1 Introduction: New Sociolinguistic Landscapes

These days, sociolinguists do not just walk around the world carrying field notebooks and sound recording equipment; they also carry digital photo cameras with which they take snapshots of what has, in the meantime, become known as 'linguistic landscapes'. Such landscapes capture the presence of publicly visible bits of written language: billboards, road and safety signs, shop signs, graffiti and all sorts of other inscriptions in the public space, both professionally produced and grassroots. The locus where such landscapes are being documented is usually the late-modern, globalized city: a densely multilingual environment in which publicly visible written language documents the presence of a wide variety of (linguistically identifiable) groups of people (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Barni, 2008; Barni & Bagna, 2008; Barni & Extra, 2008; Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006; Coupland & Garrett, 2010; Gorter, 2006; Jaworski, 2010; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lin, 2009; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Excursions into less urban and more peri-urban or rural spaces are rare, even though they occur and yield stimulating results (e.g. Juffermans, 2010; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009; Wang, 2013; Juffermans also provides a broad spectre of signs in his analysis of The Gambia). In just about a decade, linguistic landscape studies (henceforth LLS) have gained their place on the shelves of the sociolinguistics workshop.

I welcome this development for several reasons. The first and most immediate reason is the sheer potential offered by LLS. This potential is *descriptive* as well as *analytical*. In descriptive terms, LLS considerably expand the range of sociolinguistic description from, typically, (groups of) speakers to *spaces*, the physical spaces in which such speakers dwell and in which they pick up and leave, so to speak, linguistic deposits, 'waste', signposts and roadmaps. Note that older sociolinguistic traditions such as dialectology *also* included space into their object – the typical scholarly product of dialectology

was the dialect-geographical map. But space was a secondary concern in dialectology, as we shall discuss in greater detail below. The spaces of the dialect atlases were empty, unsemiotized spaces onto which speaking people were plotted. In LLS, space *itself* is the central object and concern, and this is an important extension of the traditional scope of sociolinguistics (see Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009).

I will elaborate this descriptive and analytical potential further in what follows; but before that, another important potential of LLS needs to be mentioned. I see LLS as one branch of sociolinguistics that could be of immense interdisciplinary value. The reason is the clear overlap between LLS and disciplines such as social geography, urban studies and the anthropology and sociology of diversity. The overlap is in the terrain covered by LLS: as said, space is now sociolinguistically thematized and examined, and the space covered by LLS is the same as that covered by several other disciplines. We have here an opportunity to show the relevance of sociolinguistic investigation, the ways in which attention to sociolinguistic aspects of space can contribute to better and more precise analyses of social space in general, of space as inhabited and invested by people. And the relevance we can have is sited in the potential of LLS, to which I can now return.

The descriptive potential is indeed quite formidable, for it comes with several quite interesting side effects, of which I shall briefly review some.

- One, LLS can act as a first-line sociolinguistic *diagnostic* of particular areas. It offers the fieldworker a relatively user-friendly toolkit for detecting the major features of sociolinguistic regimes in an area: monolingual or multilingual? And in the case of the latter, which languages are there? From such a quick and user-friendly diagnosis, one can move into more profound investigations into the sociolinguistic regime, and feed those back to the diagnosis. This book hopes to provide an example of that.
- Two, given this diagnostic value, LLS will at the very least protect researchers from major errors – as when an area identified as the research target proves not to offer the multilingualism one had expected to meet there, on the basis of an exploration of published sources or less reliable travelers' accounts. Thus, LLS can be used as an excellent tool for explorative fieldwork and will enhance the realism of research proposals. The potential is thus also practical.
- Three, and more fundamentally, LLS compels sociolinguists to pay more attention to *literacy*, the different forms and shapes of literacy displayed in public spaces. This is blissful, for traditional sociolinguistics can thereby shed some of its historical bias towards spoken language forms and incorporate crucial sociolinguistic views developed in (the at present

rather parallel universe of) literacy studies. The specific place of literacy in sociolinguistic economies has traditionally been downplayed in mainstream textbooks. The unfortunate consequence of this is that important sociolinguistic features that can only, or most persuasively, be read off literacy artifacts have not been incorporated into considerations of the sociolinguistic system. In that sense, sociolinguistics has never really been *comprehensive* in my view.

- Finally, I will also try to show that LLS compel us towards *historicizing* sociolinguistic analysis. The arguments for that will be elaborated in the remainder of the book; I firmly believe that renewed and deepened LLS heralds the end of the dominance of a synchronic (or achronic) perspective in linguistics and sociolinguistics. More, in particular I intend to show how LLS can detect and interpret social change and transformation on several scale-levels, from the very rapid and immediate to the very slow and gradual ones. This could be an important contribution of LLS to other disciplines: we can detect indexes of change long before they become visible in statistics or other large-scale investigations.

The potential of LLS is not just descriptive; it is also analytical. While a 'light' version of LLS can act as a useful tool in the sense outlined above, a higher-octane version of it can do vastly more.

The reason for that is at first sight rather simple. Physical space is also social, cultural and political space: a space that offers, enables, triggers, invites, prescribes, proscribes, polices or enforces certain patterns of social behavior; a space that is never no-man's-land, but always *somebody's* space; a *historical* space, therefore, full of codes, expectations, norms and traditions; and a space of *power* controlled by, as well as controlling, people. We know all of that. Yet, it is not enough to merely exclaim this; it needs to be demonstrated and therefore requires careful and meticulous moves. The move from a physical to a social space (from dialectology to LLS, in other words) and from a synchronic to a historical space is not automatic and self-evident, but is precisely lodged in a deeper analysis of the linguistic landscape as indexing social, cultural and political patterns. The sociolinguistic diagnostic mentioned above can thus become a diagnostic of social, cultural and political *structures* inscribed in the linguistic landscape.

