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Solidarity and support in Belgian residential linguistic landscapes during the Covid-19 outbreak

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Abstract

This article examines the role played by signs in the public space of two socio-economically stratified residential neighbourhoods of Ghent (Belgium) during the first Covid-19 outbreak in 2020. On the basis of fieldwork, we explore the potential of public signs as a resourceful strategy for communicating solidarity and support and the discursive construction of a community affected by this crisis. We show that in times of lockdown and social distancing, the residential linguistic landscape in both neighbourhoods became strategically appropriated by local inhabitants to communicate with neighbours and strangers and was operationalised as a vehicle to serve new communicative functions such as the conveying of solidarity and support as well as gratitude, and collective belonging. Some differences related to emplacement, language use and quantity of signs were also observed. Overall, the article documents the affective appropriation of space through Covid-19 signs during the Covid-19 outbreak and periods of lockdown in Flanders, Belgium.

Keywords (6-8): linguistic landscape, Covid-19 signs, support, solidarity, appropriation, affective regime

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 had a profound impact on all aspects of public life across the globe both in social, economic, and political terms. In Belgium, the first Covid-19 infection was confirmed in early February; it concerned one of the nine Belgian evacuees who arrived by plane from Wuhan China (Paelinck 2020)¹. In the

¹ <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnews/nl/2020/02/04/corona-protocol/>

subsequent weeks, the first casualties of Covid-19 were recorded by the Belgian government following infections on Belgian soil and the number of infections rose exponentially. In an attempt to ‘crush the curve’, the Belgian government announced a number of increasingly strict measures between March, 12 and March, 20 which were referred to as a “lockdown light”. These measures profoundly affected all aspects of public life across Belgium: bars, restaurants and clubs were closed, all types of events were cancelled, all schools and workplaces were closed apart from essential services such as grocery stores and pharmacies, and the national borders were closed. Additionally, restrictive movement measures were imposed for the population at large, entailing that people were still allowed to go outside to walk, jog, or bike, but only within a specific perimeter of their homes, and all other non-essential activities or movements were prohibited (Maerevoet et al. 2020).² This first phase of lockdown lasted throughout the rest of March and April of 2020.

As the number of infections rose throughout the country during March and the beginning of April, hospitals delayed non-urgent medical care as they became overwhelmed with severely sick Covid-19 patients, and people were forced to stay at home and, at times, faced job insecurities and financial hardships. From late April 2020 onwards, the slowly decreasing number of infections as a result of the lockdown measures gave way to a gradual exit strategy in several incremental phases from May 4 onwards (Desson et al. 2020). Following decreasing numbers of infections over a period of several weeks, more and more government-mandated restrictions on public life were gradually lifted until the Fall of 2020, when a second wave of rising Covid-19 cases hit Belgium and many restrictions were reimposed. This timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic development and the concomitant measures introduced by the Belgian government to contain the pandemic outbreak was not unique to Belgium and similar to what other countries in Europe and beyond experienced during the first half of 2020.

Given the significant social, mental and economic impact the lockdown had on the inhabitants of Belgium, various initiatives were undertaken by both official local governments, civil society stakeholders and grassroots volunteers with the aim of offering solidarity and support. In this article, we are specifically interested in the role played by the public space in the construction and display of such initiatives and, more specifically, in the medium of public signs and related types of semiotic expressions that emerged in multitudes in the public space during the first period of lockdown in Belgium. In doing so, we zoom in on the city of Ghent

² <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/03/17/liveblog-17-maart/>

in the northern Flemish part of Belgium as a contextualised case-study and, more specifically, will compare two of its residential areas. As part of our analysis, we approach the public space as a new medium in pandemic times to express such affective communicative work and as a vehicle for personal communication from neighbour to neighbour, stranger to stranger and professional to client. As such, we are interested in the changed nature of the linguistic landscape (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Van Mensel et al. 2016) during the Covid-19 lockdown period in Belgium and how public signs expressing solidarity and support constitute a social practice tied to the construction of a societal collectivity affected by Covid-19. In addition to discussing the different kinds of signs and semiotic expressions displayed by inhabitants and the local government and the messages these communicate, we also base our observations on the specific residential neighbourhoods and include their respective socio-economic and spatial organisation in our analysis. As such, we argue that the Covid-19 lockdown in Belgium imbued the public space with the potential to communicate with others in newfound, more personal(ised) and affective ways and more collectively than before, while ultimately impacting on people's relations positively.

We start this article with a theoretical reflection on our approach of the linguistic landscape in this case study. This is followed by more information about the data collection methods, research questions and our analytical approach, before turning to a discussion of the Covid-19 messages we found and the most striking differences between the two neighbourhoods in terms of quantity, multilingual language use and spatial emplacement. We finish with concluding remarks on the new linguistic landscape phenomenon this article documents.

