Lamppost Networks[i]: Stickers as a Genre in Urban Semiotic Landscapes

Abstract: This paper examines the pragmatics of stickers as a genre prominent in communication in urban public space. Although normally small in size, stickers may quantitatively dominate signage in certain areas of cities. Stickers are examined here as localized communicative events that mediatize social practices through a range of complex multimodal and linguistic processes, based on data from the Digbeth area in central Birmingham, UK. An analysis of the distribution of stickers, their agency, audience, and the multimodal practices involved in their creation reveals that they bring together transgressive, artistic and commercial discourses and form a specific layer of urban communication, especially in areas of pedestrian transit within a city. A large number of stickers also initiate communications that can potentially be continued online.

Key words: urban semiotic landscapes, Birmingham (UK), stickers, pragmatics, multimodality

Introduction

As one of its first focal points, research into language in public places chose the mapping of multilingual urban spaces, with the aim of analysing multilingualism or the linguistic representation of minorities in the increasingly diverse cities of the twenty-first century (see, e.g., Backhaus [2007], Barni and Extra [2008], Gorter, Marten and Mensel [2012]). In this spirit, in spring 2016, a group of twenty-two students set out to map one street each in the city centre of Birmingham, UK, as part of an assignment for an undergraduate course on urban multilingualism. The students sorted the resulting corpus of signage according to languages and to the discourse types infrastructural, regulatory, commercial and transgressive following Scollon and Scollon's (2003) concept of 'geosemiotics'.

Birmingham is the second-largest city in Britain with a population of roughly 1.1 million, originating from multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Yet the students' description of language in public places found that the city centre of Birmingham seems to be almost completely monolingual English and dominated by commercial discourse. It appears that the City Council and city retailers make sure the city centre is presented as controlled, cleaned ("buffed") and speaking with one (English) voice to visitors, shoppers and workers sharing this particular space. One student, however, ventured a few paces outside the immediate

centre of the city and discovered a very different scenario: Digbeth, a street adjacent to the recently redeveloped Bull Ring shopping centre, appeared to be dominated by transgressive discourse, mainly conducted via a huge number of stickers on lamp posts, walls and windows.[ii] According to Vigsø (2010:30), stickers have become "a popular and versatile means of commercial communication" during the 1960s. Since the 1970s, stickers have been used predominantly to indicate membership of specific groups, political affiliations or subcultures. Linguistic research thus far has focused in particular on the use of stickers in political contexts (Bloch [2000]; Vigsø [2010]; in some cases, stickers were analysed as one of various genres carrying political messages (Hanauer [2012]; Woldemariam and Lanza [2012]). Stickers do not occur independently of place: they are closely associated with cities, but tend to proliferate only in specific areas within urban space (see below). Stickers are often linked to communities of practice around street art and other urban subcultures, and many of them refer to virtual spaces on the internet.[iii]

Inspired by my students' findings, I focus in this article on stickers as a medium of communication in public places, based on my own fieldwork conducted in Digbeth between October 2016 and March 2017. The Digbeth district, centred on the street of the same name, is one of the oldest parts of Birmingham, and has served the inner city as an area of trade and business since medieval times (Upton 1993). It played a vital part in the Industrial Revolution, with factories, workshops, warehouses and pubs built during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, notably Alfred Bird's custard factory. Today, Digbeth connects the historic city centre with Birmingham Coach Station and St Andrew's, the Birmingham City football stadium, and is home to the arts and media departments of a further education college, an Irish community centre, music venues, pubs, clubs, small-scale businesses and restaurants. Bird's factory has been turned into an arts centre, aptly named the "Custard Factory". Digbeth is part of a large regeneration plan and is currently being redeveloped as a hub for creative businesses and industry (http://bigcityplan.birmingham.gov.uk; accessed 3 September 2017).

This paper is based on the following research questions:

• Place: Where does communication via stickers occur?
• Discourses: Which discourses are conveyed?
• Agency and audience: Who uses stickers for communication in public spaces, and what are the communicative purposes behind stickers?

• Multimodal linguistic analysis: Which multimodal and linguistic practices are involved in the design of stickers?

After an overview of the theoretical background, data and methods of analysis, this article presents an analysis of the Digbeth Corpus by examining the location of stickers and their distribution across discourse types, agency and languages used. A qualitative, textual and visual analysis is then applied to twelve representative stickers from the Digbeth Corpus.

