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Semiotic Rural Landscapes and the Performance of Community in Villages:

A Case Study from Low German-Speaking Northern Germany

Abstract

This article analyses the semiotic landscapes of 19 villages in Low German-speaking northern Germany, thus contributing to the growing body of research in the field of semiotic landscapes in rural settings. Drawing from Blokland's (2017) typology of community, it analyses the semiotic landscapes of the villages as material manifestations of communicative practices and performances which create fluid, flexible configurations of community. The analysis reveals that signage in this particular rural context reflects social processes by which individuals and communities have constructed new images of themselves by using elements of local tradition, culture, language, and history. In doing so, they have also carved out a specific approach to tourism for themselves, which is opposed to mass and package tourism.

In disse Artikel geit dat um de Spraak up Schillers, de buten Husen anbrocht worn sünd. De Autor het all Schillers in negentein Logen in Krummhörn, Ostfreesland unnersöcht. Dortau het se Bloklands (2017) Systeem van Gemeenskup brukt. Se unnersöcht dat Gelaat van de Logen as'n Resultaat van soziaale Daden, wat to flexible, sük alltied verannerne Förmen van

Gemeenskup föhren deit. Daarbi kummt herut dat Schillers in disse Kuntrei soziaale

Prozessen reflektern doon un dat de de Dörpslüü naje Biller van sük konstruert heben. Daarto

bruken se Stückjes van de Kultuur, de Spraak (Nedderdütsk), de Historje und de Talen, mit

de se in Ostfreesland upwursn sünd. Up disse Wies warven se ok um een besüner Slag van

Turisten.

Keywords: semiotic landscapes, rural communities, commodification, Low German, tourism

1.Introduction

Research in the field of semiotic landscapes, interested in the "interplay between language, visual discourse, and the spatial practices and dimensions of culture, especially the textual mediation or discursive construction of place" (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010: 1), tends to focus on urban environments, to the extent that some researchers in the field even speak of "cityscapes" when referring to this area of study (e.g., Coulmas, 2009). The present article aims to draw attention to semiotic landscapes outside the urban centres and analyses data collected in 19 villages in northwest Germany, thereby adding to the growing body of studies on linguistic/semiotic landscape research in rural areas.[1]

Most studies examining rural sites in the Global North look at the way in which small languages are represented in the semiotic/linguistic landscapes:[2] Pietikäinen, Lane, Salo, and Laihiala-Kankainen (2011), for example, examine the linguistic landscapes of seven Sami-speaking villages in a border area between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Auer (2009) looks at the Alemannic dialect in the linguistic landscapes of rural southwest Germany; and Daveluy and Ferguson (2009) examine how Inuit languages are used on road signs in northeast Canada. Dunlevy (2012) compares the linguistic landscapes of the main squares of a city and a village in Galicia (Spain) in order to ascertain in which environment Galician, as a minority language, is more represented. Reershemius (2011) focuses on the commodification of Low German in rural linguistic landscapes in northwest Germany. Laitinen (2014), on the other hand, analyses the use of English as an indicator of globalisation in parts of rural and urban Finland. In all of these studies, the rural context is part of the ethnographic descriptions.

An increasing number of studies analyse the semiotic / linguistic landscapes in the Global South. Juffermans and Coppoolse (2012), for example, examine literacy in rural regions of Gambia; and Banda and Jimaima (2015) focus on the linguistic/semiotic landscapes of two rural areas in Zambia. It becomes apparent that "rural" may mean rather different things in the Global South than in the Global North: "The conceptualization of 'rural' in the Zambian context is based on the distance between a given area and the main post office. This is the criterion used for awarding a rural-hardship allowance to government employees in Zambia. Usually, an area situated at a distance exceeding 10 kilometres from the post office is considered rural" (Banda & Jimaima, 2015: 650). The studies also show how elements of the natural rural landscape are used alongside signage for directions as well as compare rural and urban place-making practices.

Why can the region observed for the purpose of this article – a municipality in northern Germany consisting of 19 villages – be defined as "rural"? Although frequently used in day-to-day language, politics, and policy discourses, the terms "urban" and "rural" have been contested in sociology and geography (Cloke, 2006; Harding & Blokland, 2014: 10–12; Woods, 2011: 1–15). In these disciplines, "rural" used to be defined as a functional concept, describing spaces which "are dominated (either currently or recently) by extensive land-uses, notably agriculture and forestry; … contain small, lower order settlements which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and extensive landscape, and which are thought of as rural by most of their residents; … engender a way of life which is characterized by a cohesive identity" (Cloke, 2006: 20).

During the 1980s and 1990s, rurality was questioned as an analytical category (e.g., Hoggart, 1990). From a political-economic point of view, the same national and transnational processes form and transform communities and spaces, and affect cities and countryside

alike, so that the distinction between "urban" and "rural" eventually becomes obsolete. Social constructivist research, however, shows that powerful discourses about "rural" and "urban"– some of which can be traced back more than two thousand years – shape realities and need to be considered as integral parts of analysis.[3] The theoretical framework for analysing semiotic rural landscapes used in this article is Keith Halfacree's model of rural space (Halfacree, 2006). Halfacree's concept is that rural space is at the same time imagined, material, and practised. This approach combines material and discursive aspects which are brought together in the practices of people as groups and individuals, thus creating and shaping both places and communities. Thus, the region observed for the purpose of this study can be called rural because its citizens, visitors, and policy-makers imagine or define it as "rural," all of them contributing their specific ideas to the overall notion. It is also "rural" because particular practices, such as food- and energy-production or tourism, shape the villages and their surrounding landscape, which are interrelated with specific material conditions, such as closeness to the sea or year-round availability of wind to power wind turbines.

