Bavarian flag). The sign previously referred to in Figure 4 is just one small aspect contributing to the Bavarian order of discourse in the streets of Munich.³

Each order of discourse is a particular combination of a complex set of social practices, socialization processes, identity production and historical, social and ideological dispositions (Scollon and Scollon 1995:98). Orders of discourse can thus cut across national languages (English, French, Chinese) and across discursive modes (verbal and non-verbal, textual and visual semiotic systems). Their meaning is usually only obvious to the members of the communities of practice that

have them as their interpretive frameworks. The colors blue and white in Brussels or Luxembourg do not mean Bavarian culture, except possibly for members of the Bavarian community in Brussels or Luxembourg which would identify these colors as meaning to them "Bavaria". Hence the importance of always factoring in the positioning of signs in interpreting them, as well as identifying the communities for which the interpretations are warranted.

Interdiscursivity

As already noted, orders of discourse are always configurations of different dimensions. Several orders of discourse can combine in various configurations: orders of discourse interpenetrate each other, one order of discourse can exist within another, or several orders of discourse



Figure 7 Interpenetrating orders of discourse (Brussels)

can overlap. The appropriation of a discourse within another Discourse is called in some linguistic theories interdiscursivity (Bakhtin 1986; Fairclough 1992).

The signs shown in Figure 7 illustrate the appropriation of aspects of a European order of discourse by other discourses. "Europconstruct" was found on a construction site for European institutions in Brussels. It co-articulates the Discourse of construction and the Discourse of Europe. "Eurohouse" and "Eurolines" are the banners for two souvenir shops selling mostly European kitsch to tourists who are visiting the capital of Europe. Both signs appropriate symbolisms of the European order of discourse (the circle of stars and the prefix Euro) within the commodity Discourse. "Sec-Europe" and "Euroclean" are signs for dry-cleaners. Again, they appropriate visual and linguistics aspects of the European order of discourse within what we could call the Discourse of services.

All these signs are commodity signs integrating a certain European ideal. On the basis of these signs and others, it seems that Europe is a concept that sells and helps establish a conducive atmosphere for the selling of services. Moreover, all of these signs are in English. English in this case, we would argue, does not represent the national language English (English is not an official language of Belgium), but rather is also constitutive of a transnational commodity Discourse (this argument is developed in Scollon 1999). We will return to this idea below.

When a city's inhabitants appropriate these signs (by reading them, talking about them) in the course of their daily lives, the signs become cultural tools, i.e. semiotic means for achieving some social action (obtaining information, making a point). Every time a social action is performed by appropriating these signs, the actions are imbued with the meanings carried over by these interdiscursively connected orders of discourse. In the next section, we will examine one social action: the discursive appropriation of city signs by some of its inhabitants during focus group discussions.

Sites of Engagement

During the focus group discussions we were mainly interested in understanding what people do with city signs. We sought to examine how and under what circumstances signs on city walls become relevant for the city's inhabitants.⁴

Most of the time, city signs function as a kind of wallpaper (Scollon 1998:11); they are present in the city, but nobody pays attention to them. They are almost invisible, never crossing the threshold of consciousness. On some occasions, a city sign becomes salient for one reason or another (an advertisement is particularly striking, somebody is looking for a particular shop and thus observes shop signs, one is being handed a handbill). On these kinds of occasions signs might become a subject of discourse. Sites of engagement can be defined as those moments where people appropriate signs in their discourse and use them for some purpose in an interaction. During a focus group discussion people appropriate the signs (or photos thereof) in discourse.

In Munich, several people selected the "Buyern" sign (Figure 8) out of approximately 100 photos. Thus, they appropriated this shop sign to make a point, and the sign became part of a site of engagement.

The sign is a word play: it uses the English verb "buy" (to purchase) instead of the German "bay" which is the beginning of the word Bayern, which in German means "Bavaria". Most people interviewed reported that they had never noticed it was a word play, although they reported having seen the sign in several locations. In other words, they had appropriated the sign passively as meaning Bavaria, but had overlooked the actual word play. They had appropriated it from the interpretive framework of their specific historical community of practice (Scollon 1997:1), Bavaria, but not from the multilingual global market perspective. Another set of expectations was revealed in the discourse of some city's inhabitants. People who had never seen the sign in the city reported that "the sign was interesting, but that it did not fit into Munich." This comment shows that the individual in this focus group appropriated the