This I see as the greatest potential offered by LLS, and this will be the object of this book. The book has emerged out of an understanding of this fantastic potential, and of an awareness that this potential can only be realized when LLS are analytically deepened and theoretically matured – both points currently representing major weaknesses of the young discipline. I welcome LLS, therefore, also for another reason than the potential it

offers: I welcome the analytical and theoretical challenges it offers us. It represents a genuine opportunity to improve our science. Through work on LLS, I believe we can make the whole of sociolinguistics better, more useful, more comprehensive and more persuasive, and to offer some relevant things to other disciplines in addition. This book aspires to offer some tentative lines into that task.

The range of issues we are required to address is both vast and complex. In what follows I shall engage with some of the major themes that demand attention, and I shall specify my own position in their regard.

Superdiversity

I must open with a sketch of the background for this work – the wider panorama in which we will locate and dissect linguistic landscapes. That wider panorama is a form of social, cultural, economic diversity for which Steven Vertovec coined the term 'superdiversity' – diversity within diversity, a tremendous increase in the texture of diversity in societies such as ours (Vertovec, 2007, 2010). This increase is the effect of two different but obviously connected forces, emerging at the same moment in history and profoundly affecting the ways in which people organize their lives.

The first force is the end of the Cold War. Since the early 1990s, the 'order' in the world has fundamentally changed. This 'order', during the Cold War, was quite clearly defined: people from one camp did not often or easily travel to or interact with people from the other camp; if they did that, it would be under severely conflictual circumstances, as refugee or dissident. The effects of that order included the fact that one would literally never see a car with, e.g. Bulgarian or Romanian license plates on Western European roads. Migration prior to the early 1990s was a well-regulated phenomenon, organized on a cross-national basis in such a way that the profiles of 'migrants' into Western European societies were rather clearly defined and predictable. Migration into Belgium, for instance, would include several waves reflecting agreements between governments about migration. First, people from Italy and other countries north of the Mediterranean would arrive; then people from Morocco and Turkey would be attracted. Migration was labor migration, and very little migration happened in other categories, such as asylum seeking.

The end of the Cold War changed the patterns of human mobility in the world, and one visual feature of that is that nowadays one can observe hundreds of vehicles with Bulgarian, Romanian, Lithuanian, Polish, Czech license plates on almost any highway in Western Europe. Another one would

be the presence of students from the People's Republic of China on almost every university campus in the Western world. The robust boundaries that contained populations were all but erased, and in combination with growing instability in many parts of the world (not least in the former Warsaw Pact countries), massive new migrations were set in motion. Labor migration in the old fashion sense became less prominent; asylum seekers became, from the early 1990s onwards, the single biggest category of immigrants in Europe, and crises in the asylum systems have been endemic for about two decades now. In general, more people from more places migrated into more and different places and for more and different reasons and motives than before (Vertovec, 2010); and the outcome was an escalation of ethnic, social, cultural and economic diversity in societies almost everywhere. Unstable, highly volatile and unpredictable demographic and social patterns evolved, and they were further complicated by the second force behind superdiversity: the internet.

The world went online at more or less exactly the same moment as that of the end of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the internet became a widely available infrastructure, and by the late 1990s Web 2.0 was there, offering a vast and unparalleled expansion of the means for exchanging long-distance information and for developing and maintaining translocal ties (documented early on by, e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 1996; Lash & Urry, 1994). Mobile phones became widespread at approximately the same time, and their effect was to detach possibilities for communication from fixed spaces, like the phone booth or the phone corner in the living room. So from the mid- to late-1990s onwards, communication patterns in the world changed dramatically, and with them the capacity to maintain virtual networks and communities, to circulate, produce and absorb information, and to engage in entirely new forms of social interaction, such as in social media and mass online gaming. The effects on how we lead our social and cultural lives are the object of an exploding literature, and while all sorts of questions can be asked about specific patterns of online conduct, the fact is that the impact of the internet and other communication technologies is fundamental and pervasive (see e.g. Davidson & Goldberg, 2010).

The interaction of these two forces – new and more complex forms of migration, and new and more complex forms of communication and knowledge circulation – has generated a situation in which two questions have become hard to answer: who is the Other? And who are We? The Other is now a category in constant flux, a moving target about whom very little can be presupposed; and as for the We, ourselves, our own lives have become vastly more complex and are now very differently organized, distributed over

online as well as offline sites and involving worlds of knowledge, information and communication that were simply unthinkable two decades ago.

This is superdiversity. It is driven by three keywords: mobility, complexity and unpredictability. The latter is of course a knowledge issue, which pushes us to a perpetual revision and update of what we know about societies. This, I believe, is the paradigmatic impact of superdiversity: it questions the foundations of our knowledge and assumptions about societies, how they operate and function at all levels, from the lowest level of human face-to-face communication all the way up to the highest levels of structure in the world system. Interestingly, language appears to take a privileged place in defining this paradigmatic impact; the reasons for that will be specified below, and the privileged position of language as a tool for detecting features of superdiversity is the reason why I write this book.