2. The re-functionalisation and appropriation of the linguistic landscape during times of crisis

Language use on signs in the public space, in what has become known as “the linguistic landscape” (hereafter: LL) has become a fertile and multi-faceted object of sociolinguistic enquiry in recent years (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Shohamy 2012; Van Mensel et al. 2016). In such studies, the linguistic landscape is typically studied as a source of information about the complex function and role of language in a particular (multilingual) space (Huebner 2006; Janssens 2012; Vandenbroucke 2015) or as a constitutive element in the discursive construction of a place (Leeman and Modan 2009; Papen 2012; Vandenbroucke 2018). In linguistic landscape studies, a semiotic approach is frequently applied (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), as signs are inherently multimodal resources in which text is combined with other

visual-expressive modes to convey meaning. Assessing the linguistic and multimodal semiotics of signage enables touching upon the interplay between “the way written discourse interacts with other discursive modalities: visual images, nonverbal communication, architecture and the built environment” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 2). Indeed, a full understanding of the meaning of a sign requires not just examining its linguistic features, but also the meaning-making processes inherently at work through other semiotic characteristics of the sign. While early studies into public signage and semiotics largely favoured a focus on relatively fixed signage of commercial or official nature (Backhaus 2007; Gorter 2006), more and more attention has since also been dedicated to more ephemeral or transient types of writing in the public which are only displayed for a brief period of time (see Sebba 2010; Moriarty 2014; Jaworski and Lou 2020). In this article, we will focus on signage whose existence in the public space was inherently time-sensitive: the signs were displayed in reaction to the dramatic outbreak of Covid-19 in Belgium and were not permanently but only temporarily displayed during the first period of lockdown and subsequent months.

Linguistic landscapes around the world abound with all types of signs displayed for various reasons: shop owners advertising their business, governmental traffic signs regulating the circulation of people and automobiles, graffiti tags voicing dissenting opinions, or handwritten notes informing a family member or interested stranger about relevant information. What publicly displayed signs share is thus essentially a message, a piece of information or meaning that is communicated in the public space. Interestingly, in times of crisis in our modern society, people experience the need to externalise private states or emotional responses (Tourinho et al. 2011; Zeevi and Dubiner 2016), and resort to the public space to express these emotions through symbolic artefacts (Zeevi 2009; Zeevi and Dubiner 2016; Kailuweit and Quintana 2020). During the military operation Protective Edge in Israel, for example, outdoor signs emerged as a display of citizens’ feelings about the operation (Zeevi and Dubiner 2016). Similarly, during the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and Paris in 2015, public mourning emerged in the shape of grassroots memorials covered in signs (Kailuweit and Quintana 2020). In the case of both these events, we see how the public space, and the LL specifically, has become appropriated and “re-functionalised” (Kailuweit and Quintana 2020) to express individuals’ private emotions and subjective reactions to the crisis or distressing events they were confronted with. Under circumstances of crises, such re-functionalisation of the appropriated LL imbues the public space with new social meaning and changes its “affective regime”, i.e. “the set of conditions that govern with

varying degrees of hegemonic status the ways in which particular kinds of affect can be appropriately materialized in the context of a given site” (Wee 2016: 109). As part of this new affective regime, new “display rules” and “feeling rules” (Wee 2016) emerge in reaction to the crisis regarding what is appropriate to express through public signs. Whilst LL studies for a large part have focussed on commercial locales as these spaces are typically the backdrop of a multitude of signs, in our article we focus on a type of space which under normal circumstances is characterised by far less density of signs: the residential space. During the Covid-19 lockdown in Belgium, people were confined to their homes and, as our analysis will show, it is precisely in these spaces that the re-functionalisation and appropriation of the LL and the new temporary affective regime of Covid-19 signs emerged.

In analysing the temporary signs which occurred in the public sphere during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium, we focus specifically on signs which express personal attitudes and emotional meaning related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on our analysis of these signs, our article will discuss how during the Covid-19 lockdown in Belgium a new affective regime temporarily emerged, which led to an unprecedented number of new signs and semiotic initiatives. The range of functions and values these signs expressed include the expression of gratitude, greetings, support and well-wishes. As such, we approach them as expressions of support and solidarity, i.e. “the willingness to share and redistribute material and immaterial resources drawing on feelings of shared fate and group loyalty” in times of social, political or economic crisis (Stjernø 2004 in Oosterlynck et al. 2016: 765). Our analytical approach is geosemiotic in nature, as we consider the linguistic landscape as a situated practice and the social and indexical meanings conveyed by a sign as context-specific. The framework of geosemiotics by Scollon and Scollon (2003) puts forward that the meaning of a sign can only be fully understood by paying attention to “the social meaning of the material emplacement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 2) and by examining the “interaction order” (i.e. the social relationships between the sign-maker and its addressees), as well as the “visual semiotics” (i.e. the multimodal make-up of a sign as a meaningful whole that can be read) and “place semiotics” (i.e. the specific social and materialised context in which the sign is placed) (Scollon and Scollon 2003). In our analysis, we will primarily focus on the relationship between the sign-maker and the sign addressees, as well as the specific location of the sign and how this adds meaning to the sign. In doing so, we will focus specifically on the new

“affective regime” (Wee 2016) and the social-indexical meanings of Covid-19 signs which emerged during the first lockdown in Belgium in 2020.

