Is class relevant in constructing a multilingual Europe?

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Introduction

It is a commonplace of discussions of globalism, and of official European self-understanding, that multilingualism and linguistic diversity are unavoidable features of the contemporary world in general and of particular significance to the emerging EU (Friedman, 2003; European Commission, 2005). Nonetheless, individual nation states vigilantly guard their national languages, and across Western European nations a large class of social problems are attributed to social groups whose primary languages are other than the national language, and particularly to those migrant minorities who hail from ‘the (non-EU) South’ (DeHaan, 2005; Extra & Gorter, 2001; Pujolar, 2008/forthcoming). Relevant in this regard is the observation made by many, including applied linguists and anthropologists who study globalization, that the value or stigma attached to multilingualism depends on the social standing of speakers (Cook, 2005; Friedman, 2003), often in combination with (dis)preferred educational trajectories. This suggests that the widening social inequality of the contemporary era (Bauman, 1997; Bourdieu et al., 1999; Henwood, 2003) needs to be addressed in efforts to study “the construction of multilingual Europe.” In this paper, we approach these issues by examining how social class and multilingualism figure into debates about educational inequities in Europe and North America. In particular, we examine policy documents and debates, analyzing references to social class and multilingualism in discourses about educational achievement.

The arguments made below build upon a series of sociolinguistic/ethnographic studies we have conducted of migration-connected multilingualism in institutional contexts and urban neighbourhoods in Flanders and in Upstate New York (see Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005b; Collins, 2007; Collins & La Santa, 2006; Collins & Slembrouck, 2006, 2007, 2008/forthcoming). In this prior research we have argued for a rethinking of the relation between social categories and language categories in light of thinking about issues of ‘scale’ and the dynamics of ‘scaling’. In this paper we continue that line of argument, examining how discourses of class and multilingualism are influenced by scale and, further, what such discourses reveal about scaling dynamics.

As a preface to the cases below, let us say a few words about our understanding of scale and scaling and how they relate to social categories and language practices. Put most simply, ‘scale’ refers to the size (scale) and relationship between units of analysis, whether of geopolitical (international, national, urban), geo-cultural (village, group, ‘areal’, or transnational ‘ethnoscape’ (Appadurai, 1990), or discursive order (face-to-face co-presence, genres, registers). ‘Scaling’ refers to the construction of scale; it reminds us that scale, of whatever sort, is the outcome of efforts; it is evoked, imposed, and created as well as ‘given-in-the-world’ (Harvey, 2000). Drawing upon research in world systems theory (Wallerstein, 1998) and cultural, economic and political geography (Swyngedouw, 1997; Coe & Young, 2001; Härstad & Fløysand 2007) as well as discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005, 2007) and linguistic anthropology (Agha, 2005; Silverstein, 2003), we use concepts such as scale and scaling in order to capture the dialectic interplay between more durable features of social order, in particular, the articulated temporal and spatial dimensions of any social formation,
and the interactional real-time of face-to-face communication and other situated language use. In our larger research program, we use concepts of scale and scaling because they assist in the analysis of the layered, polyvalent nature of social life and communicative conduct, while not losing sight of inequalities and hierarchies. They allow us to push beyond the usual binaries of macro and micro, global and local, pre-given and emergent, exploring linkages empirically, analytically, and theoretically.

In the cases in the following two sections, we explore linkages between scale relations, discourses of class and claims about multilinguals. We begin by examining the situation in Belgium/Flanders, where contemporary debates about educational outcomes are framed by international comparisons, with parallel and cross-cutting references to socioeconomic resources and to language variation (monolingual and multilingual) as sources of educational ‘problems.’ We then examine a similar debate in the U.S., framed in national rather than international terms, but showing similar refractions and omissions regarding the role of social class and ‘languages other than English’ on educational outcomes. Both cases show the need to think relationally: on the one hand, to analyze the interaction between class and language – whether of class features cited when language is constructed as a problem, or of language features cited when class or ‘poverty’ is constructed as a problem; on the other hand, to track the interaction of scale with the construction of problems – whether the shifting clarity or opacity of economic diversity among social categories depends on local, national, or international frames of reference; or whether the changing criteria for judging ‘speakers of other languages’ depends similarly on ‘scale-shifting.’