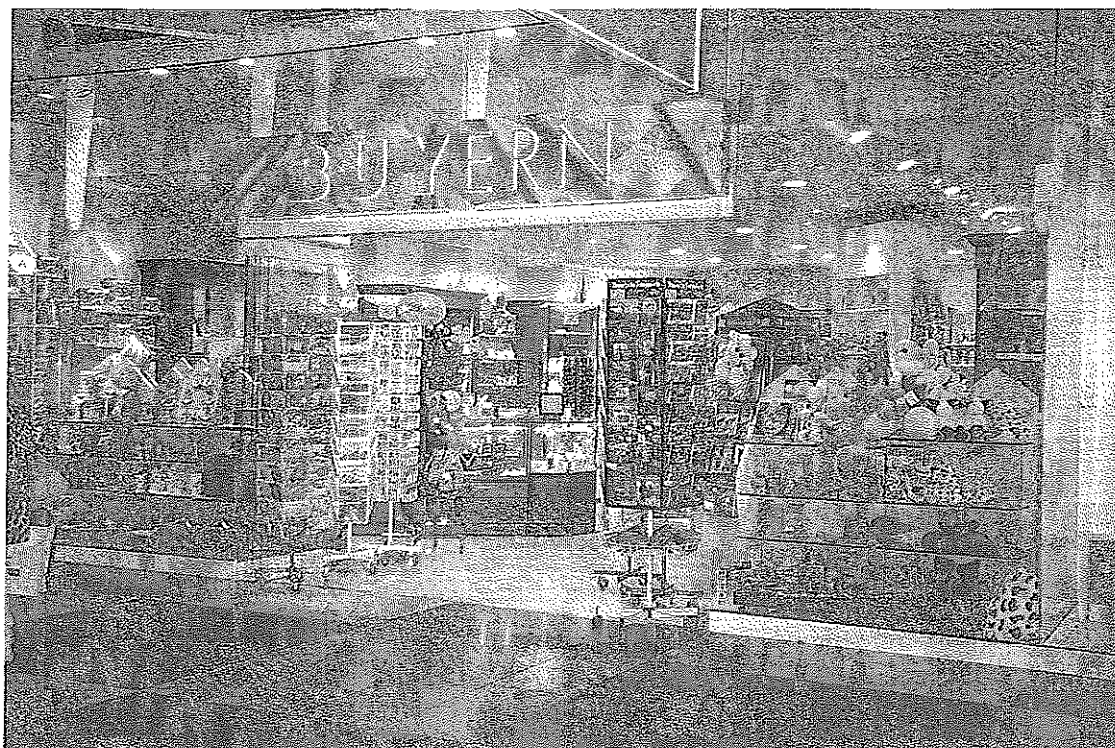


Figure 8: The "Buyern" sign (Munich)

sign by evaluating it in terms of being an indicator of identity in relation to the city.

Language use within the signs also triggered informants' appropriations of signs. About half of the commodity signs found in Munich were apparently in English. We say "apparently" because trademarks and names of shops use the English language as a commodity marketing tool to give their products a flair of transnationality. As a result, these names and logos lose their language-specificity and are assimilated across different national languages (Scollon 1999). Informants observing photos in Munich were surprised at the amount of signs in English found in their city, a fact they reportedly had never consciously noticed before. This lack of awareness of the significant presence of English on their walls shows that these transnational, commodified identities that businesses claim for inhabitants are transforming the city in ways that inhabitants are largely

unaware of. These signs are shaping their identity without them being aware of the growing importance of the global market economy in even the most basic dimension of their everyday life.

Street Signs in Brussels A Case Study

When used together, the notions of orders of discourse, interdiscursivity and sites of engagement can be appropriated as diagnostic tools of change in progress.

Consider Figure 9. This sign was found above a shop and is as mundane as all other street signs of its kind. The purpose of this sign is to give a uniquely identifiable name to the place (Charles Weiser Place), within the neighborhood in which it is placed (Etterbeek, in Brussels). It may be assumed that it presents the reader with reliable information and that the



Figure 9: Maurice Wiser Place (Brussels)

qualified authorities have put it up. In fact, we rely on these types of assumptions when we look for our way in the labyrinth of a city. This sign is not here to be questioned.

As evident as it might seem, naming streets is in itself part of an order of discourse. As pointed out by Scollon (1997:4), "we take it for granted that roads will have names and be marked so that you can find your way, but we tend to forget that this has not always been the case and is still not the case in many other places." Scollon (1997:4-5) argues that this

"explicit map of roadways" is an aspect of modern consciousness, an order of discourse that emphasizes among other traits, rationality, logic, clarity and bureaucratic efficacy. Choosing a certain type of format and color scheme, situating signs on building facades rather than on windows or corner poles, and situating signs at the end of streets as opposed to the middle, are all elements that culturalize street signs. Such a type of sign can only exist within communities of practice, which take street signs to be necessary elements of urban organization; they would appear ludicrous in other contexts (e.g. the Saharan desert or Himalayan summits). Street signs are thus cultural tools. They bring with them certain socio-cultural assumptions of the society, which produces them in order to organize urban space.

A diachronic perspective on Brussels' street signs clearly shows that social practices of sign making are always the product of historical evolution and subject to on-going transformations. The sign for "Robert Schuman's Place" (see Figure 10) is one example of the old signs that can still be found in Brussels. It is very simple in its design. All it bears is the name of



Figure 10: Robert Schuman's Place (Brussels)

the place in the two national languages (Dutch and French) and an indication that the authorities of the city of Brussels have placed it there. We know this through the logo representing the emblem of the city of Brussels: Saint Michael killing the dragon (to the right of the sign). In the new sign, the "Maurice Wiser Place" sign, it appears that over time, several orders of discourse have started to interpenetrate each other.