3. Research questions, data and methods

In order to document and understand the role played by the public space and the affective messages of publicly displayed Covid-19 signs during the pandemic outbreak in Ghent, Belgium, we explicitly focus on residential neighbourhoods, as these were the spaces that local inhabitants were primarily confined to under the lockdown measures, and on signs made by all types of LL-actors (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), including private individuals, shop owners and governmental agencies. In doing so, we were interested in residential areas which are characterised by different socio-economic, demographic and spatial make-ups under the assumption that certain differences might be observed in terms of language use and types of signs. As such, this article addresses the following intersecting research questions which will form the guiding thread in the discussion of the results and analysis of LL signs:

1. How did inhabitants and the local government use the public space and public signs to express messages of support and solidarity?
2. What are the main differences between the two neighbourhoods in terms of emplacement and language use?

In answering these questions, fieldwork was conducted in two residential parts of Ghent, a mid-size industrial city in Flanders, Belgium (see Figure 1). The first neighbourhood is the Brugse Poort, which is situated in the north-western part of the city centre and forms part of the historical 19th century housing ring. The Brugse Poort is a centrally located, densely populated neighbourhood which also contains commercial activity along its main axis, the street Bevrijdingslaan, and is adjacent to the Rabot neighbourhood (see Collins and Slembrouck 2007; Blommaert and Maly 2014 for LL explorations of this neighbourhood). Historically, this part of Ghent is a working-class area which has since the 1960s become much more diverse and highly multilingual (Blommaert et al. 2005). Its population is considerably mixed and contains both people of Belgian descent and people of Turkish and Maghrebian descent, as well as other migrants or descendants of migrants who arrived since the 1990s from other parts of the world (Blommaert et al. 2005); according to the City of Ghent, more than half of its population has foreign roots.³ Whilst the general perception of the

³ See <https://hoeveelin.stad.gent/wijken/brugse-poort-rooigem/>

neighbourhood is one of ‘deterioration’ alongside high unemployment, low real-estate prices, and crime (Blommaert et al. 2005), in recent years the area has experienced urban renewal led by the city council⁴ and incipient gentrification by the arrival of young middle-class families, which has been met with local protest.⁵ Spatially, the densely populated neighbourhood Brugse Poort consists largely of row houses and apartments and has a more down-scale socio-economic make-up.

The second residential area under scrutiny in this case study is located further north in the city’s suburban periphery and forms part of the municipalities Wondelgem and Mariakerke. This residential area is comparatively more affluent, and spatially to a large extent made up of traditional one-family detached homes with spacious gardens and (small) parks, historical castles, and ponds. The housing facilities in this area comprise both homes built in the 1960s and 1970s, which have been renovated since, and new development projects catering primarily to young families. The neighbourhood is also home to a few small pockets of commercial activity (e.g. a local butcher, pharmacy, community house). In terms of its socio-economic and linguistic profile, the area is arguably more middle class and less diverse than the Brugse Poort.

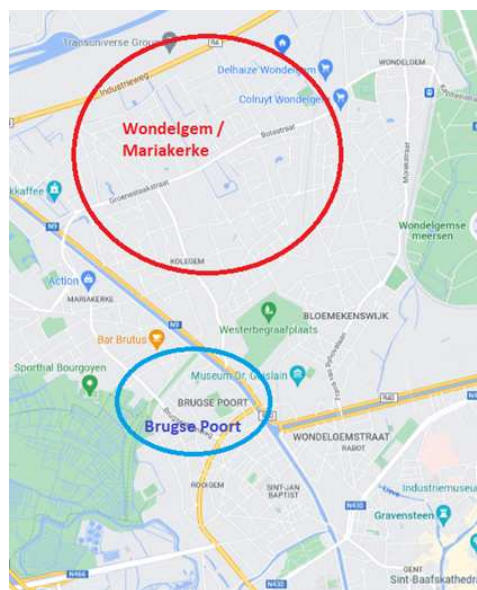


Figure 1. Map of the city of Ghent with the Wondelgem/Mariakerke and Brugse Poort neighbourhoods highlighted

⁴ See

https://www.complexestadsprojecten.be/Documents/Gent_Brugse_poort/Brochure%20Brugse%20Poort%20juni%202012.pdf

⁵ See https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200612_04989220 and <https://www.burgerplatform.gent/brugse-poort-graag-geknijpt>

Fieldwork was conducted on-site in a Covid-19 safe manner (i.e. with social distancing and/or mouth masks) and entailed photographic documentation of the Covid-19 signs that were encountered in the two areas. The Brugse Poort was visited several times during the lockdown period, while the Wondelgem/Mariakerke period was experienced more directly as the first author lives in this area. Whilst the LL was thus observed during this period, the systematic photographic documentation occurred after the lockdown when restrictions for physical movement were lifted and residents were less wary to engage in conversation about the signs. In the Brugse Poort this was carried out by both authors on the same day by walking through all the streets of the area, while in the Wondelgem/Mariakerke area this was spread out over several days by the first author due to the greater space to cover. Interestingly, the vast majority of the signs and semiotic interventions which had been displayed during the lockdown period remained on public display for the subsequent months and at times were even maintained by the sign makers (e.g. a sign that had dropped down was put back in its original place). While the status of the first author as a long-term resident of Wondelgem/Mariakerke allows for the experience of the period of lockdown and concomitant situated display of signs and artefacts in the public space, the fieldwork in the Brugse Poort was thus by comparison less comprehensive.