**Flanders and the PISA results: socio-economic background and pupils whose home language is ‘not Dutch’**

The public debate on educational (language) achievement and social class in Flanders has been dominated by the three-yearly PISA-results (Program for International Student Assessment), a program for international comparison of student performance. It concentrates on 15-year-olds and capabilities in three areas of literacy: reading, mathematics and science. In the Flemish context, three successive results (2000, 2003 and 2006) have put socio-economic background in the foreground as a key explanatory factor, but – as discussed in detail below – this is left out of the picture when it comes to the sub-group of multilingual youngsters with an immigrant background.

The summary of the 2000-results claim top performances for Flemish children from privileged backgrounds and an average low performances for their less privileged peers (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2000).

*In 2000 werden wereldwijd 15-jarigen getest op hun leesvaardigheid (reading literacy) en wiskundige en wetenschappelijke geletterdheid.*

*Vlaamse jongeren horen bij de besten van de wereld op vlak van leesvaardigheid en wiskundige geletterdheid, en bij de subtop voor wetenschappelijke geletterdheid. Deze goede resultaten werden gehaald zonder grote verschillen tussen de leerlingen met de hoogste en de laagste scores. De verschillen tussen leerlingen uit gezinnen met een hoge en lage sociaal-economische status zijn relatief groot. Leerlingen uit Vlaamse kansarmere milieus presteren even goed als vergelijkbare groepen in het buitenland. Leerlingen uit gezinnen met een hogere sociaal-economische status halen echter ongewoon hoge prestaties. Zoals in alle landen zijn meisjes leesvaardiger dan jongens.*
De hoge leerprestaties nemen niet weg dat Vlaamse 15-jarigen niet graag naar school gaan en opvallend weinig lezen voor hun plezier.


TRANSLATION:

In 2000 15-year-olds worldwide were tested for reading, numerical and scientific literacy.

Flemish youngsters belong to the top of the world for reading proficiency and numeracy, and the sub-top for scientific literacy. These good results were obtained without considerable differences between the pupils with the highest and the lowest scores. The differences between pupils from families with high and low socio-economic status are relatively large. Flemish pupils with a background characterized by a lack of opportunity perform equally well as comparable groups abroad. Pupils from families with a higher socio-economic status perform unusually well. As in all countries, girls read better than boys.

These high learning performances do not detract from the fact that 15-year-olds do not like going to school and remarkably little reading is done for pleasure.

The foregrounded correlations between the results and socio-economic background were reaffirmed after the 2006-test results were announced (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2007):


TRANSLATION:

Just as with reading (2002) and mathematics (2003), it is now also clear for science (2006) that the impact of socio-economic background on the performances of pupils appears to be very big. Flanders combines a high average level of quality with strong socio-economically determined inequality of opportunity.


PISA has successively indicated high scores for Flanders, but considerable differences are noted to be correlatable with high/low socio-economic background: the explanation given is that children from families with high socio-economic status draw more profitably from the schooling experience. One of the key terms used is socio-economically determined “inequality of opportunity” and high socio-economic status is contrasted with a social background characterized by “poverty of opportunity” (kansarmoede; in our general discussion below, we analyze the term “kansamoede” further, as an example of how understandings of class and social difference are constructed, but here we merely note the usage).

In the chapter on “home language/school language”, the Education Minister comments on the 2006 results as follows (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2007):

Er zijn in de leerresultaten voor wetenschappelijke geletterdheid ook zeer grote verschillen tussen autochtone leerlingen en leerlingen van buitenlandse herkomst (eerste en tweede generatie). Met een aantal andere Europese landen scoort Vlaanderen in dit opzicht veel slechter dan landen die er in slagen een hoge immigratie te combineren met een snelle en duurzame integratie.