Theoretical Background: Stickers as Communicative Events

This study is a contribution to the growing body of research in the field referred to as '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 and Thurlow 2010:1]). For the analysis of stickers in public places, this paper draws on three research traditions in particular: human geography, pragmatics and social semiotics. In human geography, 'place' is defined as the result of social transformation of 'space' – the environment as it is before human intervention ([Cresswell 2015]). Place as a social construct is the result of social practices, such as agriculture, trade, or architecture at macro-level. At micro-level, the construction of place could involve simple acts such as the putting up of a framed picture in order to claim an anonymous room as home (Pratt [1999]:152). Social practices leading to the creation of place involve aspects of materiality – ploughing a field, building a house, framing a picture – in order to give space meaning. The role of language and communication in this process, however, had been overlooked by geographical research, according to Tuan (1991). A viable framework for the analysis of language in processes of place creation is pragmatics: the designing, posting and reading of stickers, for example, is a combination of social actions which involve senders and addressees. Stickers as signs in public places can thus be described as localised communicative events (Kallen 2009) serving various illocutionary and perlocutionary functions. A communicative event such as a sticker is composed of actions, linguistic or multimodal, for example naming or choosing a specific typeface. The creation of stickers involves specific forms of mediation, which is defined here as all cultural, material or semiotic conditions of communicative action (Norris and Jones [2005]: 50-51). Communicative events such as stickers can be grouped into genres according to their forms, functions and specific combination of semiotic resources applied ([Huebner 2006]; Järlehed [2018]). Hymes (1974) defines genre as a class of communicative events identified both by

their conventionalised recognizable form and by their common functions. The notion of genre has been discussed and defined primarily in the areas of systemic functional linguistics, rhetorical genre studies and applied linguistics, particularly in studies of English for specific purposes (Solin 2011). Swales (1990, 58) developed a widely recognized definition:

> A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. . . . In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience.[iv]

If stickers in public space are taken to constitute a genre, a bundle of communicative purposes can be recognized. Creating and / or posting stickers is an attempt to garner attention from pedestrians in order to sell, convince, warn, regulate, exhibit or "tag".[v] The study of social semiotics adds another characterizing feature to the definition of genre: in addition to form and communicative purposes, genres of signs in public places can be identified by specific combination of semiotic resources (Järlehed [2018]: 290). Stickers, for example, tend to comprise short multimodal texts, often including images or pictorial elements, arranged on variously shaped pieces of paper or self-adhesive vinyl. They may be hand-crafted or mass-produced. Sticker contents vary widely, and as a result, numerous linguistic and multimodal practices are applied. Finally, genres as conventionalized communicative events are shaped by and inscribed into discourses, defined here as "socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behaviour reflected in numerous texts" (Scollon and Scollon [2001]: 538). The majority of stickers placed in public space are unauthorized, which means that, like spraying or writing graffiti, the posting of stickers can be considered an illegal activity and stickers tend to be associated with urban subcultures and transgressive discourse. In fact, as this study shows, the reality of sticker communication is more complex.

Data and Methods of Analysis

The approach to data collection and analysis for this study is an ethnographic one. It acknowledges that any recording of language in public places can only ever be a snapshot,

like a photograph that freezes a certain moment in time, because semiotic landscapes are fluid and changing (Blommaert [2013]). The example of stickers shows that important parts of a semiotic landscape can disappear within days, for example if the City Council decides to send in a cleaning party. Areas such as Digbeth in Birmingham, however, seem to escape such initiatives for longer periods of time because the Council tends to concentrate its efforts on the neighbouring area, the city centre. In order to include historical and more immediate dimensions of change, the following five steps were carried out during the collection of data between September 2016 and March 2017:

1. Familiarization with the area to be mapped, including researching its history and informal interviews with shopkeepers and pedestrians.
2. Taking a comprehensive inventory of all manifestations of language by compiling a corpus of digitized photographs.
3. Sorting the photographic corpus into a database.
4. Returning to the area under investigation four months later to record any changes in the linguistic landscape.
5. Further interviews with pedestrians and shopkeepers, discussing selected stickers from the Digbeth Corpus.