In total, 63 photos were taken in the Brugse Poort and 93 photos in Wondelgem/Mariakerke. In the case of pre-printed posters which were displayed by multiple home owners, not all instances were photographed and only the high rate of public display was recorded in that specific space. Next to photographs, a small number of brief informal interviews with local inhabitants was also conducted (two in the Brugse Poort and four in Wondelgem/Mariakerke) and we also examined media and news coverage concerning Covid-19 signs in Ghent and Flanders. Our geosemiotic analysis of the Covid-19 signs consisted of categorising the corpus of signs into subcategories, incl. the message a sign expressed, the multimodal design of the sign, the addressee(s) of the sign, the languages used on the sign, and the physical emplacement of the sign.

In the next section, we present our results for each research question. For the first research question, we structure our findings according to the LL-actors involved, i.e. the individual or entity who authored the sign: we first discuss Covid-19 signs displayed by the inhabitants and this is followed by a discussion of signs by the local government of Ghent. In turning to the second research question, we discuss the main differences between the two neighbourhoods

and how the observed spatialised operationalisations of the public space connect to the socio-economic profile of each area.

4. Covid-19 signs in Ghent, Belgium

4.1 Signs displayed by inhabitants expressing affective messages

From the start of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium in mid-March 2020, white sheets appeared in the windowsills and on the fronts of houses all over Belgium.⁶ The indexical and social meanings of these signs were well-documented in the media and essentially constituted expressions of solidarity and gratitude to the health care workers who were working at the hospitals, doctors' offices and other medical facilities and who were under great pressure and personal health risk by taking care of Covid-19 patients. The omnipresence of these white sheets as an expression of solidarity and support during the first wave of Covid-19 was accompanied with applause at 8 o'clock sharp in the evening when people, whilst socially distancing, would applaud from the windows and doors of their houses or apartments in appreciation of the health care workers. White sheets or white pieces of fabric displayed by local inhabitants were observed throughout the two neighbourhoods we visited, but in several cases these semiotic carriers also sometimes contained written messages, as can be seen in Figure 2. The example on the left side of the Figure was found in the Brugse Poort and contains the following hand-written text:

„Zorgpersoneel (Dutch) / Bedankt! (Dutch) / Merci! (French, but also used in Dutch) / Teşekkürler!...(Turkish)” (translation: “Health care staff / Thank you! / Thank you! / Thank you!, ...”)

The two examples in the middle of the Figure were displayed in Wondelgem/Mariakerke and expressed gratitude in Dutch and French only: the sign at the top reads “*bedankt / merci*” in Dutch and French (translation: “thank you”), while the sign at the bottom reads “*#samentegencorona*” in Dutch (translation: “#togetheragainstcorona”). The photo in the

⁶ See <https://www.hln.be/ninove/in-beeld-ninovieters-hangen-witte-lakens-uit-als-steun-voor-hulpverleners-en-andere-werkenden-tijdens-coronacrisis~a5ba0043/>; <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnews/nl/2020/03/20/bedanking-zorgsector-coronavirus/> and <https://www.tvl.be/nieuws/witte-lakens-aan-de-vensters-als-symbool-van-solidariteit-met-de-zorgverleners-95192> for news coverage about these semiotic activities of support and gratitude.

right-side of the figure illustrates the most commonly observed type of empty white sheet displayed on a house's façade.

Residential neighbourhoods are typically spaces in which the density of publicly displayed signs is relatively low, especially compared to commercial areas (Vandenbroucke 2016). Indeed, the number of residential signs displayed prior to the pandemic outbreak was rather limited. During the lockdown, a plethora of signs displayed by inhabitants emerged in the residential public spaces with messages expressing gratitude. Examples are shown in Figure 3: the heart-shaped sign on the left reads “*merci*” in Dutch/French (translation: “thank you”) and “*#toonjehart*” in Dutch (translation: “#showyourheart”); the sign in the middle reads “*respect voor onze helden*” in Dutch (translation: “respect for our heroes”), while the handstitched cloth banner reads “*bedankt*” in Dutch (translation: “thank you”).



Figure 2. White sheets displaying messages of gratitude to health care workers



Figure 3. Signs expressing gratitude to health care workers

Interestingly, Covid-19 signs during the lockdown in these two residential neighbourhoods did not only address medical care workers with their messages. Neighbours (who were prevented from interacting directly with each other because of social distancing measures) actively undertook initiatives to connect and speak with each other or with other passers-by in their neighbourhood through signs as well. Figure 4 shows an example of such explicit dialogicity on a poster which was encountered several times in the Wondelgem/Mariakerke area. The printed sheet of paper displays the Dutch words “*Ik u ook*” which translates roughly as “I you too”. This declarative phrase arguably functions as an answer to an unvoiced statement and, as such, presupposes the sentiment “I miss you” voiced by the interlocutor, in this case the sign reader. As part of this implicit adjacency pair, the opening turn is thus the gaze of the passer-by who participates in the speech act simply through their presence and act of reading. The poster’s semiotic design further enhances its intended meaning: the placement of the words on the sheet with a large white space underneath the sentence suggests an open-ended conversation with any and all passers-by.