Complexity

I have outlined the background against which we will have to operate and set our work in this book. Let us now dig into some of the conceptual tools needed for the work ahead of us. I will of course focus on language in society, but while doing that I will also introduce themes that we share with some of the other disciplines mentioned earlier.

I have for several years tried to address the effects of globalization on various aspects of the study of language in society, and this book can be seen as an extension and deepening of earlier attempts: on discourse and discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005b), on literacy and how to address it (Blommaert, 2008) and on the sociolinguistic study of globalized environments (Blommaert, 2010). The central notion in these earlier attempts was *mobility*: I assumed (and still assume) that thinking about language in society in terms of mobility is a major theoretical effort, for it disrupts a very long tradition in which language, along with other social and cultural features of people, was primarily imagined as relatively fixed in time and space.

Disturbing mobility

A language or language variety was seen as something that 'belonged' to a definable (and thus bounded) 'speech community'; that speech community lived in one place at one time and, consequently, shared an immense amount of contextual knowledge. That is why people understood each other: they knew all the social and cultural diacritics valid in a stable sociolinguistic community and could, thus, infer such contextual knowledge in interactions

with fellow members of that speech community. Roles and expectations were clear and well understood in such contexts – children had respect for elder people and so forth. And people reproduced patterns that were seen as anchored in a timeless tradition – the rules of language usage are what they are, because the rules of society are what they are (for a critique, see Rampton, 1998). Social and linguistic features were members of separate categories, between which stable and linear correlations could be established.

Labov's (1963) study of Martha's Vineyard (not by coincidence an *island*, I believe) can serve as a prototype of such assumptions of fixedness and stability; the work of Joshua Fishman on macro-sociolinguistics equally articulates these assumptions (Fishman, 1972; Fishman & Garcia, 2010; see also Williams, 1992, for a critique).

Gumperz and Hymes (1972), however, quickly destabilized these assumptions, and they did so with one apparently simple theoretical intervention: they defined social and linguistic features not as separate-but-connected, but as *dialectic*, i.e. co-constructive and, hence, *dynamic*. Concretely: the reiteration of specific patterns of language usage – say, the use of 'yes sir' as an answer in a hierarchical speech situation – creates a social structure (hierarchy), which in turn begins to exert a compelling effect on subsequent similar speech situations. It has become a 'rule' or a 'norm' and so becomes an ideologically saturated behavioral expectation; but such 'rules' or 'norms' have no abstract existence, they only have an existence in iterative communicative enactment. People need to perform such ideologically saturated forms of behavior – their behavior must be iterative in that sense – but small deviations from that 'rule' have the capacity to overrule the whole of norm-governed behavior. Saying 'yes sir' with a slow and dragging intonation, for instance, ('yeeees siiiiiiiir') can express irony and so entirely cancel the norm, and even become the beginning of an alternative norm.

The importance of this simple but fundamental change in perspective is massive, for it introduced a dimension of contingency and complexity into sociolinguistics that defied the static correlational orthodoxies. Deviations from norms, for instance, can now be the effect of a whole range of factors, and it is impossible to make an a priori choice for any of them. The dragging intonation in our example above can be the result of intentional subversion; but it can also be the effect of degrees of 'membership' in speech communities – whether or not one 'fully' knows the rules of the sociolinguistic game. So, simple correlations do not work anymore, they need to be established by means of ethnographic examination. In my work, this issue of 'full membership' and 'full knowledge' – an issue of inequality – has consistently figured as one of the big questions. And I realized that mobility in the context of globalization and superdiversity led to more and more cases and situations

in which 'full membership' and 'full knowledge' were simply not there; there were, to put it simply, way too many exceptions to the rule to leave the rule itself unchallenged.

Mobility, for me and many others then, has three major methodological effects: (a) it creates a degree of unpredictability in what we observe; (b) we can only solve this unpredictability by close ethnographic inspection of the minutiae of what happens in communication; and (c) by keeping in mind the intrinsic limitations of our current methodological and theoretical vocabulary – thus, by accepting the need for new images, metaphors and notions to cover adequately what we observe. The challenge of mobility is paradigmatic, not superficial (cf also Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Jørgensen *et al.*, 2011; Møller & Jørgensen, 2011; Pennycook, 2010, 2012; Rampton, 2006; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009; Weber & Horner, 2012).

The paradigmatic nature of the challenge is hard to escape when one addresses the many new forms of multilingual communicative behavior that seem to characterize the present world, and for which scholars have developed terms such as 'languaging', 'polylanguaging', 'crossing', 'metrolingualism', 'transidomatic practices' and so forth (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, provide a survey). In superdiverse environments (both online and offline), people appear to take any linguistic and communicative resource available to them – a broad range, typically, in superdiverse contexts – and blend them into hugely complex linguistic and semiotic forms. Old and established terms such as 'codeswitching', and indeed even 'multilingualism', appear to rapidly exhaust the limits of their descriptive and explanatory power in the face of such highly complex 'blends' (cf Backus, 2012; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Sharma & Rampton, 2011). And not only that: the question where the 'stuff' that goes into the blend comes from, how it has been acquired, and what kind of 'competence' it represents, is equally difficult to answer. Contemporary repertoires are tremendously complex, dynamic and unstable, and *not* predicated on the forms of knowledge-of-language one customarily assumes, since Chomsky, with regard to language (Blommaert & Backus, 2012).