Within linguistics, a theoretical conceptualisation of "rural" versus "urban" is still a work in progress. Ever since the 1960s, the focus of the discipline has been on urban centres: the early work of William Labov is often referred to as a contribution to „urban dialectology" (Vandekerckhove 2010: 316). For the emerging discipline of sociolinguistics, the countryside, once the preferred area of investigation for traditional dialectologists in their attempts to record the most ‚authentic' linguistic forms and establish isoglosses, mostly ceased to be of interest. This shift in focus can be seen as the result of dominant discourses on „urban" and „rural" into which linguistic studies are inscribed: "Rurality is ... an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policy makers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals. The rural is therefore a category of thought" (Woods 2011: 9). One of the oldest discourses on rurality is,

for example, the notion of the rural idyll which depicts the rural as stable, peaceful, traditional, simple or 'authentic'. At the same time, the countryside and its inhabitants tend to be portrayed as backward, conservative, boring or uneducated (Bell 2006, Du Puis 2006, Short 2006, Woods 2011, 21-22). Britain (2017) shows how dominant discourses can determine the focus of scholarly interests in the study of language; traditional dialectology, for example, used to rely heavily on informants in rural areas where researchers expected slower processes of social change and an ideological compliance to traditional values and ways of life. Thus, dialectological studies aimed to record linguistic forms which were just about existent but often threatened by extinction (Kamwangamalu & Tovares 2019: 321). Other linguistic processes which may have taken place at the same time in rural areas of investigation were ignored. One of the most striking examples is the disregard of migration in German dialectology after World War II when millions of refugees from the former eastern provinces settled in predominantly rural, Low German-speaking areas. In the process, new linguistic facts were established that did not seem to be of any interest for linguists at the time (Ehlers 2018).

Among the most influential recent sociolinguistic contributions in this area is Pietikäinen, Kelly-Holmes, Jaffe & Coupland (2016). The authors base their theoretical reflections on the changed circumstances of four smaller languages spoken in geographically peripheral areas in Europe: "It has become conventional to think of geographical peripheries as zones that hold on to traditional ways of speaking, contrasting with more affluent, more modern, more linguistically progressive, more urban and more central zones. That is to say that there is a familiar discourse of centre – periphery relations which takes in far more than the immediate issues of linguistic usage, vitality and change, and which naturalises the idea of two opposing ideological clusters through which we can understand sociolinguistic differences:

centre+affluence+authority+dynamism+development *versus*

periphery+poverty+dependency+tradition+conservatism" (Pietikäinen et al. 2016, 27).

The centre-periphery model thus covers notions of rurality without having to go into the details of current debates in rural sociology and human geography. The authors state, however, that "what is at issue here is … the reinterpretation of rural spaces, their associated cultural traditions and their small languages as objects of gaze and consumption" (Pietikäinen et al. 2016, 30). The use of smaller languages is one of many aspects of the complex linguistic arrangements in peripheries / rural spaces. For sociolinguistic inquiry that goes beyond the study of smaller languages and aims to investigate the entirety of linguistic practices in the peripheries / rural spaces, future theoretical reflections ought to take into account the questions of whether potential material and discursive differences exist, and how they impact on the use of language.

The next question is how to conceptualize the way people live together in a rural environment such as the 19 villages under observation for the purpose of this study. As discussed in the introduction of this special issue, "community" is a concept widely used and debated in sociolinguistics. Within rural studies as part of sociology and human geography, "community" as a concept has been approached in a number of different ways (Liepins 2000a); structural-functional and ethnographic perspectives saw "communities" as discrete and stable entities with observable characteristics and purposes. When these conceptualisations became the focus of criticism, many scholars in the field of rural studies applied what Liepins (2000a) calls a minimalist approach, by mainly avoiding to define what they meant when referring to "community". Others explained "community" as a mental construct: "The 'community' as experienced by its members – does not consist in social structure or in the 'doing of' social behaviour. It inheres, rather in 'the thinking' about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the 'community' as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct" (Cohen 1985, 98). Although "community" appears to be a contested concept in rural studies, scholars such as Day and Murdoch (1993) or Liepins (2000a, 2000b) suggest a

reappraisal of "community" since they see it as a key concept in analysing social space that "has the capacity to contribute to a number of current challenges in rural studies", such as "explorations of power, diversity, counter cultures, deprivation, marginalisation and rapid change" (Liepins 2000a, 24). She proposes a conceptualisation of rural communities which combines material and spatial aspects of the construction of community with practices through which community is performed and reproduced.