We weten dat een andere thuistaal dan het Nederlands een belangrijke barrière vormt voor succes. De PISA-resultaten bevestigen dit nogmaals. Het prestatieverschil tussen leerlingen die thuis Nederlands spreken en anderstalige leerlingen is erg groot. Het is mogelijk dat in de PISA-
survey, waar slechts 3% van de leerlingen als anderstalig wordt geklasseerd, een aantal Frans- of Duitstalige kinderen als niet-anderstalig worden beschouwd en dat dit de score van de groep anderstaligen in negatieve zin beïnvloedt. Het blijft een feit dat anderstaligheid een zeer grote belemmering vormt voor succesvol leren. Voor ons land is dat wellicht nog sterker het geval dan voor andere landen, omdat onze schooltaal, het Standaardnederlands, vaak veraf staat van de thuishuis en ook minder dominant is in de leefomgeving dan bijvoorbeeld Frans of Engels in Franstalige of Engelstalige landen.

TRANSLATION:

In the results for learning there are also very large differences between autochtonous pupils and pupils from foreign origin (first and second generation). Together with a number of other European countries, Flanders scores much worse in this respect than countries which succeed in combining high immigration with fast and durable integration.

We know that speaking another language than Dutch at home forms a major obstacle to success. The PISA-results confirm this again. The difference in performance between pupils who speak Dutch at home and those who speak another language [anderstaligen] is very large. It is possible that in the PISA-survey, in which only 3% of the pupils are categorized as anderstalig, a number of French and German-speaking children were treated as not-anderstalig and that this has negatively influenced the scores of anderstaligen. For our country, this is probably even more the case, because our school language, standard Dutch, is often quite removed from the home language and also less dominant in the lifeworld than for instance French or English in French-speaking or English-speaking countries.


“Speaking another language at home” is presented as a direct and significant cause which disconnects home context and school context. This claim occurs as a statement at the level of “a home languages which is not Dutch” but within one and the same paragraph the claim is extended to include a dialect background, i.e. the “home language being remote from standard Dutch” and this factor is believed to more influential than would be the case in France or the UK. This is an analysis of deficit multilingualism and it is largely discussed in isolation from the effects of socio-economic background. It is worth dwelling for a moment on three further aspects of this:

<i> Particularly in the context of children with an immigrant background (“allochtonen”), the “other language”-argument has come to be perceived as an absolute factor and this argumentation has been conducted at the level of separate languages, functionally unspecified and undiversified. The argumentation has also been based on an assumption of “one language used at home”. No attention is paid to the functional distribution of languages/varieties and the rich interactional and situational complexities of code-switching and style-switching in the home/peer/neighbourhood-context (compare with descriptions in Collins & Slembrouck, 2008/forthcoming).

<ii> At the same time, there appears to be no room for talking about intra-group socio-economic differences within the category of “anderstaligen” en “allochtonen” (occupational, financial capacity, orientations in the consumption of media practices, value orientation to pedagogies of language immersion or of maintaining the home language alongside the dominant language, etc.). Instead, a dual argumentation appears to have developed over the years in the public educational debate: there is one line of argumentation about socio-economic background which is implicitly developed as being about “autochtonen” (native Flemish) and there is a second line of argumentation which is about “anderstaligheid” and which is read as being about “allochtonen” (immigrants). The two lines of argumentation are not seen to connect. Absent categories in the debate include for instance the “(emerging)
immigrant middle class”, which according to ethnographic observations which are close to homes and local urban schools settings, are often in favour of a “Dutch-only language immersion pedagogy” for schools and send their kids away from their neighbourhood to prestigious schools with a small intake of children of immigrant descent.

Thirdly, and finally, note that the PISA literacy tests are conducted exclusively in the dominant language, Dutch/Flemish. PISA does not test multilingual proficiency, or reading proficiency in other languages than Dutch, or, say, numeracy in the home language, or, say, scientific literacy in English. Other languages than Dutch do not feature anywhere in the instruments or as objects of testing. Their presence is restricted to what is reported in the sociological survey part. This is true both in the sense of a lack of attention for the West-European languages traditionally taught in Flemish secondary school (esp. English and French) and a lack of attention for immigrant languages (here Turkish and Arabic would be the main ones, but of course not the only ones).