Superdiversity, thus, seems to add layer upon layer of complexity to sociolinguistic issues. Not much of what we were accustomed to methodologically and theoretically seems to fit the dense and highly unstable forms of hybridity and multimodality we encounter in fieldwork data nowadays. Patching up will not solve the problem; fundamental rethinking is required.

Complexity: Theory as inspiration

In the mid-1980s, I keenly devoured popularizing books on relativity theory, quantum physics and chaos theory. Two books stood out as highlights

in reading: Waddington's (1977) *Tools for Thought* about complex systems, and, especially, Prigogine and Stengers' (1984) classic *Order out of Chaos*. The fact that the latter book was written by two fellow Belgians, one a Nobel Prize winner and the other a distinguished philosopher, no doubt contributed to the eagerness with which I read and discussed their book. Looking back, I have severely underestimated the depth of the effect of these books on my view of things.

Both books introduced (at the time) entirely new ways of thinking about nature, the universe and society; and both books emphasized the crucial role of (and perpetual need for!) fantasy and imagination, 'the conceptual creativeness of scientific activity' (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984: 18). When certain theories or methods do not work, one option is to disqualify the data that brought the theoretical machinery to a standstill. Another one, of course, and the one advocated by Prigogine and Stengers (1984) as well as by Waddington (1977), is to understand this failure as owing to an as yet unperceived and thus unknown fundamental feature of reality, and theoretical and methodological innovation is needed in order to identify, know and understand that feature. I liked that idea.

The books introduced a world of complex systems: systems that were open and unfinished, in and on which several apparently unrelated forces operated simultaneously but without being centrally controlled or planned, so to speak. In such systems, change was endemic and perpetual, because of two different dynamics: interaction with other systems (an external factor), and intra-system dynamics and change affected by such exchanges with others, but also operating autonomously (an internal factor). Consequently, no two interactions between systems were identical, because the different systems would have changed by the time they entered into the next ('identical') interaction. Repeating a process never makes it identical to the first one, since repetition itself is a factor of change. The authors also stressed the importance of contingency and accident – the 'stochastic' side of nature. General patterns can be disrupted by infinitely small deviations – things that would belong to statistical 'error margins' can be more crucial in understanding change than large 'average' patterns. And they emphasized the non-unified character of almost any system, the fact that any system can and does contain forces and counterforces, dominant forces and 'rebellious' ones.

Particularly inspiring, of course, was the conclusion that chaos is not an absence of order but a *specific form of order*, characterized, intriguingly, by the increased interaction, interdependence and hence *coherence* between different parts of a system. And the assumption that such general chaotic patterns can be found at every scale level – authors usually distinguish the microscopic world from the macroscopic one – was both challenging and productive as

well. Finally, but more speculatively, the notion of entropy can be useful to keep in mind: systems inevitably develop entropy, a loss of the energy that characterizes their non-equilibrium state, and tend to develop towards uniformity. Their internal pattern of change, in other words, tends towards homogeneity and the reduction of the intense energy of diversity.

Those ideas are decades old by now, and many of them have become common sense. But not, I observe with regret, in sociolinguistics and many other branches of the human and social sciences, nor in public policy. They have more influence and are much better understood in New Age movements than in the EU Commission or in any department of sociolinguistics, and this is a pity.[1] In my own work, they were often a *basso continuo*, a presence below-the-radar rarely spelled out explicitly; perhaps it is time now to do so.

But before I do, an important qualification must be made. I am not, and have no intention, of becoming an 'expert' in what is now called chaos theory or complexity theory. And I will not 'use' or 'apply' chaos theory to sociolinguistic phenomena; whoever intends to read this book as a chaos-theoretical sociolinguistic study should abandon that attempt right now. I use chaos theory as a *source of inspiration*, a reservoir of alternative images and metaphors that can help me on my way to re-imagining sociolinguistic phenomena – not a fixed and closed doctrine that I must follow in order to do my work well. Several perversions of chaos theory will consequently pollute my approach; I am aware of them and they are *needed*. I use complexity as a *perspective*, not as a compulsory vocabulary or theoretical template. It offers me a *freedom to imagine*, not an obligation to submit.

Complex sociolinguistics

In earlier work, I developed several notions that could be profitably recycled, and could gain clarity, by being put in a more coherent complexity perspective. Let me summarize and review them; I will do that in the form of a series of theoretical statements that will inform the remainder of the book.

(1) A sociolinguistic system is a *complex system* characterized by internal and external forces of perpetual change, operating simultaneously and in unpredictable mutual relationships. It is, therefore, always dynamic, never finished, never bounded, and never completely and definitively describable either. By the time we have finished our description, the system will have changed. As for the notion of 'sociolinguistic system', it simply stands for any set of systemic – regular, recurrent, nonrandom – interactions between sociolinguistic objects at any level of social structure.

(2) Sociolinguistic systems are *not unified* either. In earlier work, I used the notion of *polycentricity* to identify the fragmentation and the interactions between fragments of a sociolinguistic system. A sociolinguistic system is always a 'system of systems', characterized by different *scale levels* – the individual is a system, his/her peer group is one, his/her age category another and so on. We move from the smallest 'microscopic' or 'nano-sociolinguistic' level (Parkin, 2013), to the highest 'macroscopic' scale level. Centers in a polycentric system typically occupy specific scale levels and operate as foci of *normativity*, that is, of ordered indexicalities (Silverstein, 2003; Blommaert, 2005b). The norms valid in a small peer group are different from those operating on the same individuals in a school context, for instance.