Blokland's typology of (urban) community shows how practices and performances bring individuals together to form communities as fluid, flexible cultural configurations. Community as culture "includes a sharing of experiences and is built out of symbols and narratives produced together and shared" (Blokland, 2017: 162). Social ties within communities are categorised by Blokland as bonds, attachments, transactions, and interdependencies. Bonds are defined as affection-based relationships, such as those between family members or friends. Attachments describe affiliations of the individual, as in a football club or a political party. Transactions refer to those social relationships in which participants perform clearly defined roles in specific social settings, for example as sellers or buyers in an economic transaction, or as patients or health professionals in a doctor's surgery. Interdependencies refer to those social connections which are not consciously meaning-bearing but which still exist between individuals, for example between food-producers and customers in a restaurant.

Halfacree's model of rurality and Liepins's and Blokland's approaches to community take social practices as their starting point. Social practices are based on communication and language, to the extent that it is questionable whether they would exist without them.

The study of semiotic landscapes—as material manifestations of practices—can shed light on the processes in which social communicative practices lead to the making of place, thereby

creating social meaning and community. This study applies Blokland's typology of social ties in an urban environment to a rural setting in order to approach the following research questions: How do village dwellers perform community according to the semiotic landscapes they create and in which they live? How do the semiotic landscapes of the villages reflect social and economic change? This case study looks at language and multimodal communication in public space in 19 villages in northwest Germany. The analysis combines qualitative and quantitative methods and is based on a corpus of more than a thousand image tokens collected in 2010 in the municipality of Krummhörn in northwest Germany. After an overview of data collection, the methodological approach of the study, and a brief description of the area under investigation, this article's structure follows Blokland's categories of community, analysing the villages' semiotic landscapes according to transactions (commercial signage), attachments (signage around churches and community organisation hubs), and bonds (signage around private homes).

2.The area under observation

Krummhörn is a municipality consisting of 19 villages, situated on the East Frisian peninsula bordering the Netherlands (Map 1). Originally independent units of administration, the 19 villages were merged into the municipality in 1972. They function as suburbs for the neighbouring towns, where village inhabitants tend to work or go to school, and which form the main hubs of general infrastructure for the region.

Map 1: Krummhörn

Krummhörn comprised a population of 12,200 citizens in 2016, 4.7% fewer than during the period of data collection six years previously. Decreasing populations are one of the challenges faced by many more remote rural communities that are not located adjacent to urban centres (Woods, 2011: 162–199). Over the last five decades, the villages of Krummhörn municipality have changed in ways much like many other rural areas of the Global North (see, e.g., Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2011). The dominance of agricultural production as the main purpose of rural environments is increasingly questioned, and ecological considerations have become more important than they used to be. Small and medium-sized farms are increasingly forced to make room for large agricultural enterprises

("super-productivism"). Tourism has become a new and important part of the local economy in a region that is reinventing itself in order to fit consumer requirements and notions of country life (see, e.g., Reershemius, 2011).

Historically, the region experienced high levels of outward migration; during the 19th century, many East Frisians emigrated to the United States, mainly for economic reasons (Hoogstraat 1997). Immediately after World War II, refugees from former German territories in the east of the crumbling Reich were resettled in the region under observation. Intra-regional mobility at various levels has increased considerably over the last five decades: Young people leave the area for reasons of higher education or better job prospects, and many houses in the historic village centres are bought by newcomers to the region, who are often settling down for their retirement and looking for their own version of the rural idyll. In 2018, 128,891 tourists spent their holidays in Krummhörn,[4] a number slightly higher than the overall registered population of the municipality.

Although the region of East Frisia belongs to the heartland of Low German-speaking northern Germany, it is currently in the process of a language shift towards the dominant Standard German language (see, e.g., Adler, Ehlers, Goltz, Kleene, & Plewnia, 2016). Low German is the English name for Plattdütsch or Platt, as the language is referred to by its speakers. Low German speakers currently number approximately 2.5 million, mainly in northern Germany. The Low German varieties were recognised as an endangered regional language as part of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1999. Speakers of Low German in Krummhörn are bilingual and use Low German alongside Standard German. For most speakers, Low German is a predominantly oral language. Studies and surveys have shown that a majority of Low German speakers feel uncomfortable writing

in Low German (Möller 2008; Reershemius 2002) – despite the existence of a considerable corpus of literature in Low German since medieval times, to which an active literary scene has added ever since. For some time, Low German has been in the process of shift towards German due to an increasing loss of communicative domains and decreasing transmission across generations in the family. Although Low German is in steady decline as a vernacular of day-to-day communication, it has become increasingly popular and more visible in public space in recent years (Reershemius 2011). Low German is often drawn on to establish proximity and closeness in communication and it connects the individual speakers to a concept of place, even if they do not live in the Low German-speaking regions any more. It is used as part of speakers' identity construction, and in addition to communicative functions, it also increasingly serves symbolic or post-vernacular purposes (Reershemius 2009). Low German tends to be associated with discourses of tradition and authenticity, making it subject to commodification processes, for example, in the context of tourism. Low German speakers have created Internet spaces dedicated to their heritage language which more recently have also expanded into the realm of social media where an increase in the use of spontaneously written Low German could be observed (Reershemius 2017).