Since stickers need to be analysed in the context of the place in which they appear, an overall inventory of the linguistic landscape of Digbeth was created first. In October 2016, all linguistic and pictorial signs to be found on Digbeth within two days were photographed.[vi] The 1,191 items were sorted into a database and tagged according to place, discourse type, language, contexts of agency, information management, semiotic codification and size, thus adapting the methodological approach of the research project "Metropolenzeichen" (Cindark and Ziegler [2016], Mühlan-Meyer and Lützenkirchen [2017]; Ziegler [2013]), as shown in Table 1. "Metropolenzeichen" – based on what is probably the largest systematic data collection on signage in public place to date, consisting of a corpus of 25595 signs including stickers and 120 interviews – analyses the semiotic landscapes in the Ruhr area in Germany, an urban region that can be compared to Birmingham in terms of its industrial history, social structure and high levels of immigration since the 1960s.

Table 1 about here

The Digbeth Corpus allows us to present both the overall context of the semiotic landscape of Digbeth and the specific distribution and appearance of stickers within that landscape. The analysis applies a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods of analysing language in public space have been much criticised lately, especially the focus of a number of earlier studies on counting and cataloguing signs, searching mainly for instances of languages other than the dominant standard language in a certain area and neglecting close contextual analysis (for a critical overview, see Blommaert [2013] or Blommaert and Maly [2015]). Such approaches do not account for the complex processes of agency, audience and discursive interplay that form the structure of any urban public place. In order to make any valid statement about the role and impact of certain features in a semiotic landscape – languages, genres, discourses – such context is key, and the overall distribution of all signage in an area under investigation must be ascertained as a first step. Depending on the focus of each investigation, qualitative analysis of representative examples then enables us to examine the complexities and multiple meaning-making in what has come to be known as semiotic landscapes. For the qualitative analysis, this article pays special attention to the interplay between linguistic and multi-modal practices underlying the production of stickers.[vii] A further focus is the pragmatics of communicative processes between designers / producers of stickers as senders and their addressees / recipients (Pappenhagen, Scarvaglieri and Redder [2016]; [Redder 2008]).

Sticker Communication in Digbeth

Stickers in transit spaces

As pedestrians walking through a city, we are normally not particularly aware of stickers. Two randomly selected groups of informants – twenty each, one group interviewed outside Digbeth, the other in Digbeth – confirmed this. Only two among the outside group claimed to look at stickers sometimes, while waiting at traffic lights or bus stops. Another had noticed a particularly striking sticker on the postbox recently when she was about to post a letter. None of the Digbeth group claimed to have noticed any stickers. Yet the Digbeth data show that 712 out of 1,191 signs – 60 per cent – recorded in Digbeth in October 2016 were stickers.

The projects conducted previously by my students had revealed that sticker communication is not equally distributed across Birmingham: they noticed a high density of stickers in Digbeth compared with the adjacent city centre. This finding echoes the data collected for the large-scale linguistic landscape project "Metropolenzeichen" in the German Ruhr area; out of the

eight neighbourhoods investigated for the project, only one showed a high occurrence of stickers (Wachendorf, Ziegler, and Schmitz [2017]). This particular neighbourhood – Essen/ Rüttenscheider Straße – is ranked as mainly middle class with comparatively low levels of ethnic minority citizens.

What do Essen/Rüttenscheider Straße and Digbeth have in common? Essen/Rüttenscheider Straße is an area south of Essen's city centre, not far from the opera house, concert hall and the famous Museum Folkwang, with numerous cafés and restaurants. It attracts visitors from other neighbourhoods and from outside Essen. For slightly different audiences, this also applies to Digbeth; it attracts people from all over Birmingham and beyond to the coach station, the football stadium, various pubs, clubs and music venues, a college and the Custard Factory arts centre. Both areas are transit areas in a wider urban environment that is dominated by cultural and recreational establishments.

Figure 1 about here

In Digbeth, the majority of stickers are found on lamp posts, traffic signs, and traffic lights (Figure 1). Stickers address pedestrians who pass through Digbeth; they tend to be too small to be noticed by cars. They often appear in clusters: some lamp posts or traffic lights carry a large number of stickers, as if the existence of a sticker in a certain space invites more stickers to be posted, thus creating ad hoc sticker forums or exhibitions. Scollon and Scollon (2003:2) emphasise that "signs and symbols take a major part of their meaning from how and where they are placed". The posting of stickers is in most cases illegal and as such a transgressive act. At the same time, it is a form of claiming space – and turning it into a platform for communication for individuals and groups who otherwise may not be represented as part of a particular place. Interviews with pedestrians on Digbeth show that many passers-by do not notice them at all while others look out for them, either for entertainment or because they want to find out about news for a particular community of practice, thus becoming part of 'lamppost-networks'. These networks are in themselves a complex layer of transgressive communication on Digbeth, adding a distinctive layer to the commercial and infrastructural discourses otherwise dominant in this particular area.