(3) Sociolinguistic systems are characterized by *mobility*: in the constant interaction within and between systems, elements move across centers and scale levels. In such forms of mobility, the characteristics of the elements change: language varieties that have a high value here, can lose that value easily by moving into another 'field of force', so to speak – another sociolinguistic system. Concretely, an accent in English that bears middle-class prestige in Nairobi can be turned into a stigmatized immigrant accent in London (cf Blommaert, 2010).

(4) The reason for such changes is *historical*: the value and function of particular aspects of a sociolinguistic system are the outcome of historical processes of becoming. At the lowest level of language, word meanings are 'conventional', that is 'historically entrenched as meaning x or y'. Historicity creates recognizability, grounded in indexical attributions: I hear x, and I recognize it as conventionally and indexically meaning y. This also counts for higher-order levels such as genres, styles, discourse traditions and other forms of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Blommaert, 2005b; Agha, 2007).

(5) In a complex system, we will encounter *different historicities* and different *speeds of change* in interaction with each other, collapsing in synchronic moments of occurrence. Long histories – the kind of history that shaped 'English', for instance – are blended with shorter histories, such as the one that produced HipHop jargon, for instance. I called this 'layered simultaneity' in earlier work (Blommaert, 2005b: 126): the fact that in communication, resources are used that have fundamentally different historicities and therefore fundamentally different indexical loads. The process of lumping them together, and so eliding the different historicities inscribed in them, I called 'synchronization'. Every synchronic act of communication is a moment in which we synchronize materials that each carry very different historical indexicalities, an effect of the intrinsic polycentricity that characterizes sociolinguistic systems.

(6) I made the previous statement years ago as a general typification of discourse, from individual utterance to text and discourse complex. I am now ready to make the same statement with respect to larger units as well, as a typification of entire zones of communication and of communicative systems in general. One of the reasons is that I am now, perhaps too boldly, inclined to accept *fractal recursivity* as a rule: the fact that phenomena occurring on one scale level also resonate at different scale levels (Irvine & Gal, 2000). The intrinsic hybridity of utterances (something, of course, introduced by Bakhtin a long time ago) is an effect of interactions within a much larger polycentric system.
(7) The synchronization mentioned earlier is an act of interpretation in which the different historical layers of meaning are folded into one 'synchronic' set of meanings. This is a reduction of complexity, and every form of interpretation can thus be seen as grounded in a reduction of the complex layers of meaning contained in utterances and events – a form of *entropy*, in a sense. People appear to have a very strong tendency to avoid or reduce complexity, and popular 'monoglot' language ideologies (Silverstein, 1996), as well as 'homogeneistic' language and culture policies (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998), can exemplify this tendency. While the default tendencies of the system are towards entropy – uniformity, standardization, homogenization – the perpetual 'chaotic' dynamics of the system prevent this finite state. In sociolinguistic systems, we are likely to always encounter tensions between tendencies towards uniformity and tendencies towards heterogeneity. In fact, this tension may characterize much of contemporary social and cultural life (see Blommaert & Varis, 2012).
(8) In line with the previous remarks, change at one level also creates effects at other levels. Every instance of change is at least potentially *systemic*, since changes in one segment of the system have repercussions on other segments of that system. A simple example is the way in which parents can be influenced by their teenage children's internet gaming jargon and effectively adopt it in their own speech, even when these parents themselves never performed any online gaming in their lives. A change in one segment (the teenager child) affects other segments (his/her parents), and is provoked by higher-scale features (the jargon of online gaming communities). Similarly, in an argument I developed in Blommaert (2008), the generalized spread of keyboard literacy in certain parts of the world devalues longhand writing – the default form of literacy in less prosperous (segments of) societies.
(9) The latter remark has a methodological consequence. The loci of macroscopic change can be microscopic and unpredictable; large scale change

can be triggered by individual contingencies or recurrences of seemingly insignificant deviations. A jurisprudence-driven legal system is a good illustration: a single highly contingent ruling by a judge can change the whole system of legislation on related issues. This means that microscopic and detailed investigation of cases – ethnography, in other words – is perhaps the most immediately useful methodology for investigating systemic sociolinguistic aspects (cf also Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Rampton, 2006). The precise *direction* of change is unpredictable as well because of the unpredictability of the other factors. We know that systems change irreversibly – we know, thus, that there is a *vector* of change – but what exactly the outcome of change will be is hard to determine. We can *believe* in a certain direction of change; but we will not necessarily see it happen. The history of language planning across the globe is replete with unexpected (and often unwelcome and unhappy) outcomes. Nonlinear effects are frequent and important.

(10) In view of all this, the task of analysis is not to reduce complexity – to reiterate, in other words, the synchronization of everyday understanding – but to demonstrate complexity, to unfold the complex and multifiliar features and their various different origins that are contained in synchronized moments of understanding. Recognizing that the synchrony of linguistics and sociolinguistics (the so-called 'Saussurean synchrony') is, in actual fact, an ideologically plied habit of synchronization, evidently destroys that synchrony.