3. Data and Methodological Approach

The Krummhörn Corpus was built by recording a comprehensive inventory of all signs visible in public space apart from road signs.[5] The resulting 1,294 image tokens were sorted into a database and tagged according to place, discourse type, language, name, information management, semiotic codification, and size (see Table 1). The study follows the methodological approach of *Signs of the Metropolis* (Metropolenzeichen)*,* a project analysing the linguistic landscapes in the Rhine-Ruhr area in Germany, which is based on the geo-semiotic approach to language and communication in public space as introduced by Scollon

and Scollon (2003).[6] The main methodological innovation in the present study is the
introduction of a further discourse type – private discourse – referring to signage and social
communicative practices around private dwellings in the villages under observation. The vast
majority of villagers in the region under observation live in houses of various sizes; only very
few inhabit apartments. The decision to add a further discourse type was data-driven, as many
signs around private houses were not a good fit in the discourse types put forward by Scollon
and Scollon (2003) and the *Signs of the Metropolis* project.

For the analysis, the quantitative evaluation of the corpus is combined with the qualitative,
multimodal examination of representative signs. In addition, this study is based on 18 years
of close participant observation of the region and its social and linguistic developments,
including extensive informal interviews.

Categories	Options
Place	Wall, post, window, bin, telephone booth, lamppost, traffic light, drainage pipe, memorial, fence, bus stop, door, poster, pavement, etc.
Discourse type	Infrastructural, commemorative, commercial, artistic, regulatory, transgressive, private
Language	Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Low German, etc.

Context of agency	Institution, business, homeowner, artist, political party, fire brigade, sports club, unknown, etc.
Material design	Printed, handwritten, sprayed, painted, etc.
Information management	Complete, extended, partly
Semiotic codification	Text, picture, text–picture combination
Size	$-1m^2$, $-10m^2$, $-100m^2$, $>100m^2$

Table 1: Categories for tagging the Krummhörn Corpus

4.Analysis

The first observation to be made is the relative sparsity of signage in public space in the 19 villages. The complete inventory of all signs in the municipality almost equals the overall number of signs recorded in just one inner-city street of Birmingham, England (Reershemius, 2018). The rural environment captured by the Krummhörn Corpus is dominated by commercial discourses (60%), followed by the combination of infrastructural and regulatory discourses (21%). Signage around private homes amounts to 15.3%; transgressive and commemorative discourses are rare (Reershemius in press). The quantitative distribution of languages in the Krummhörn Corpus is 88.3% Standard German, 13.5 % Low German (including hybrid German–Low German forms), and 2.6% English.

4.1 Economic Transactions

The quantitative analysis of the Krummhörn Corpus shows that commercial discourse dominates the semiotic landscapes of the 19 villages under examination (Table 2).
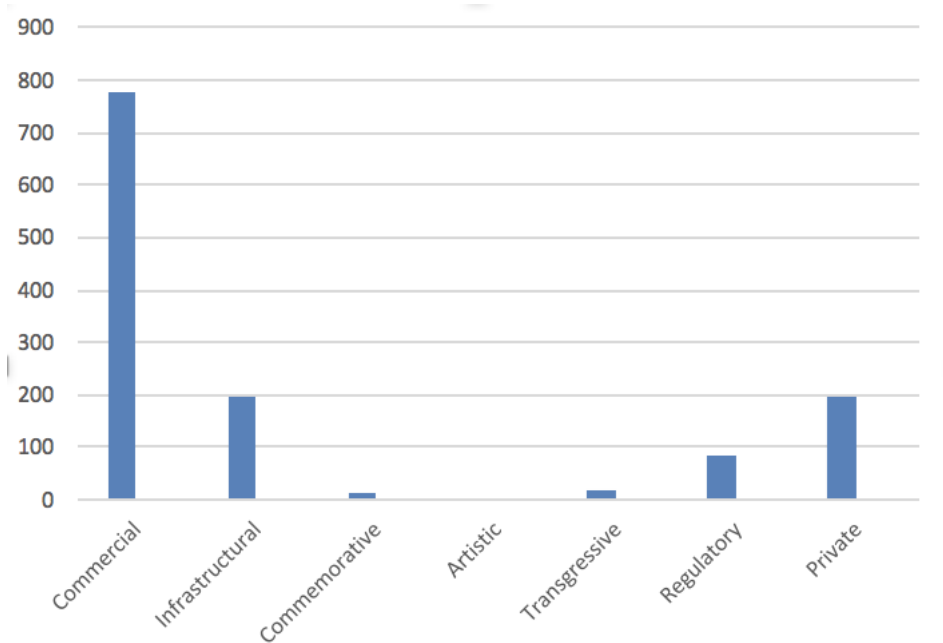
Table 2: Distribution of discourses in the Krummhörn Corpus

This result contrasts with the widely expressed view among Krummhörners that their villages seem to be transforming into residential suburbs that are losing their meaning as socio-economic units and places where people can earn a living. As one elderly villager (82, female) put it, "Da ist ja nichts mehr im Dorf. Kein Laden, keine Post, nicht mal eine Dorfkneipe. Zum Arbeiten muss man anderswo hingehen, zur Schule und zum Arzt auch." ("There is nothing left in the village. No shop, no post office, not even a pub. In order to work, to go to school, or to visit the doctor's surgery, you have to go somewhere else.") The very old still remember times when most children growing up in the village spent their entire life there; they went to the village school where eight year-groups were taught together in one classroom. Later, they normally found employment in the village, either with one of the four or five farms, or with the village's baker, butcher, shoemaker, shopkeeper, or other trades. In the case of Krummhörn, these recollections date back to the 1940s and 1950s; economic and social change first accelerated in the 1960s and is closely linked to the founding of the

Volkswagen factory in the nearby town of Emden in 1964, which currently employs about 10,000 workers.