Figure 4. A sign in search of a gaze (Wondelgem/Mariakerke)

Another example is shown in Figure 5 (top left): a hand-made drawing presumably made by a child which depicts a representation of the Covid-19 virus alongside text that reads “*I feestje minder / 10 mensen gered*” in Dutch (translation: “one less party / 10 people saved”), signed with the child’s name and the date of the drawing. Whilst the message of this sign is, on the one hand, instructive to make passers-by more aware of the risk of infection that goes with close contacts and parties, it simultaneously also induces encouragement through a child’s voice to maintain and carry out the governmental measures to protect and save other individuals from becoming ill. In this example, we find indexes of solidarity by way of invoking collective responsibility and emphasising reciprocity in keeping one another safe. A similar example is shown on the top right side of Figure 5, which is essentially an encouraging sign through its Dutch message of “*goed bezig/ je bent in de helft / nie pleuje*” (translation: “well done / you are halfway / do not give up”). In this specific example, the sign appropriates the local Ghentian dialect saying “*nie pleuje*” (translated as “do not give up”), indexical of the famous allegedly stubborn character of the Ghentian population, and applies it strategically to (stubbornly) maintaining the social distance and abiding by the protective

measures imposed by the government. Interestingly, quite a number of imperative constructions were found on such directive Covid-19 signs, including “*blijf in uw kot*” (“stay at home”), “*draag zorg voor elkaar*” (“take care of each other”), “*hou vol*” (“keep going”) and “*toon je hart*” (“show your heart”). Even if such grammatical constructions can be interpreted as directives or instructions, their particular geosemiotic emplacement allows for a more nuanced, encouraging interpretation designed to support other people psychologically during a trying time.

Similar encouragements and expressions of solidarity are shown in the two signs at the bottom of Figure 5: the red posters (left-side of figure) read in Dutch “*veel sterkte aan iedereen en hou vol!*” (translation: “stay strong everyone and hang in there”) and “*wees solidair en doe je boodschappen bij onze Wondelgemse handelaars*” (translation: “show solidarity and shop with the local Wondelgem shop owners”), which are indicative of calls for economic solidarity in times of economic hardships of the lockdown for business owners; the right-bottom sign reading “make solidarity great again” encourages people to show solidarity with one another in tough times. In doing so, the sign is constructed in English and as such explicitly appropriates a political campaign slogan. On a more local, grassroots level, neighbours also reached out directly to convey community support and offered aid to one another in a time of need with hand-written notes in windows announcing that when one is in need of help, one can just ring the doorbell. An example of this is shown in Figure 6: the handwritten text in the window reads in Dutch: “*Hulp nodig met iets? Bel maar aan! :) :) :)*” “*Allez kloppen*” (translation: “Need help with something? Just ring the bell! :) :) :)”) Well actually knock [on the window]”).



Figure 5. Signs of solidarity and encouragement



Figure 6. Handwritten note offering help to neighbours in need

A more organized initiative of sign-making by inhabitants designed to express solidarity and support to neighbours and strangers can be seen in Figure 7. These hand-made artworks and drawings in large residential windows were found throughout the Brugse Poort and, as explained to us by a local inhabitant, were part of a local children's initiative where the kids would ask their neighbours if they could come and draw a specific poem on their windows. The poem is in Dutch and includes heart-warming lines such as “*Voor eeuwig en altijd / zit jij hier in mijn hart / zo ben je dicht bij mij*” (translation: “Always and forever / you’re here in my heart / that’s how I keep you close to me”). This was a popular, collective neighbourhood endeavour that also had an Instagram account documenting the different window drawings and an online map where you could see where all the drawings were located, as can be seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Hand-made artwork and drawings in windows as part of local children's initiative in Brugse Poort



Figure 8. Local artist's Tibetan flags with well-wishes for the neighbours in Wondelgem

Hand-made artwork was also encountered in Wondelgem. As shown in Figure 8, a local artist made Tibetan prayer flags with drawings and well-wishes specifically for her neighbours and hung them in front of her house. The wishes expressed on the signs wished the passers-by the resolve and quiet strength to hold on until everyone was able to be together again. In a short informal interview conducted with her during fieldwork, the artist explained that she wanted her wishes to spread with the wind to her neighbours, similar to the mantras on the Tibetan prayer flags. The artist also frequently maintained and updated the Covid-19-related artwork in front of her house and sent photographic updates to us. In general, these drawings and artworks were not directed at anyone in particular, but rather at the collectivity of neighbours and passers-by to wish them strength and courage in these difficult times, thereby sending a strong message of togetherness and shared fate.

Next to signs expressing support, solidarity and gratitude, quite a number of semiotic interventions in the public space were directly linked to helping individuals and families to deal with the psychological problems they might experience due to the confinement at home during the pandemic, as well as the social distancing imposed by the federal government and the limited opportunities for physical exercise and outdoor activities these implied. One of the heart-warming initiatives which developed as a collective public display throughout residential neighbourhoods was the so-called “*berenjacht*” (translation: “bear hunt”). Inspired by a children’s book from 1989 titled “We’re going on a bear hunt”, individual citizens and residents of cities all over Belgium (and the world) started displaying stuffed bears in their windows and gardens. Because movement was restricted to a radius of a few kilometres

during the lockdown, families with young children were limited to taking walks in their local neighbourhood to be able to spend time outdoors, and these bears then became a so-called ‘bear hunt’, a game children could play for which they had to spot the bears while they were outside on their family walk. This initiative was wildly popular all over Belgium and other countries across the globe, as people wanted to show solidarity to both children who were confined to their homes and could no longer freely play outside or see their friends, as well as to their parents, who were now suddenly forced to work and spend time at home with their children 24/7 without the ability to spend time with them elsewhere. Figure 9 (top) shows various examples of displayed bears from both neighbourhoods in Ghent, while the bottom shows a screen capture from a website that was launched to register where bears had been spotted, indicative of how popular the bear hunt was everywhere in Ghent, including our two areas of study.