I realize that all of these points sound rather abstract and perhaps daunting; I can reassure my readers, however, that they merely summarize insights repeatedly established in what amounts to a tower of sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological literature by now. I must also remind the reader once more that the list of points is *not* a complexity theory of sociolinguistics; it is merely a list of theoretical assumptions that I will use throughout this book, and which perhaps could be applied elsewhere as well. The terms in which I have couched my points are merely there because they enable me to imagine the sociolinguistics of superdiversity as organized on an entirely different footing from that which characterized the Fishmanian and Labovian sociolinguistic world. In fact, several of the points flatly contradict some of the most common assumptions in the study of language in society – the boundedness of speech communities, the stability, linearity and even predictable nature of sociolinguistic variation; the linear nature of linguistic and sociolinguistic evolution; the autonomy and boundedness of language itself, and so forth (cf Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, for a discussion). They have now been replaced by a default image of openness,

dynamics, multifiliar and nonlinear development, unpredictability – what used to be considered deviant and abnormal has become, in this perspective, normal.

If superdiversity offers us a paradigmatic challenge, it is because we now see that the fundamental features of reality have changed; our imagery of such a reality needs to be adjusted accordingly. The price we have to pay for that is the cosy familiarity of a habituated worldview, and the clarity and user-friendliness of the paradigmatic terms in which that worldview was translated.

Chronicles of Complexity

I have outlined the conditions of superdiversity in which I will situate my work; and I have sketched my perspective on sociolinguistic complexity, defining the theoretical parameters within which I intend to work. Let me now turn to the story to be told in this book.

The central argument in this book is that linguistic landscaping research can be useful in illuminating and explaining the complex structures of superdiverse sociolinguistic systems. LLS can, thus, be turned into a tool for dissecting the various forms of sociolinguistic complexity that characterize our contemporary societies. But there are conditions that need to be met before LLS can do that.

In line with the theoretical and methodological principles given in the previous section, LLS needs to be brought within the orbit of ethnography. Just like an ethnography of face-to-face interaction, LLS needs to become the detailed study of situated signs-in-public-space, aimed at identifying the fine fabric of their structure and function in constant interaction with several layers of context (see e.g. Rampton, 2011; Hymes, 1972, provides an early source of inspiration here). The various historical layers encapsulated in signs need to be unpacked, and their precise role in the semiotization of space needs to be established. If we claim that it is through semiotic activity that physical space is turned into social, cultural and political space, we need to understand how exactly these processes of semiotization operate.

Chapters 2 and 3 will address crucial aspects of an ethnographic theory of linguistic landscapes, drawing inspiration from the work of Ron and Suzie Scollon and Gunther Kress. Chapter 2, an essay called 'Historical bodies and historical space', starts from the problem of synchronic 'snapshot' analysis, and addresses the ways in which semiotic activity – the use of signs – provides a fundamental historical dimension to space, to which

complexes of 'recognizability' can be attached. Signs turn spaces into specific loci filled with expectations as to codes of conduct, meaning/making practices and forms of interpretation. And the use of such semiotized spaces – by means of processes of informal learning called 'enskilment' – shows how a historicized space also turns bodies into historicized actors-in-space. This theme is taken further in Chapter 3, 'Semiotic and spatial scope', where the specific functions of signs in semiotized space are being discussed. We will see that signs demarcate spaces, cutting them up in precisely circumscribed zones in which identities are being defined and enacted, forms of authority can be exerted, ownership and entitlement can be articulated – a complex range of social, cultural and political effects results from the semiotization of space.

These two chapters shape some basic understandings about what signs do in space, how space becomes a non-neutral (even agentive) zone in which *specific* and *ordered* identities, actions and meanings can be generated. The general drift of my argument is to see semiotized space as a material force in social, cultural and political life, something we ourselves have shaped as a meaningful system-of-meanings (a sociolinguistic system in other words) and that never stops acting as a compelling force on our everyday conduct. Two major insights should be culled from these chapters: that public space can be seen as a sociolinguistic system of a particular scale level – a set of nonrandom interactions between sociolinguistic objects – and that detecting the features of that system requires detailed attention to both the microscopic characteristics of single signs and the systemic relationships between signs. These two insights are fundamental, and they will underlie the next steps I shall take in this book.

These next steps consist of a detailed analysis of one particular space: my own neighborhood in inner-city Berchem (Belgium). In the Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I intend to provide a deep study of this neighborhood, using the kind of LLS developed in the earlier chapters. The neighborhood has become distinctly superdiverse; it is an area where, over the past decades, several layers of migration have resulted in an extremely multilingual and multicultural environment, with a very high level of instability. Groups that are present today can be gone tomorrow; premises serving as a lingerie shop can be turned into an Evangelical church in a matter of weeks. It is a prime illustration of the complexity characterizing superdiversity, even though this work of illustration is cumbersome and demanding.

The tactics I shall use in my attempt to describe and analyze the complexity of my superdiverse neighborhood revolve around a mixture of two methodological approaches: linguistic landscaping and longitudinal ethnographic observation. I have lived in this neighborhood for close to 20 years

now, and I have been a direct witness to almost all of the transitions in the looks, structure and composition of the area over that period. Yet, a deep understanding of these processes of change is not something that evolves simply by 'being there'; most of my neighbors never noticed many of the specific developments and changes towards superdiversity I will describe here, and many of them would be surprised to read some of the stories told here.