A closer look at the commercial signage in the Krummhörn Corpus reveals a complex and varied structure of economic activities and transactions. First, there are a few larger independent enterprises, such as the one selling and maintaining agricultural machinery (Image 1, right). Interviews have revealed that this company has its origins in a former village smithy, which was run by the current owner's grandfather. The dominant feature of this sign is the name of the company owner, because in Krummhörn it is the name of this family business that ensures the quality of products and services. The same applies to the bakery, also shown in Image 1 (left); the current owner has transformed his great-grandfather's village bakery into a business with branches in many of the 19 villages of Krummhörn. The sign includes a crest, emphasising the long-standing tradition of the business. It is positioned so that it is visible from the main road and reads, "Kommst du in dieses schöne Dorf hinein – schau doch mal bei BÄCKER BUCHHOLZ rein." ("When you come to this beautiful village – pop in to BAKER BUCHHOLZ.") The somewhat crude rhyme scheme of the slogan closely connects the business with the name and its family tradition as well as the place—the village in which the bakery has done business for more than three generations.

Both enterprises used to serve a single village in the past but now target a wider area of the municipality for customers. Both companies are household names, and many villagers follow their successes and failures with keen interest. Transactions in these two examples involve company owners, employees, and customers (e.g., in the case of the bakery, anyone who buys their bread and cakes). Transactions can occur at different levels: For someone who has lived in the region all their life and participates in the collective narratives of the villages, buying

bread from this particular baker probably means something different than for a tourist who is passing by. But the difference between locals and tourists is not as clear-cut as it may seem: Some villagers have moved there only recently, whereas many tourists come year after year to the same places, talk to villagers, and gain access to the local narratives.

Image 1: Former smithy and bakery

Another level of economic transactions that emerges in the semiotic landscapes of the Krummhörn Corpus is the restaurant and catering trade. Image 2 (lower left) shows the front of a restaurant situated in one of the traditional farmhouse buildings of the region. Its main sign, which reads *Restaurant Lüttje Hörn* ("Restaurant Little Corner"), uses a Low German name and a gothic typeface to indicate tradition and "authenticity" (Reershemius, 2011). This particular restaurant caters mainly to tourists, according to interviews conducted in the village. There seems to be an understanding among villagers of which restaurants and cafes are frequented by them and which mainly cater to tourists. The reasons given by interview partners were that some places offer good value for money whereas others are a rip-off, or that they know the owners of a certain pub, restaurant, or cafe.

Image 2: Restaurant and catering trade

All four signs depicted in Image 2 have in common that they use at least one element of the regional language, Low German: *Dat Huuske*, "The Little House" (upper left), is entirely in Low German; *Hafenkieker – Das urige Bierlokal*, "Harbour Watcher – the rustic beer pub" (upper right), contains the Low German word *kieker* ("watcher"); and *Herzlich Willkommen im "is Teetied,"* "Warm welcome in 'It's Tea Time'" (lower right), puts the Low German name of the cafe in quotation marks. The advertising strategies of the local catering trade thus use the regional language as an indicator of tradition and quaintness, achieving the latter by applying diminutives such as the Low German diminutive suffix *-ke* or adjectives such as *lüttje* ("small"). Similar forms of linguistic commodification of smaller or minority languages

can be observed in many tourist destinations across the world, albeit predominantly in the Global North, in order to create non-threatening cultural "otherness" for tourist consumption (see, e.g., Heller, Pujolar, & Duchêne, 2014; Heller, Jaworski, & Thurlow, 2014; Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2014; Pietikäinen, Kelly-Holmes, Jaffe & Coupland 2016).

Tourism has developed into an important economic sector in the region, and renting holiday accommodations has become a full- or part-time occupation for many villagers. One of the 19 villages can be clearly identified as the epicentre of tourism in Krummhörn, where businesses and private homeowners offer accommodation at all levels. However, signage in public space makes clear that private homeowners are renting holiday accommodation in all of the other 18 villages too (Image 3).

Image 3: Holiday accommodation

Image 3 shows a representative example of signage advertising holiday accommodation by a private homeowner that employs widespread advertising strategies; the name of the house is presented in Low German, *Huus an't Deep* ("House at the Canal"), in a computer-generated font that mimics handwriting. The use of specific typefaces has "typographic meaning"

(Spitzmüller, 2015: 127); it represents a stance taken by a social actor and can be interpreted by other social actors, for example pedestrians who can read a particular typeface as a sign (see also Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015; Stöckl, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2005). In Image 3, for example, the choice of this specific typeface suggests an informal and personal, yet professional approach by the landlord. The house number positioned next to the sign is in Gothic typeface, which is increasingly used in signage across the region in order to create the impression of businesses steeped in tradition and local heritage. Across the area observed for the purpose of this study, signage with Gothic typeface tends to be the most recent. In general, older signs, such as those from the 1950s and 1960s, use fonts other than Gothic. Image 4, for example, shows two signs advertising a village shop, one from the 1950s (left) and a recent one (right). The recent sign uses Gothic typeface and presents itself as the *Dorfmarkt* ("Village market"), whereas the older sign refers to the business it advertises as a *Gemischtwarenhandlung* ("Mixed-goods shop").