The lack of multilingualism in the semiotic landscape of Digbeth
Like most major cities in the UK, Birmingham is home to speakers of many different languages. Of its current 1.1 million citizens, 84.7 per cent named English as their first or

preferred language in the 2011 census. The largest groups within the remaining 15.3 per cent were speakers of Urdu (29,403), Panjabi (21,166) and Bengali (14,718).[viii] These figures can only serve as a rough indication of the linguistic reality in Birmingham since the census did not account for bi- or multilingual speakers.

Figure 2 about here

The Digbeth Corpus records all signage in Digbeth at one point in time. It seems to indicate that public written communication in Digbeth, just as in the adjacent city centre, is predominantly monolingual (Figure 2). The category "unknown" in Figure 2 refers mostly to the texts produced by graffiti writers and a number of cryptic letter combinations found on stickers. "No language" refers to images that nevertheless serve a communicative purpose and as such are part of the Digbeth Corpus; not included are traffic signs. Apart from Arabic on the shop front of a restaurant, none of the major community languages spoken in Birmingham appeared in the linguistic landscape of Digbeth at this particular point in time.

Figure 3 about here

Only very few signs in Digbeth show languages other than English – but of these rare signs featuring other languages, the majority are stickers, as Figure 3 indicates. Most prominent are the European languages Czech, German, Polish and Spanish. They were all found as part of stickers celebrating football clubs such as the German FC Hansa Rostock, created for and presumably posted by football fans on their way to the Birmingham City football stadium (Sticker 1). Vigsø (2010) analyses football stickers as part of a fan culture which includes established rivalries between different cities and clubs. Football stickers "hardly display more than a name and a color code, recognizable mostly to supporters and adversaries" (Ibid, 41). By posting stickers, football fans claim territory: "The very point of these stickers lies in their presence in public space. By sticking these signs to lampposts or street signs, the supporters make a clear manifestation of their presence in the area." (Ibid, 42) It is remarkable that all football-related stickers were found on one side of Digbeth, leading from the bus station to the football stadium, as if football fans never ventured across the street to leave their marks.

Sticker 1 about here

Discourse types of stickers on Digbeth

The overall distribution of items in the semiotic landscape of Digbeth by discourse types shows a preponderance of transgressive discourse, in other words non-authorized items, followed by artistic and commercial discourses (Figure 4). It should be noted that the boundaries between artistic and transgressive discourse are extremely fluid: most items categorized as artistic in the Digbeth Corpus are also non-authorized.

Figure 4 about here
Figure 5 about here

Looking at stickers only, they make up a high percentage of the transgressive items in Digbeth (76 per cent), as Figure 5 illustrates. The remaining transgressive items recorded in Digbeth were handwritten, scratched or sprayed "tags" by graffiti writers. Figure 5 shows that the majority of stickers found in Digbeth can be classified as artistic and transgressive. A considerably smaller number of stickers recorded in Digbeth serve regulatory or infrastructural purposes, for example communicating fire regulations or car park opening hours. The Digbeth Corpus also shows that 22.5 per cent of all stickers serve commercial purposes. This is interesting because research on stickers tends to focus on their functions in political contexts (Bloch [2000]; Hanauer [2012]; Vigsø [2010]; Woldemariam and Lanza [2012]).