Posters explaining the game were also made available in 23 different languages on a different website (see Figure 9, bottom-right). The rationale behind this initiative was explicitly framed as follows:

De Berenjacht is heel populair. Kinderen kunnen samen met hun begeleiders zoeken naar de beren die achter de ramen zitten in de buurt. Een verbindende en gezonde bezigheid. En niet-talig. Dus daarom maakten we deze affiches voor mensen die het Nederlands nog niet of weinig machtig zijn. Want beren spreken alle talen.

(translation: “The bear hunt is very popular. A connecting healthy pastime. And a non-linguistic one. That’s why we made these posters for those who are not (very) proficient in Dutch. Because bears speak all languages”, <http://berenjachtvooriedereen.be/>)

As such, the bear hunt was an explicitly inclusive initiative that indexed high levels of solidarity and support towards parents and their young children irrespective of the languages they speak, and that could be observed all over the linguistic landscape of Ghent.

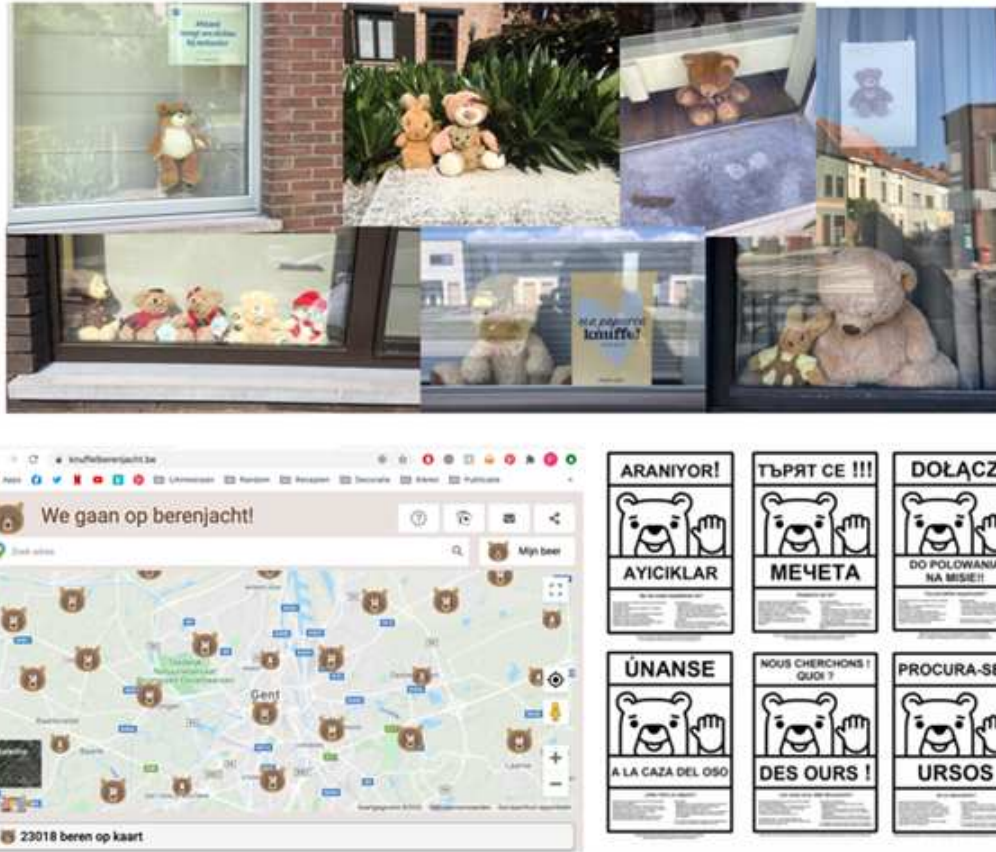


Figure 9. The “Bear Hunt” in Brugse Poort and Wondelgem/Mariakerke; in windows (top) and online (<https://knuffelberenjacht.be/> and <http://berenjachtvooriedereen.be/>)

4.2 Signs displayed by the local government expressing support and solidarity

Next to inhabitants, the local government also undertook initiatives to display public signs expressing support and solidarity. An example is the communication campaign undertaken by the City of Ghent in early April 2020. As part of this campaign, pre-printed posters were distributed via newspapers and the post to be voluntarily displayed in people’s windows and homes. This top-down initiative stands in stark contrast with the handmade signs discussed earlier in the article and their mass-production and distribution, which resulted in a high visibility of the campaign throughout the city, further underlines the intended effect of community building the campaign had. Examples of the different designs of the posters are shown in Figure 10 and were found in high numbers in all streets surveyed in both neighbourhoods. The messages on the posters contain brief Dutch sentences, such as:

- “Oh Romeo, Romeo, waar zijt gij Romeo?” – “Ik blijf binnen, Julia” (translation: “Oh Romeo, Romeo, where art thou, Romeo? – I’m staying inside, Juliet”);

- *In de Brugse Puurte, Uustakker of 't Rabot ... blijf in uw kot* (translation: “In the Brugse Poort, Oostakker or the Rabot ... stay inside your home”, in which the names of the three neighbourhoods are written in Ghent dialect);
- *Neute mag, pleuje nie* (translation: “You can complain, you cannot give up”, which is an adaptation of a popular Ghentian dialect saying “*nie neuten, nie pleuje*” meaning “do not complain, do not give up”).