Image 4: Commercial sign from the 1950s (left) and from 2010 (right)

The highly individualised sign in Image 3 also shows a drawing of the house itself next to a canal and two windmills. This type of signage performs transactions between villagers and tourists in which landlords claim a space in the region and its heritage by using elements of Low German and by displaying emblematic pictorial elements such as windmills. Many of these signs (22.1%) are individually designed, handwritten, or handcrafted. Possible reasons for these practices may be the desire of sign producers to present themselves or their accommodation as quaint, and/or to convey a specifically personalised approach to hosting and tourism. The region is pitching itself as an alternative to mass tourism and package holidays.

This strategy was also apparent in political debates during the time of data collection; the municipality's council was in the process of negotiation with a property developer over the creation of a large holiday accommodation complex ("Greetland") which would accommodate roughly 1,000 visitors at a time. The local landlords, faced not only with potentially fierce competition but also with a concept of tourism that went against what had emerged as their style, were staging protests in many of the 19 villages. The sign shown in Image 5, positioned at a private homeowner's barn door, reads, "Tourismus mit Stil. Greetland ist zu viel" ("Tourism with style. Greetland is too much"). It is noteworthy that none of the visible manifestations of political discourses and activism at the time of data collection used Low German in their slogans.

Image 5: Greetland protest

Numerous smaller businesses running from private homes also produce self-designed or handcrafted, highly personalised advertising signage (Image 6). Many of these businesses are run as a supplement to the main income of the household, such as a job at the nearby Volkswagen factory, and most of them address local customers primarily. The envisaged customers seem to be people living in the villages, yet the advertising strategies are similar to those identified above for attracting tourists, for example *Klara's Najbakje*, "Klara's Sewing Casket" (upper left), where a seamstress advertises her services with a Low German word on the sign next to her name. The difference here is that *najbakje* is a term that the average Standard German-speaking tourist would struggle to comprehend. Low German on advertising signs directed predominantly at tourists is normally restricted to words easily recognisable for Standard German speakers, such as Low German *huus* ("house"; in Standard German, *Haus*), or its diminutive form *huske*.

Image 6: Small businesses

The quantitative dominance of commercial signs in the Krummhörn Corpus indicates that although the economic structures of the villages have changed considerably within a lifetime, they are far from being just residential suburbs for the regional towns. Compared with fifty years ago, signage in the villages indicates that business transactions of a different kind now dominate. In the past, businesses used to cater to a single village, but now they cover a wider area within the municipality and even beyond. Tourists form a new group of potential customers, and economic transaction is the main setting where villagers and tourists perform community. An analysis of representative signage from the 19 villages shows that sign-makers sell their products positioned in time (e.g., by emphasising tradition and heritage) and space; larger and smaller businesses sell a perceived idea of East Frisian rural life to tourists

and to themselves, for example by applying elements of the regional language or by using emblematic images connected with the region.

4.2 Attachments

According to Blokland (2017), attachments describe affiliations of the individual, as in a football club or a political party. The architecture of the 19 villages observed for this study indicates that various established institutions and organisations are active and draw villagers together in order to perform community. All villages comprise at least one church building; most have their own fire brigade, housed in purpose-built quarters. Some villages have their own sports clubs, including facilities such as football pitches or sports halls. Each village used to have its own village school. Many of the unused school buildings have been claimed by village community organisations, which stage events such as fairs, dances, and barbecues. Signage is clustered around these buildings, as the Krummhörn Corpus shows. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on signage around the churches as an example of an agency that is more "top–down" and around village community organisations as a more "bottom–up" approach to sign-producing (Backhaus, 2007).

Image 7: Church

Signage around the churches is normally produced by the pastor or the council of elders responsible for the parish, and can thus be categorised as top–down agency. Signage around churches in the 19 villages is remarkably similar: It addresses both members of the parish and visitors. The majority of churches in the municipality are historic buildings dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries, and many of them also possess historic organs. These churches have become a tourist attraction, and the churches seem happy to oblige. The sign in Image 7 (lower left) addresses tourists directly: "Liebe Urlauberinnen, liebe Urlauber! Falls Sie die Kirche besichtigen möchten, können Sie den Schlüssel bei unserer Küsterin Frau Tini Reck, Große Lohne 4 (Richtung Dorf, erste Straße links, zweites Haus an der linken Seite, 50 m) ausleihen. Ihre Kirchengemeinde Grimersum." ("Dear Holidaymakers! Should you wish to visit the church, you can borrow the keys from our church warden, Mrs Tini Reck, Große Lohne 4 (on the way to the village, first road left, second house on the left-hand side, 50 m). Yours, Grimersum Parish.") The printed high-gloss poster on the lower right of Image 7 shows pictures of the church's interior and gives an overview of the building's history and main attractions. A similar poster can be found next to each of the historic churches in the municipality; though they mainly address tourists, parish members may have learned a thing