Agency and audience

In the majority of cases, the posting of stickers is not only unauthorized but illegal and equivalent to criminal damage, much like graffiti.[ix] There is a conceptual overlap between art and vandalism, as debates on graffiti show:

> In the debates over graffiti's status as vandalism-versus-art, it is worth noting that vandalism and art are commonly defined as opposites (destruction versus creation), yet both can also be seen as different forms of transgression. While vandalism transgresses the law, art frames a range of discursive transgressions. With authorized public art often serving instrumental roles such as place branding, stimulating consumption or celebrating history, graffiti is often the most transgressive of public arts. … The criminality of graffiti is based on a perception of violated property rights and of damage to neighbourhood image or place identity. (Dovey, Wollan, and

Woodcock 2012, 22)

Thus, it is not surprising that most stickers from the Digbeth Corpus are anonymous. Interviews with pedestrians – again unsurprisingly – did not lead to the discovery of active sticker producers. Among those stickers with clear or indirect indications of agency, four clusters of agency prevail: hospitality, businesses, music bands, and political organisations or individuals (Figure 6).

Figure 6 about here

Hospitality

Sticker 2 about here

Sixty-seven stickers draw the observers' attention to bars, pubs, clubs or restaurants, most of them in Digbeth itself or its immediate vicinity. One of the most frequently found stickers in this category is Sticker 2, which advertises a club. Sticker 2 is a text/picture combination. The distribution of text-only, text/picture combination, and picture-only in the Digbeth Sticker Corpus is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 about here

 The text/picture combination in Sticker 2 is designed as a persiflage of the Birmingham city crest. The crest's image of a working man with his toolkit has been replaced by a graffiti artist with mask and spray cans, the city's motto "Forward" is changed into "Backward", and the word "VOID" – also the name of the club – is written across the crest. A typeface has been used that resembles the style of handwritten graffiti applied with a thick felt pen. The sticker advertises a club by locating it both spatially and socially in Birmingham and in the subculture and communities of street artists passing through Digbeth.

Companies and businesses
The corpus data reveal that most companies and businesses advertised by stickers are connected in some way with the urban subcultures for which Digbeth is known: shops selling equipment for street artists (for example, Sticker 3); recording studios; fashion outlets

specialising in clothes worn by musicians, street artists and their followers; facilities for printing stickers; or tattoo parlours (see, e.g., Hicks [2009] or Muth [2016] on the commodification and commercialization of street art).

Sticker 3 about here

The majority of commercial stickers found in Digbeth serve a specific community of practice, such as communities listening to avant-garde or niche musicians, art students, or graffiti artists, most of them members of younger generations. Commercial stickers such as Sticker 3 refer their readers to the internet, where further details of products advertised can be found and actual transactions can be made. Although most pedestrians seem not to notice stickers at all, as the interviews with pedestrians revealed, stickers do provide particular communities with a form of informative infrastructure. Typography plays an important role in drawing the attention of such communities of social and linguistic practice to stickers: like most stickers in the text-only or text/picture combination categories of the Digbeth Corpus, Sticker 3 has been produced with careful attention to typefaces. The first part of the text, the name of a company providing equipment for graffiti artists, is written in a font that imitates graffiti writing, a communicative strategy we also observed for Sticker 2. This typeface has "typographic meaning" (Spitzmüller 2015, 127); it is a stance by a social actor and can be interpreted by other social actors – for example, pedestrians who can read this particular typeface as a sign (see also Järlehed and Jaworski [2015]; Spitzmüller [2007]; Stöckl [2005]; Triggs and Ewart [2005]; van Leeuwen [2005]). Some fonts used for stickers in the Digbeth Corpus appear more marked than others, for example, Gothic typeface or the graffiti-style typefaces because readers can relate them to certain communities of practice, such as Heavy-Metal musicians or their fans. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), writing is always an act of design and as such always multimodal. In a genre such as stickers, the limitation of space for writing and the necessity of conveying short messages invites producers to draw on as many semiotic resources as possible. Even in cases where no images are involved, therefore, stickers need to be analysed as products of multimodal practices.

Music events
Several venues in Digbeth stage concerts, many by niche or avant-garde musicians. A large number of stickers aim to draw attention to musicians and bands. It is not clear whether they have been posted by fans as a form of tagging or by musicians in order to advertise

themselves. As in the example of Sticker 4, bands often use a picture that has the potential to draw attention, then add their name.

Sticker 4 about here

"Distorted" is an Israeli heavy-metal band (http://www.distortedband.com:80, accessed 14 August 2017). The image on the sticker shows a beautifully attired and coiffed woman with a devil's face. Some parts of her face – one of the eyes and the mouth – seem to have been added (distorted) by a black felt pen in the same way as pictures in public space are sometimes embellished. In the case of this sticker, however, the black felt distortion is part of the image and the underlying concept. The typeface used for the name of the band reflects "scratching", a form of graffiti using a nail or knife to engrave tags or messages into surfaces in public space. By referring to transgressive forms of writing in public space, the band thus positions itself as part of an anti-mainstream subculture.