The rationale behind this ludic, encouraging poster campaign was, in the words of the Mayor of Ghent:

We willen niet alleen de Gentenaars op een positieve manier aanmoedigen om de richtlijnen na te leven, maar ook het samenhorigheidsgevoel aanwakkeren. We moeten de rug rechten, het beste maken van deze situatie en samen uitkijken naar het einde van deze crisis, of zoals ze in Gent zeggen: nie pleuje. (translation: “We not only wanted to encourage the people of Ghent to adhere to the measures in a positive way, but we also want to encourage a feeling of togetherness. We have to straighten our backs, make the best of this situation and look forward to the end of this crisis together, or as they say in Ghent: *nie pleuje*”).⁷

This final saying is also used in the home-made sign in Figure 5. The use of a Ghent dialect phrase indexes a local anchoring not necessarily accessible to people who do not know or speak the local dialect. Indeed, while these posters are well-intended to bring people together, they might at the same time also have an alienating effect for some sign-readers because of their strong reliance on the local dialect in their messaging. In this sense, they arguably might present somewhat of a communicative paradox: while the intention of the sign is clearly to be inclusive and to instil a feeling of collective togetherness in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic between the people of Ghent, the use of the local Ghent dialect might also be excluding in its effects, as dialect language is not necessarily accessible and understandable to every sign-reader.

⁷ See <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-en-het-stadsbestuur/nieuws-evenementen/download-hier-hartverwarmende-posters-voor-aan-je-raam>



Figure 10. Local government-initiatives poster campaign designed to instil “togetherness” and “collectivity”

Similar to the signs discussed earlier, the messages of these posters are not directed at anyone specifically, but rather have the aim to bring people together in general and to highlight the shared fate, underlining that we all have to make an effort if we want to get through this together. The LL in this case turns a private hardship and individual anxiety due to Covid-19 into a social experience shared with others, albeit with social and physical distancing precautions in place. A more literal reference to this collective approach in overcoming the pandemic is shown in Figure 11, a Dutch message by the local government sprayed on streets throughout the city which reads “*alle neuzen in deze richting / samen tegen corona*” (translation: “all noses in this direction / together against corona”). Interestingly, the phrase “together against corona” became a rallying cry of encouragement and support both on social media and on public signs, as evidenced in the hashtag “*#samentegencorona*” (translation: “*#togetheragainstcorona*”) on the white sheet displayed against a hedge in Wondelgem/Mariakerke (Figure 12).



Figure 11. "All noses in this direction / Together against corona" (Brugsepoort)



Figure 12. #Togetheragainstcorona against a hedge in Wondelgem/Mariakerke

Due to the requirement to stay at home, daily commutes (by car) to work also diminished significantly which prompted the City of Ghent to declare several streets officially 'cycling streets', meaning that cyclists receive priority over cars in that particular street. An example of such temporary re-assignment of the traffic rules is shown in Figure 13 where the road sign

designating the cyclist's priority status is semiotically linked to the slogan “*samen tegen corona*” (translation: “together against corona”).

The re-functionalisation and appropriation of the LL during the Covid-19 outbreak as a medium to express affective messages offering solidarity, gratitude and support should also be understood against the background of the confinement at home of all residents of Belgium. Due to restrictions in movement, many signs discussed in the previous paragraphs arguably address the high numbers of new passers-by. A fundamental characteristic of the new affective regime that emerged in this period thus relates to the inherent dialogicity of these types of Covid-19 signs and the new sign-readers which concomitantly emerged in residential locales.



Figure 13. *Cyclist streets as a “together against corona” measure by the city of Ghent*

4.4 Comparing Covid-19 signs in both neighbourhoods

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Belgium, both areas we examined were spaces in which few residential signs were displayed. This changed drastically due to Covid-19, as evidenced in the examples discussed in the previous sections, which illustrate the emergence of a new affective regime in the public space. When comparing the distribution and design of the Covid-19 signs observed in both neighbourhoods, many similarities were found in spite of the

socio-economically different profiles of the areas, and only clearly differing patterns emerged in terms of the language use, quantity and material emplacement of the signs.