Our general argument is that scale, social inequality, and language pluralism are interconnected. Before turning to our North American case, let us consider an example of how this works, by looking at how the arguments about socioeconomic difference and language diversity in Belgium/Flanders “trickle down,” from the scale of state-level policy to the scale of school-level administrative procedure, in particular ‘intake’ procedures when children are registered at school. Relevant here is the assumption, which has recently been adopted across the board by the Ministry of Education, that there is a direct correlation between children’s educational achievement and the level of education attained by the mother. ‘Mother’s level of education’ is viewed as an indicator of the “cultural capital,” which children bring to school, a complex of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are in turn indicates of the degree to which the “home culture” is aligned with “school culture”. One aspect of the question of the symbolic/cultural capital in children’s home contexts is in practice believed to be indexed by the answer to the question of the mother’s “completed level of education”. In other words, symbolic/cultural capital is in practice equated with completed level of schooling. The public debate has also affected preliminary screening at intake into schools, with regards to language, which is the other salient aspect believed to connect “home context” and “school success”. The question of how the home language connects with the language of the school context at the scale-level of administrative procedure becomes phrased as “is the home language ‘not Dutch’?”. The latter was announced in the Education Minister’s commentary on the 2006-PISA results. Pertinent to our concern with multilingual identities and scale, the Minister’s commentary stipulates a stern policy of how language repertoires are to be dealt with at the level of actual schools and classrooms (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2007):

In any case, these research results strengthen my conviction that a far-reaching and sustained language policy is an absolute necessity. Alongside the actions which I have announced earlier in this respect, we have now also defined ‘anderstaligheid’ as a significant learner variable in the new system of financing for primary and secondary education; as a result, schools with many ‘anderstaligen’ will receive significantly more financial resources. In teacher training more attention will also go to the correct use of Standard Dutch not only in the classroom but also outside.
‘Speaking another language than Dutch at home’ is being treated administratively as a reliable indexical token – the basis for an institutional claim to resources and a procedural alarm bell/explanatory ground that can be activated at any point in a pupil’s subsequent trajectory. At the same time, there is no sign of functional differentiation in answering the question ‘what is the pupil’s home language?’ or any reference to the possibility of different languages/varieties being used, depending on situation, dyad or functional orientation. As we will discuss when comparing our Belgium and US cases, much depends on how class and language are defined, separately and in relation to each other, across changing scale-sensitive settings.

**The US and “No Child Left Behind”**

At first glance, the North American situation seems different from the European one, but the problems which animate policy and debate are recognizably similar. Unlike the case in Belgium and a number of other European countries, in the United States the recent public debate on educational (language) achievement and social class has not been framed by international comparisons of student performance (despite the fact that the USA does participate in PISA). Instead, the national debate has been structured by the consequences of the federal legislation entitled “No Child Left Behind.” (NCLB). This program of federal/state oversight of schools, initiated early in the Bush Administration, was explicitly justified as a means of identifying and correcting the consequences of poverty and ethnoracial ‘minority’ status on educational performance. NCLB focuses directly on aspects of socioeconomic background, noting that students from poor backgrounds, especially those from districts with large areas of concentrated poverty, disproportionately fail to achieve mandated ‘proficiency’ levels in reading, mathematics, science and social studies. It focuses attention also on students who speak languages other than English, the ‘English Language Learners’ and ‘Limited English Proficiency’ students, who are also identified as likely to fail to achieve mandated proficiency levels in school subjects (U.S. Congress Committee on Labor and Education, 2007).

The NCLB program is now widely-regarded as itself a failure, one more casualty in the general wreckage of the Bush Presidency. Its strict testing-and-assessment procedures have greatly modified American classrooms and schools, but have not lessened the ‘gaps’ in measured scores on reading, math, science or social studies knowledge (Rothstein, 2007). In assessing the shortcomings of NCLB, debate has renewed about the sharp divisions of class and race, of citizenship and migration, of monolingualism and multilingualism in American society – but as in the Flemish/Belgian case, the strands of debate remain unconnected.

Regarding social class and educational achievement, there is a cultural-determinist line of argument, led by those who identify language deficits in the lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as the interactional habits of students from working-class and poor families (see also) as causal in educational failure (Hart & Risely, 2003; Payne, 2001; Tough, 2006). There is also a structural-economic line of argument, which allows that linguistic and cultural knowledge rooted in family background play a role in school performance, but which argues that the class-linked conditions such as differential health, nutrition, and residential instability are more important causes of the average educational under-achievement of working-class and poor children (Rothstein, 2004). Both strands of the argument continue old debates about
the variable role of language and social background in educational and other life outcomes (Bernstein, 1972; Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Labov, 1972a). As with the situation in Belgium, the arguments point to the persisting issue of language practices and social inequalities, but as with the older debates, the new formulations do not provide adequate concepts for understanding mechanisms linking language practices and social outcomes, especially in a world marked by increasing, rather than lessening linguistic diversity and social polarization.