Political organisations and individuals
A number of stickers in the Digbeth Corpus express political views or messages, representing organisations, initiatives and individuals, although it is not always straightforward to establish authorship. The views expressed tend to be on the radical side of the political spectrum, both left and right. Sticker 5, for example, appeals to its readers to go vegan, with a reference to stolen babies and dead animals. It also suggests that readers should "Watch Earthlings on YouTube": "Earthlings" is an American documentary on the abuse of animals as food or entertainment or for scientific research.

Sticker 5 about here

Sticker 5 looks as if it has been designed and produced by a non-professional; the typefaces and embellishments used are all available as part of standard office software. The sticker has been produced on paper and, judging by the creases, glued to a post with wallpaper adhesive. It probably is not the work of a professional designer, as is reflected by the contrast between the sticker's floral ornamentations and its rather gruesome message. What Sticker 5 shares with many other stickers in the Digbeth Corpus is a reference to the internet. Here the appeal is to watch the documentary. The sticker itself does not offer enough room to make the case for its political message, so it refers readers to the internet, where there is plenty.

Sticker 6 is authored by the initiative "The People's Assembly", an organisation backed by a number of trade unions and high-profile individuals from the left of the political spectrum and aiming to fight the austerity programme of the British government. The immediate purpose of the sticker is to appeal to readers to join a rally. The sticker is mass-produced on adhesive vinyl. It contains information about the rally as well as details of the organisation's website. The two first, eye-catching lines are in red and green, both colours associated with political movements. The typeface resembles letters painted on walls with broad brushes, a technique traditionally used for political graffiti in the past.

Sticker 6 about here

Interestingly, Sticker 6 shows signs of a dialogue: graffiti writers have either left tags on the sticker or commented on it. Dialogue is defined here as any form of visible reaction to elements in the urban semiotic space (Schmitz and Ziegler [2016]). A sticker in itself can be used as a comment, for example when it is glued on top of another sticker or sign, thus used as a palimpsest (Shep [2015]). Some stickers in the Digbeth Corpus, such as Sticker 7, seem to be torn on purpose, as if to comment negatively on the statement made by the sticker.

Sticker 7 about here

FOKA WOLF is a self-proclaimed street artist, according to his Facebook page: "Hello. I am an artist from Birmingham. In my spare time I enjoy lazer quest, dog shows and shoplifting" (accessed 23 September 2017). The photograph of Sticker 7 indicates that FOKA WOLF provokes strong reactions. The face pictured on the sticker has been both crossed out in pen and scratched out. The same happened to Sticker 8, which contains a political slogan by a left-wing political organisation – it has been made almost unreadable by tearing off parts of the sticker.

Sticker 8 about here

A form of political dissent seems to be the basis of Sticker 9. It was glued on top of a sticker carrying a political message by a German anti-Nazi initiative ("Antifa Duisburg"), which is still partly visible underneath. At first glance it was not clear whether the posting of the

picture on top of another sticker was a political statement or whether the person posting the second sticker simply found the first one ugly, as was suggested by an art student commenting on this sticker.

Sticker 9 about here

The owner of a coffee shop in an arts centre on Digbeth, however, read the sign differently: he identified the drawing on the sticker as "Pepe the Frog", a well-known internet meme. During Donald Trump's presidential election campaign, it morphed into a symbol for the "alt-right" movement, a grouping of far-right fringe groups.[x] Collins and Slembrouck (2007) show how readers can interpret signs in public places in different ways, depending on their individual repertoires of linguistic forms and cultural knowledge. As in the case of Sticker 9, individuals belonging to different communities of practice may read stickers differently, either as an artistic comment or a political statement.

Artists / graffiti artists

Of the stickers in the Digbeth Corpus, 18.5 per cent were classified as artistic discourse. The Digbeth Corpus reveals a number of different artistic styles and material formats: some stickers are drawn on paper and glued onto street furniture with what is presumably household adhesive. Stickers, such as for example Sticker 10, seem to have been designed by artists but produced by professional printing companies specialising in stickers, such as Grey Jam. Grey Jam advertises in Digbeth using stickers and offers an online service (http://www.greyjampress.com, accessed 6 September 2017), underlining the point that, within transgressive discourse conveyed via stickers, an infrastructure for certain communities of practices is displayed via the lamppost networks on Digbeth.