Messages of solidarity, gratitude and support emerged in and throughout both neighbourhoods, albeit to varying degrees. Many more bears were encountered in the Wondelgem/Mariakerke area, as well as overall more affective Covid-19 signs. This lower frequency of signs could be because other forms of solidarity and collectivity exist in closer-knitted and more densely populated communities in which the public space and LL do not necessarily play a central role. Pre-printed posters and handwritten or self-made signs occurred in both neighbourhoods and no stark differences between the multimodal or material design of signs were observed. The languages used to convey the Covid-19-related message, however, showed different practices: the LL in Wondelgem/Mariakerke was pre-dominantly Dutch-only (with the exception of some short phrases in French and English); the Covid-19 signs displayed throughout the Brugse Poort were comparatively more diverse and multilingual, in line with the neighbourhood's demographics. Such multilingual signs included signs of support and solidarity (cf. the phrase "thank you" in Dutch, French and Turkish in Figure 2) and directive signage that informed people about the rules to follow when shopping. Interestingly, the multilingual signs we encountered were made by inhabitants, the government and shop-owners. For example, Figure 14 shows informational signs displayed by a shop owner in the Brugse Poort: the sign on the top left is a printer poster in English based on WHO recommendations and authored by the Arabic-speaking news broadcast Aljazeera; the sign on the top right is a multilingual sign on which the phrase "face mask is available" is rendered in English, Dutch, French, Turkish and Arabic. In terms of code preference, the design of the poster combines the image of a face mask with the English phrase displayed more prominently than the other languages. The signs displayed lower in the window are produced and made available for public use by the Flemish Agency for Integration and the Flemish Agency for Health. The former sign provides an update on the governmental Covid-19 measures for the period March 18 – April, 5th in Dutch and English, while the latter is constructed in Dutch only. The local government of Ghent also made multilingual posters available for shop owners in multiple languages to inform local inhabitants of the safety precautions and regulations to be followed. In each case, and in line with Belgian language policy regulations, these posters were bilingual with Dutch as the source language and a translation in a foreign language displayed next to Dutch. Several of such signs were observed on the main commercial street of the Brugse Poort (see e.g. Figure

15). What these examples illustrate is not only the multilingual nature of the Brugse Poort, but also that during the Covid-19 crisis local governments undertook initiatives to disseminate information in multiple languages so as to reach as many people as possible.



Figure 14. Official Covid-19 information on what is allowed and not allowed (by the City of Ghent)



Figure 15. Official Covid-19 information on what is allowed and not allowed (by the City of Ghent)

The second and most pronounced difference observed pertained to the spatial environments of the two areas as tied to their socio-economic profile, and the role this played in the emplacement strategies of signs. In the Brugse Poort, which is a more downscale neighbourhood predominantly made up of row houses, bears, sheets and other printed signs were displayed directly from and behind windows or in window stills, which were in direct view of any passers-by or neighbours on the street. This was different in the Wondelgem/Mariakerke area, where villas and houses are designed to be much more shielded off from public visibility, resulting in a bigger physical distance that needs to be crossed between the house and the passers-by on the street to enable communication with neighbours or passers-by through signs. As a result of this, local inhabitants of this area came up with creative ways to bridge that physical distance. Examples are shown in Figure 12, where we see a hedge shielding off a house from public view that was appropriated as the backdrop of a very large white sheet on which the hashtag “#samentegencorona” (translation: #togetheragainstcorona) was written in Dutch. Other examples are shown in Figure 16, where big bears were positioned further away from the residence, right next to the street and attached to any object available. These examples of creative physical emplacement show how signs and objects served a strong connecting function to communicate with people in the lockdown period and how this was experienced and deployed differently in the two areas.



Figure 16. Spatially creative ways to communicate with neighbours in Wondelgem/Mariakerke

5. Concluding remarks

The display of signs is a fundamentally social phenomenon that people deploy creatively to convey meaning and establish connection with the readers of the signs. It therefore should come as no surprise that during the Covid-19 lockdown in Belgium, when people were confined to their homes and severely limited in the kinds of social contacts characteristic of normal daily life, they resorted to the public space of their residences to express their emotional stance and their feelings of support and solidarity. Indeed, it is precisely in these residential spaces that we have observed the re-functionalisation and appropriation of the linguistic landscape and the emergence of a new temporary “affective regime” (Wee 2016) for Covid-19 signs.

We observed that in times of lockdown and social distancing, the LL became appropriated for communication between inhabitants and the government and operationalised as a tool to serve communicative functions such as the conveying of solidarity, gratitude, support and collective belonging. Specifically residential areas became the backdrop of both organised and spontaneous, as well as hand-made and pre-fabricated semiotic interventions in multiple languages and materials, with multiple goals and messages. As part of the new affective regime that operationalised and appropriated the public space as a site of affective expressions during the Covid-19 lockdown, the examples of the signs discussed in this article in fact constituted a social practice as they contributed to the discursive construction of a community affected collectively by the same crisis. Indeed, the public space clearly offered residents new potential avenues and ways to communicate and express collective well-wishing values and feelings.

Similar to previous studies on the re-functionalising appropriation of the public space in a times of crisis (Zeevi and Dubiner 2016; Kailuweit and Quitana 2020), such displays turn private hardships into a public one and construct an experience shared by the community as a whole. However, in the case of the Covid-19 signs discussed in this article, the reactions to the distressing events did not take the form of signs expressing mourning or protest, but instead carried affective messages of support, encouragement, gratitude and solidarity. Interestingly, this practice occurred in residential areas mostly, where prior to the Covid-19 pandemic signs displayed by inhabitants were more of an exception, instead of the rule. As such, our analysis of this phenomenon contributes to understanding the many forms affective appropriations of the LL can take under circumstances of crisis. In doing so, we have attempted to document and capture a creative and affective phenomenon which only existed

in the public space for a limited period of time and have focused on how, under Covid-19 circumstances, the LL of two residential areas in Ghent became a canvas for support and solidarity.

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