or two when they were first installed. The two signs depicted on the upper left of Image 7 address both locals and visitors by providing information about church services and the history of the building. The picture on the upper right, however, shows a newsletter addressed to members of the parish. It contains information about church services, marriages, christenings, and funerals as well as appeals to donate to charities and invitations to various church-related activities, such as weekly meetings of women in the parish and social get-togethers for children or the elderly. These publicly displayed newsletters, which are also distributed to all households in the parish, indicate that community is practised and performed here, although the overall number of people visiting the Sunday services seems to be in decline, according to some villagers. The parish newsletters tend to be written entirely in Standard German, but some of them have been given a Low German name like the one depicted in Image 7, *Uns Kark* ("Our Church"), thus applying a communicative strategy similar to that found in tourism advertising, though in this case for the purpose of creating group identity among parishioners.

A more bottom–up approach to signage production can be observed around the buildings of former village schools, many of which are now home to the village community organisations that have emerged since the late 1990s. These village initiatives aim to keep the villages clean and pretty and to organise social events such as summer fairs, concerts, and dances. Some of these reclaimed old school buildings can also be hired for family occasions such as birthdays and weddings. The communal activities around these initiatives are inward-facing and not addressed to tourists. Signage around these buildings normally consists of the name which the initiatives have given the old schools, along with typed lists of activities and announcements posted next to the entrance. Image 8 (right) shows that some of the initiatives have decided to use a Low German name, such as *Oll Volksschool* ("Old primary school"), whereas the text on the posters tends to be in Standard German only.

Image 8: Village community organisation

Some of the village community organisations have also commissioned additional signage for their village, which are all designed in the same style (and probably created by the same artist). These greeting posters tend to be positioned centrally and next to the main road. They depict the village's landmarks and historic buildings and include the village's name and a standard German greeting in Gothic typeface. The sign in Image 9 reads, "Hamswehrum lässt grüßen," or "Hamswehrum [the name of the village] says hello."

Image 9: Sign commissioned by village community organisation

The analysis of signs related to communities of practice around attachments thus shows that there are clear parallels between the design strategies of commercial signage predominantly addressing tourists and those signs meant to present the village as a community to the inside and the outside. These processes can be observed in top–down as well as in bottom–up agency, and on industrially produced signage as well as on handcrafted signs.

4.3 Bonds: Celebrations and Conflict

Of all the signage in the Krummhörn Corpus, 15.3% has been posted in the immediate vicinity of private homes, on walls, doors, windows, in the garden, or on the garden fence.

The majority of these signs are handcrafted, and can be bought, for example, at local craft fairs. Greeting signs like the one depicted in Image 10 are normally positioned next to the main entrance and use Standard German (*Willkommen*), English (*Welcome*), or Low German (*Moin*). According to interview partners, these signs function as much as garden ornaments as greeting signs.

Image 10 – Moin moin

The private home seems to enjoy a special status in the villages, which is not only obvious in the way signage is added for various purposes. An analysis of transgressive signage in the 19 villages of Krummhörn has revealed that even anonymous sprayers of graffiti seem to recognise the emotional value of private homes; graffiti was found only on bus shelters or transformers, never around private homes or on public communal buildings such as the church, the sports club, or the fire brigade's quarters (Reershemius, in press).

Image 11: Eighteenth-birthday celebrations

Other signs indicate forms of community performance among neighbours. In the villages observed for the purpose of this study, villagers normally know their neighbours, as interviews have revealed. In some cases, they are aware of their names, their professions, what cars they drive, and how they tend to the garden. In other cases, people have spent considerable parts of their lives together, went to the same schools, worked at the same factory, and so forth. Many villagers are related and have family in one or more of the villages within the municipality. In some cases, relationships go back for generations, as in the case of a legendary feud between two families in one of the villages.

Community, as Blokland (2017) points out, is not always positive. The collective narratives of the villages contain stories about individuals and families, often expressed in statements

about genetic dispositions; members of a certain family tend to be clever, whereas another family is prone to heart disease, and so forth. The level of participation in and knowledge of these narratives varies and often depends on the time an individual or a family has spent living in the village. Certain personal events, such as significant birthdays, are celebrated publicly (see Image 11). A non-permanent sign was posted in the garden of a private home, reading "Happy Birthday! Endlich 18!" ("Happy birthday! Finally 18!"), together with a so-called *Bogen* ("arch") of flowers with a picture of the birthday girl and a heart-shaped flowered ornament depicting the number 18. These signs and artefacts are normally crafted and presented by the neighbours, who are then invited in for drinks and snacks. The event is initiated by the neighbours themselves, not by invitations from the person to be celebrated. Theoretically, everyone who considers themselves a neighbour can join in, although there are intricate unwritten rules as to who qualifies as a neighbour and who does not.