Sticker 10 about here

None of my various interview participants on Digbeth identified themselves as a street artist or graffiti writer, for reasons explained above. In order to find out more about why artists design, produce and post stickers, I showed some of my pictures of stickers to art students in the cafeteria of an arts college in Birmingham. Although all of them claimed never to have designed stickers themselves, they said that some fellow artists see this practice as a form of exhibition on their own terms:

When you feel that you have created something interesting, like something that shows your specific style, you invest in stickers and put them up on lamp posts. Digbeth is a good place because there are people who look out for these things. You hope that your style will be recognized somehow. (Student F)

As the discussions with art students indicate, posting stickers has a performative component that goes beyond "tagging" in the sense of leaving a mark in order to claim space (see, e.g, Bell and Gibson [2011]; Jaworski [2014]). Posting artistic stickers in a relevant space might also be seen as an unauthorized exhibition.

The artistic discourses on Digbeth show an interesting intertwining of tagging and exhibiting, with stickers functioning both as elements of exhibited art and as means to guide observers to other forms of street art. Although there are no big graffiti "throw-ups", "slogans" or "pieces" on Digbeth itself,[xi] these sticker types can be found in streets off and around it. One of the quantitatively most prominent stickers in the Digbeth Corpus is Sticker 11. This is a sticker that invites pedestrians to look out for interesting graffiti and share it on Twitter – yet another example of the ways in which stickers connect communities of practice "on the ground" with digital spaces.

Sticker 11 about here

A number of tags on walls and other structures indicate that graffiti writers pass through Digbeth and leave their marks. Street artists are constantly addressed and referred to by stickers, as mentioned above: equipment for street art is advertised by stickers, and many stickers apply typefaces that cite various forms of street art. Digbeth is a busy transit area in central Birmingham, with a police station situated on the street itself, so it would be too risky to engage in serious spraying activity here. Yet tags are still left, either sprayed, written in felt pen or scratched into surfaces. Additionally, stickers are produced for graffiti writers to prewrite their tags and post them, as in the case of Sticker 12.

Sticker 12 about here

Linguistic practices

This section looks at the linguistic actions involved in the production of stickers. Figure 7 above showed that 48 per cent of stickers in the Digbeth Corpus are text/image combinations and 33 per cent are text-only, although the analysis has revealed the high level of design and multimodal effort that is put into the production of text-only stickers.

The predominant linguistic action leading to texts on stickers is naming: Sticker 2, for example, features the name of a club, Sticker 3 the name of a company, Sticker 4 the name of a band and Sticker 7 the pseudonym of a street artist. To be more precise, "naming" here refers to individuals or groups giving themselves names as stylized, constructed identities. The name "Distorted" for a heavy metal band, for example, is designed in the tradition of other band names in a particular genre of music, while simultaneously pitching the individuality and creativity of a particular band. Naming is a complex linguistic action based in pragmatics and semantics (see, e.g., Edelman [2009], Felecan [2012]; Hoffmann [1999], Pappenhagen, Scavaglieri and Redder [2016], Soames [2002], [2005]). Naming on signage in public space tends to function at two connected levels: first, an identity is constructed by applying linguistic and multi-modal resources in order to appeal to wider or specific audiences. At a second level, the identities constructed by names are applied to serve more specific functions such as selling, exhibiting, influencing opinions. Names on stickers are positioned in public space in order to advertise or remind pedestrians of the existence of certain venues, bands, street artists, or companies.

Naming on stickers reflects the practices of both branding and tagging – tagging in the sense of leaving one's mark in public space, for example by graffiti, thus claiming public space and creating a space of agency. Tagging with or without stickers is an "act of identity" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller [1985]), and it can occur in the form of either image – an artist leaving their signature style – or text. Tagging may segue into branding when the agent of the naming procedure combines their name with a product they are endeavouring to sell, which could be their own artistic performance or commodities such as fashion or equipment for street artists. It should be borne in mind that even the posting of stickers without a name can be an act of identity and therefore a form of tagging: the football fan leaving their mark by posting a sticker featuring their club, the political activist making sure that a political view they share becomes public, even if it is only on the small-scale canvas of a lamp post.