This is where linguistic landscaping comes in. I have, since 2007, been collecting extensive corpora of linguistic landscaping material in my neighborhood. They have become a kind of longitudinal 'knowledge archive' supporting and scaffolding my observations (see Blommaert & Dong, 2010, for methodological explanations of this point). Combining my observations with the corpus of linguistic landscape data continually reveals that the signs in my neighborhood provide a far superior and more accurate diagnostic of changes and transformations in the neighborhood, compared with field notes or even interviews (let alone statistical surveys and other superficial forms of inquiry). The close analysis of the visual data can be fed into the longitudinal ethnographic observations, and vice versa, in a way that delivers a sharply articulated image of social processes over a span of time, identifying participants, their mutual forms of dependence and interaction, power differences, stages in processes of becoming and change, and so on. We can see the fine fabric of social processes, and their full complexity, by combining ethnographic observations with linguistic landscape data, and this book can be read as an elaborate argument in favor of such a methodological mix. LLS enriches ethnographic fieldwork, while ethnographic observations enrich LLS and bring out its full descriptive and explanatory potential. In such an integrated exercise, signs in public space document complexity – they are visual items that tell the story of the space in which they can be found, and clarify its structure.

This descriptive and explanatory potential resides in points made in Chapters 2 and 3: the fact that the semiotization of space turns space into a social, cultural and political habitat in which 'enskilled' people co-construct and perpetually enact the 'order' semiotically inscribed in that space. Thus, analytically, we can use a richly contextualized, ethnographically interpreted linguistic landscape as a synchronic and descriptive diagnostic of the complexities of the sociolinguistic system it circumscribes.

This synchronic-descriptive diagnostic will be the topic of Chapter 4, 'Signs, practices, people'. I will first give a brief contextual narrative on the neighborhood, and then engage in a 'cataloguing' exercise of the different users of space, the various kinds of signs we can find there, the activities and

forms of organization we can read from such signs. I will start from the simplest aspect of traditional linguistic landscaping studies: counting languages, but work my way into more complex questions and more layered interpretations of signs, in line with the theoretical and methodological remarks made in Chapters 2 and 3.

We will quickly notice, however, that a purely synchronic study is impossible, for two reasons. One, a theoretical reason: every sign inevitably points towards its conditions of origins; in other words, we can 'read backwards' from signs into their histories of production – their sociolinguistic, semiotic and sociological conditions of origin. Every sign is also proleptic, it points forward to its potential uptake; investigating signs therefore makes it impossible to avoid an 'arrow of time' as Prigogine and Stengers (1984) called it. Two, an empirical reason: the diversity of signs in our synchronic snapshot already suggested historical layering in the linguistic landscape. The actual material shape of signs tells us that some are older than others, and that some are produced by established and self-confident communities, while others document the presence of recently arrived and weakly organized communities. Thus, the step towards historical interpretation is inevitable, and Chapter 5 addresses 'Change and transformation' in my neighborhood.

The neighborhood can now be seen as perpetually in motion, with layers upon layers of historically conditioned activity taking place, different speeds of change interacting and with anachronisms documenting the unfinished nature of certain transformations. In the end, the consolidated picture of the neighborhood is that of a non-unified, yet cohesive complex sociolinguistic system in which different forms of change occur simultaneously, at odds with the widespread public image of the neighborhood as simply 'deteriorating'. The fragmented and multifiliar nature of the neighborhood can be seen as a form of order, a complex of infrastructures for superdiversity held together by conviviality.

One of the conspicuous infrastructures for superdiversity in the neighborhood is the very numerous places of worship in the neighborhood – a feature that has spectacularly grown over the past handful of years. Chapter 6, 'The Vatican of the diaspora' zooms in on the role and function of churches in the neighborhood. In this chapter, the two methodological movements represented in Chapters 4 and 5 – a synchronic and a historical one – are integrated, and we follow the genesis and development of churches in the neighborhood through the kinds of signage they use and used. We can see how churches developed from largely 'ethnic' places of worship into open and ecumenical ones, and how such local phenomena display complex ties with other scale levels: some of the churches attract followers from a

very wide area and operate as branches of fully globalized religious corporations.

Chapter 6 concludes the exploration of my neighborhood, and what remains to be done in my concluding Chapter 7 is to pull the various lines of the argument together and to reflect on some wider theoretical issues – the end of synchrony being the object on which I enjoy speculating most – as well as to offer a reappraisal of the potential relevance of LLS for adjacent disciplines.

The first thing I need to do, however, is to briefly introduce the terrain on which I shall work: my own neighborhood.

Introducing Berchem

Close to two decades ago, I moved with my family into Oud-Berchem, an inner-city neighborhood in the south-eastern part of Antwerp, part of the district of Berchem. Antwerp is located in the north of Belgium, in the part known as Flanders. Tourists may know it as the town where Rubens lived and worked, and as one of the world's biggest centers of the diamond trade; they may have admired its extraordinary cathedral and, afterwards, the rich choice of exquisite beers consumed in one of the many cosy cafés in the city.

By Belgian standards, Antwerp is a big and cosmopolitan city with about half a million inhabitants. Economically, it is a powerhouse. The Antwerp harbor is one of the world's largest ones; it employs many thousands of workers, and many thousands more are employed in the large industrial sites surrounding the harbor; trucks to and from the harbor perpetually congest the ring road around Antwerp, which is one of Europe's busiest highways. This economic preponderance does not mean that Antwerp is a city of prosperous people. The average income in the districts of Antwerp is lower than the Flemish average, and much lower than that of some of Antwerp's affluent suburbs. Unemployment is higher than the national average, and the harbor and access to other arteries of mobility have made Antwerp into a highly diverse city for centuries.