As a sign put up by the authorities, the new sign still "institutionalizes" space. It does this, however, in a very different way to the old street signs. While the authorities of the "City of Brussels" put up the old sign, the new sign bears the coat of arms of Etterbeek (a neighborhood in Brussels) to the left of the sign. This coat of arms and the name Etterbeek bring a local anchorage to the sign: the fragmentation of the city in small administrative units is reflected in the new street signs. Over time, city signs have become localized. On the other hand, this street sign is also sponsored by the company "European Business Travel." Thus, this sign also advertises a commodity in English, which makes it part of the global market economy order of discourse talked about above. Two orders of discourse (one local, one global) thus compete with each other in the design of this sign.

This interdiscursivity between local administrative discourse and global market discourse is a sign of the times. The discourse of authorities seems to be "made possible" or "brought to us" (to parody the sponsoring of television programs by soaps or other commercial products) by the support of the travel company. The commodity sign brings national and corporate power into common street sign discourse (Scollon 1999:5). In that sense, the most administrative and trivial street sign is pregnant with capitalist meaning. What we are witnessing is the progressive take over of the visual environment by corporate power.

The Maurice Wiser Place sign also crystallizes the semiotic landscape we have found to be typical of Brussels. As we have seen in the use of Europe to sell dry cleaning services, souvenir kitsch, or construction services, the European dimension is very strongly present in

Brussels. It is also the only one of the four cities examined which endorses this dimension in its street signs. If we examine the particular composition of the Maurice Wiser street sign, we see that the national and European dimensions (which are displayed by the two appropriate flags) are grafted onto the local dimension of Etterbeek. The European and Belgian flags interpenetrate each other, with the European flag clearly above and partially hiding a part of the Belgian flag. In the visual variables, the Belgian flag is contextualized as part of Europe and Europe as part of Brussels. This subordination and interpenetration of Belgium and Europe is symbolic of an identity otherwise shown in many visual phenomena found in Brussels. It is thus representative of Brussels's identity both on the symbolic and on the reality plane.

When examining how this kind of sign is appropriated in the discourse of Brussels' inhabitants, it becomes apparent that the inhabitants do not identify with the interrelations between Brussels and Europe that is claimed on street signs. At best, these inhabitants claim they are indifferent to the European identity displayed in their city or talk about it as a political and marketing technique. Their discourse also reveals that city dwellers are largely unaware of these dominant socio-cultural discourses in their city, as well as they seem mostly not cognizant of the influence these discourses might have on their collective identities. For example, during a focus group session, we found that inhabitants did not interpret the use of English in city signs as displaying a transnational identity but rather as typically displaying a European identity. Without them being aware, the dominant European order of discourse on Brussels' city walls has transformed the ways in which its inhabitants relate to the use of the English language in the city. English has become equated with the "language of the Eurocrats."

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that local, regional, national, transnational, and European orders of discourse compete in the urban environment in increas-

ingly complex ways. The fragmentation of identities reflects a very post-modern consciousness. This post-modern consciousness co-exists in the signs of the city with a very modern logic of consumption, rationalization and bureaucracy typical of the global market economy. This consolidation of a modern logic is perceptible in the ever-increasing importance of commodity discourse in city signs.

The commodity order of discourse is pervasive not only in the selling of goods but also in space institutionalization and identity production. Although this progressive action of corporate power affects the ways in which people see themselves and make sense of who they are, their discourse reveals that they are mostly unaware of its extent. In the case of Munich, it was particularly clear that the inhabitants identified actively with their deeply rooted historically Bavarian identity, but were not aware of the importance of the transnational and commodity identity of their city. It also appears in the discourse of the inhabitants of the four cities that while some Europeans feel strongly about their local identity, there is a general lack of effective identification with the economic machinery of Europe, even in those cities where the European identity is most clearly displayed (Brussels and Luxembourg). This lack of effective identification does not mean, however, that this European identity has not started to be profoundly integrated by those most exposed to city signs displaying this order of discourse. This is again apparent in the discourse of the city's inhabitants. As cultural tools, city signs thus seem to have an impact on inhabitant's perceived collective identities, and this impact seems to be largely independent of a clearly articulated awareness of it.

As linguists, we believe that we cannot limit ourselves to the study of language if we want to come closer to understanding it. We need to see language, social practices, identity issues, and visual phenomena in a fully integrated way. We think that the notion of order of discourse, interdiscursivity and sites of engagement, as well as the more general framework of Mediated Discourse Theory, are useful tools to start thinking about these questions

Notes

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²There are socio-historical reasons for this that we will not delve into here.

³This analysis is further developed in Norris (2000).

⁴A more elaborate account on this issue is found in de Saint-Georges (2000).

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