Another linguistic action found on many stickers is appealing, which occurs directly and indirectly. Sticker 5, for example, appeals directly to the pedestrian readers by using tools of language such as address in the second person singular and the imperative mode: "Go vegan, . . . watch . . . on YouTube". Sticker 11 is an indirect appeal, where the combination of an icon and the name of the hash tag encourages the observer to take a picture of graffiti and share it on Twitter. It is obvious in this example how the linguistic actions of naming and appealing may interlink: "graffspotting" is both the name of the hash tag and part of the appeal.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine the role of stickers in urban semiotic landscapes by focusing on their spatial distribution, agency, and linguistic practices involved in their design and production, function and discursive distribution. The analysis of 1,191 signs in Digbeth, a street in central Birmingham, UK, has revealed that stickers form the predominant genre in this corpus (60 per cent). The comparison of the Digbeth Corpus with the data of the "Metropolenzeichen" project in the German Ruhrgebiet indicates that stickers as a genre occur in greater quantities in transit areas of cities, where they are mainly posted on lamp posts, traffic signs and garbage bins.

Stickers were analysed as a genre in urban public communication with a preponderance for transgressive discourses. For the design and production of stickers, multimodal processes are applied in which textual and pictorial elements are merged. These strategies make it possible to cross-reference stickers with specific communities of practice, for example the heavy-metal music scene, football fans, political movements, or street artists. Within these communities of practice, stickers serve various different purposes, but a high percentage provide information, entertainment or infrastructure in transgressive space via "lamppost networks", thus adding a distinct discursive layer to an area otherwise dominated by commerce.

Many stickers start as a form of tagging; in other words, those who post them claim public space by making their presence known, either as individuals or as groups, often by applying the linguistic practice of naming. In a second step, a large number of sticker designers /producers then use their thus created identities in order to sell, exhibit, appeal, as discussed above. Apart from a few regulatory stickers, posted by Birmingham City Council for

example, the majority of stickers are unauthorized. Their posting is, strictly speaking, illegal, so they can be classified as part of a transgressive discourse in the widest sense. Within this transgressive space created by designing, producing and posting stickers in certain areas, stickers advertise products, events and services, appeal for support, or exhibit art. The transgressive space is extended into the digital world, as many stickers link the urban semiotic space with various forums on the internet. Here stickers seem to initiate communication that is intended to be continued online.

[iii] Blommaert (2016), Pennycook (2008), and Tophinke (2016) note the connection between graffiti and online communication. The data presented in Blommaert's article indicates that stickers often function as the communicative means that links graffiti in urban places to online communities of fellow-artists and recipients of street art.

[iv] For further discussion of genre as a pragmatic concept see, e.g., Askehave and Swales (2001); Bhatia (1993), (1997a), (1997b).

[v] "'Tags' are a graphic signature written as a very fast and simple way to get a name onto a surface with a primary content of 'I was here'." (Dovey, Wollan & Woodcock [2012]: 23)

[vi] Data collection focuses on Digbeth, a street which is the centre of a neighbourhood with the same name.

[vii] The multi-modal analysis is based on Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), (2006); van Leeuwen (2005); Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen (2001)).

[viii] Figures from https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50065/population_and_census/1003/population_in_birmingham (accessed 28 January 2017). See also https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/languageinenglandandwales/2013-03-04 (accessed 28 January 2017).

[ix] Interviews with shopkeepers in Digbeth revealed some strong views when it came to stickers and graffiti. Six out of thirteen stated that they had installed CCTV cameras less to prevent burglary than to discourage graffiti.

[x] My thanks go to Betsy Rymes for alerting me to "Pepe the Frog" as a potential interpretation of Sticker 9. As a consequence, I took the sticker back to Digbeth and asked pedestrians and shop keepers to comment on the drawing.

[xi] "'Throw-ups' are enlarged versions of a tag, generally take longer to complete but are performed rather than finished images. . . . 'Slogans' are textural rather than graphic and are

highly legible – content is generally political or poetic and they address a broad public. In all of these types safety from prosecution is achieved through speed of application. The 'piece' is a larger-scale, complex and time-consuming work often involving multiple colours and complex graphic design. The design of a piece is often the name of the writer but stylized until it is almost illegible to non-writers." (Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012, 23–24)

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