Antwerp has always counted a very large working class population employed in the harbor and adjacent industries, trade and commerce. It has consequently always counted large working class neighborhoods, and Oud-Berchem is one of those. From a rather village-like peripheral district of Antwerp in the early 20th century, it developed into a densely populated popular neighborhood after the second world war consisting of, mainly, lower-qualified laborers, clustering in the neighborhood surrounding the

Figure 1.1 Map of Berchem
Source: City of Antwerp (public domain)

commercial axis of Statiestraat–Driekoningenstraat. These two joined streets, together about 1.2 kilometers long, connect the large railroad station (hence ‘Statiestraat’, ‘Station Street’) with an arterial road to the southern suburbs, and they still form the center of Oud-Berchem.

From the 1970s onwards, the neighborhood became a home for a large community of labor immigrants, mainly with Turkish origins. Until today, the Statiestraat–Driekoningenstraat area is known and perceived as the Turkish neighborhood of Antwerp. The Turkish immigrants bought property from the, by then, ageing Flemish working class, and the latter moved to the more remote districts of Antwerp where larger houses with gardens could be purchased.

The Turkish immigrants were followed, from the early- to mid-1990s on, by successive waves of immigrants from all over the world, often entering the country through the asylum procedure, and also quite often through clandestine and temporary immigration routes. Oud-Berchem is currently one of the Antwerp districts with the highest concentration of non-European immigrants, with a notable concentration of asylum seekers, and the central axis of the neighborhood, the Statiestraat–Driekoningenstraat, reflects this. Immigrants from all corners of the earth have opened shops, hair salons, cafés and restaurants there, visibly underscoring the superdiverse character of the neighborhood.

Figure 1.2 General view of Statiestraat

At the same time, Oud-Berchem has a higher than average unemployment rate, especially among younger immigrant men, and the average income is lower than the Antwerp average as well. This, too, is visible in the Statiestraat–Driekoningenstraat. The number of vacant commercial premises is high at any time, investments in improving the existing shops are low and older local Flemish people would often lament the disappearance of Flemish-owned commercial enterprise from the street (often called 'the better shops', in contradistinction with the foreign-operated groceries, hair salons, superettes, night shops and internet shops).

In terms of mobility and accessibility, Oud-Berchem offers several important assets. As mentioned, a major commuter railway station offers connections to almost every part of Belgium as well as to The Netherlands. A direct train ride to Brussels takes less than half an hour. The Antwerp ring road connects to major highways to the north (Breda and from there Rotterdam, Utrecht, Amsterdam and the German Ruhrgebiet); south (Brussels, and from there on to the Ardennes, Luxemburg, France and from there to Southern Europe); east (Hasselt, Liège, Eindhoven and from there to Cologne and Düsseldorf); and west (the North Sea coast, Paris, Calais and from there to the UK). It is one of Europe's major switchboards for overland traffic. Oud-Berchem is situated along the single busiest part of the Antwerp ring road,

with exits and entrances within minutes reach from the Statiestraat–Driekoningenstraat. Tram and bus services connect the neighborhood to most other parts of the city.

Owing to these mobility opportunities, as well as to relatively affordable real estate prices, the neighborhood has recently started to attract young, native double-income families, often highly qualified and politically left-of-center. These recent and more affluent Belgian immigrants have purchased the larger middle-class houses in the area, and they have brought along their mostly young children. This bohemian segment of the population has generated a demand for cultural hubs, satisfied by a couple of local cafés that now present live music, literary and political events, by a celebrity chef who runs a very successful restaurant in the Driekoningenstraat and by a cultural center that stages avant-garde theater and dance.

Thus, we can see a dimension of unplanned gentrification in an area which, other than that, would score quite low in all sorts of socio-economic categories. This gentrification, of course, accelerates and infuses processes of class stratification (and *re*-stratification) in the neighborhood, in which, as we shall see further on, younger and highly educated members the Turkish community play a crucial role. The gentrification of the area has a modest effect on the linguistic landscape too: houses owned by this new Belgian middle-class segment will have posters against the windows expressing left-of-center political concerns, such as mobility and pollution, next to posters announcing 'high-culture' events in the area – world music, theatre and classical music shows.

My family and I have always been active community members in this neighborhood, launching or joining various forms of grassroots activism, participating in neighborhood committees and public hearings, actively involved in the parents' council of the schools, co-organizing a wide range of events and so forth. Most of all, I am someone who walks around a lot and talks to anyone who cares to talk to me. My ethnographic engagement with this neighborhood, therefore, is in its most literal sense longitudinal and participant observation; it is, in fact 'ethnographic monitoring' in the most immediate sense of the term (Hymes, 1980; Van der Aa, 2012; Van der Aa & Blommaert, 2011). It has enabled me to witness and capture both the objective and the subjective features of the area, to participate in processes of change and transformation – and experience such processes, and to maintain an extensive network of contacts and resource people in the neighborhood. The neighborhood has been my learning environment for about two decades now.

I can only introduce this neighborhood in the most general and superficial terms here. A more detailed picture of it will emerge in the chapters to follow. We are now ready to embark on this journey of exploration.

Note

(1) I am being unfair here towards the very interesting attempts made by some people in our field to adapt complexity/chaos theory to linguistic and sociolinguistic phenomena; see e.g. Diane Larsen-Freeman's work on language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). I also see the study of linguistic landscapes in the townships near Cape Town by Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) as an important precursor to some of the arguments developed in this book.