Signage around private homes in the Krummhörn Corpus also tells stories of conflict; many signs fall into an area best described as private-regulatory, whereby homeowners use their house and garden to put up regulatory signage, in addition to official signage provided by the council. They appeal to neighbours and people passing by to drive slowly, not to feed the ponies, not to lean bicycles on the fence, or not to let dogs foul in the vicinity of the house. The fact that homeowners feel they have to post these signs indicates that these incidents may have occurred repeatedly. These private-regulatory signs are, again, often in handwritten or handcrafted form, as the examples in Image 12 show.

Image 12: Conflict

Although the sign depicted in Image 12 (lower left) is in English, the vast majority is in Standard German. None of the regulatory signs in the Krummhörn Corpus use Low German, indicating that at least in public displays Low German is strictly connected with projecting the positive, old, and quaint. Another reason could be that these days not only tourists, but also many younger villagers may not fully understand Low German.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that Blokland's typology of social ties in an urban environment can be transferred to a rural setting. This indicates that if "rural" is an under-theorised concept in

sociolinguistics, so is "urban," which seems to be the unquestioned default description for most environments in which research on linguistic/semiotic landscapes is conducted.

In line with many studies on the commodification of smaller languages, for example, Pietikäinen et al (2016), the qualitative analysis of signage in the Krummhörn Corpus shows that Low German is applied in an emblematic way in order to advertise the region to tourists. In addition, it also revealed that Low German is used in a similar way to create communal identity and cohesion, as shown in connection with a church newsletter or the name of a village community building. The application of Low German on public signage and the way in which villagers present themselves to the outside (tourists) and to themselves are indicative of social change: Through increased internal mobility and tourism, the region seems to have become more aware of itself, with its landscapes, architecture, and cultural heritage featuring as its selling points. These features are now emphasised in signage in ways indicating that the villagers are trying to become what they are known for. Individuals and communities, mostly at the levels of transactions and attachments, have constructed new images of themselves that use elements of local tradition, culture, language, and history. In doing so, they have also carved out a specific approach to tourism for themselves which is opposed to mass and package tourism. At the same time, individuals and communities in the villages face an interesting challenge: In an increasingly mobile world, they need to present themselves as static in terms of time and place in order to preserve what potential tourists perceive as non-threatening and thus cherished "otherness," one of their reasons for visiting the region.

The analysis of public signage in rural spaces should not be restricted to the use of smaller languages which form but one important part of a complex system of social and linguistic practices. The centre – periphery model (Pietikäinen et al 2016) as a theoretical approach focuses on the changing circumstances for smaller languages in the 21st century. Rurality is implicitly but not explicitly part of the model. This article argues that an analysis which endeavours to investigate the entirety of social and linguistic practices in a rural environment will also need to recognise its material and discursive distinctiveness beyond small languages and their application. The focus here is on speakers as individuals and as parts of ever changing formations of community who use language(s) as resources for varying purposes in a specific environment, in this case villages in a northern German province. The analysis of the semiotic landscapes of Krummhörn has revealed social change at various levels and involves different strata of community life. Commercial signage quantitatively dominates the region, selling mainly services such as accommodation or catering at various levels whereas in the past village commerce was mainly centred around products from agriculture or trades such as the village's bakery, smithy, tailor or carpentry. The focus of transactions – for example expressed by commercial signage – is not restricted to the village itself any more but encompasses the region, thus widening the geographical scope of businesses compared with half a century ago.

In the rural environment under investigation, signage around private dwellings is of considerable importance. It includes commercial, regulatory and private discourses, indicating that community is performed to a high degree around private houses, showing transactions, closeness and conflict. Posting signage around or on a private house is an act of self-identification; for example, by posting a sign demanding a higher price for milk on a barn door, readers of the sign are made aware of the barn owner's political stance. Thus, signage around private dwellings adds to existing local narratives.

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Footnotes

[1] Most earlier studies analysing language in public space referred to this newly emerging sub-discipline of sociolinguistics as "linguistic landscape" research. Since then, its remit has been significantly widened in order to take into account other semiotic resources in the construction of linguistic landscapes (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), but both terms are still in use in the literature.

[2] "Language" is applied here as a sociolinguistic concept meaning that entities such as "English," "Chinese," and "Low German" are taken as umbrella terms for "complex and layered collections of language varieties" (Blommaert, 2005: 10).

[3] Discourse is defined here as "socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behaviour reflected in numerous texts" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 538).

[4] See https://www.ihk-emden.de/blob/emdihk24/standortpolitik/downloads/2351000/6abc29d0e588a493aec116940014cc00/Tourismus_in_den_Kuestenbadeorten_Ostfrieslands-data.pdf; last accessed 06/27/2019.

[5] In addition, the municipality's 553 street names were downloaded (https://www.meinestadt.de/krummhoern/stadtplan/strassenverzeichnis); last accessed 06/18/2019.

[6] See Mühlan-Meyer & Lützenkirchen (2017); Ziegler (2013); Ziegler, Eickmans, Schmitz, Uslucan, Gehne, Kurtenbach, Mühlan-Meyer, & Wachendorff, (2018). My thanks go to Evelyn Ziegler and her team at the University of Duisburg-Essen, who gave me access to data, methodology, and work in progress on the linguistic landscape project *Metropolenzeichen*.