Regarding speakers of languages other than English and educational achievement, there is widespread agreement that being an ethnolinguistic minority in the U.S. has, on average, a negative influence on standard school achievement (Diaz, 1997; Hakuta et al. 1993). There has been and continues to be considerable debate about the role of different bilingual education schemes in improving the educational performance of immigrant English Language Learner students in school generally and during the period of NCLB policy (Collier, 1995; Crawford, 2001; Zentella, 2005). In Flanders, this debate is beginning to emerge. As in Belgium/Flanders, No Child Left Behind legislation and administrative implementation strictly defines the question of language plurality and educational equity, recognizing ‘language proficiency’ only in the dominant national language, that is, English. This practice is criticized by defenders of language minorities as a narrow framing of multiple issues – of language proficiency, learning, and educational equity – which ignores the social or collective aspects of language use in minority and immigrant communities (Crawford, 2007; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). However, the default assumption in much of the debates appears to be that proficiency in language is in terms of mastery of one or more standard languages, and thus ‘social’ aspects involving code-switching, home bilingualism and non-elite ‘truncated multilingual proficiencies’ (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005a) tends to be ignored by researchers. Instead attention is focused on group rights to have specific language varieties officially recognized (Hornberger, 2003; Crawford, 2001). As we will argue more fully below, this impedes the effort to understand language and class relationally.

In the US debates there appears to be little common ground between those concerned with social class influences or the role of language pluralism on educational outcomes. Analysts of socioeconomic status and school performance, and certainly those who make it into elite public media such as the New York Times (Tough, 2006), may pursue cultural as well as economic lines of argument, but they rarely address the fact that the U.S. working-class is increasingly immigrant and multilingual as well as multi-racial (DeGenova, 2005; Zweig, 2000). Analysts of language minorities and education, in the U.S. grouped under the rubric of ‘Bilingual Education,’ may correctly identify the politicization of bilingual issues, the unfairness of testing and assessment which does not account for primary languages, and the inherent diversity of migration-presuming categories like ‘English Language Learners’ in U.S. schools, but they quickly elide the socioeconomic dimension of this diversity 6

Discussion

The two cases raise a number of points bearing on the interrelations of class, language, and scale as well as on the role of ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ analytic data as a basis for policy critique and intervention.

A first point is that for both the Flemish and the US case there appears to be little common ground between the concern with social class influences/socio-economic background
and public understandings of multilingualism. In the case of the PISA-results and attendant public debate in Flanders, “working class” is an absent signifier. Instead, “social class” is narrowed to the “educational background of parents” (with recently, a particular focus on the mother) and the discourses of class and educational achievement that are being developed do not interact at all with the discourse about multilingualism. The latter is predominantly heard about in mediatised public debate as part of a discourse in which multilingualism is narrowed to “the (negative) effects of a home language other than Dutch”. The Flemish and the US case also share the prevalence of monolingual practice in the conduct of tests with results which attribute causal effects to individual multilingualism.

If we ask why these avoidances and separations should occur, one answer is that in both countries there is a familiar euphemizing of the racialized aspects of migration and official responses to migration, including differential response to ‘foreign’ languages, coupled with an avoidance of discussions of class, especially the precise characteristics of working-class migrant polyglot communities. A second is that there are professional blinkers operating in both research and advocacy arenas. Research on second language learners, for example, tends to focus on proficiencies within standard languages, favoring evidence drawn from standardizable assessments of single languages, and giving short shrift to non-elite multilingual repertoires-in-practice (see, for example, Cook, 2005). Minority language advocates, often themselves based in or near educational institutions, try to mobilize on the basis of ‘language rights,’ that is, generalized rights of this category/community member to a given language, but neglect the community mobilization that brings actual ethnic-and-class coalitions into a public arena (Crawford, 2001, chapter 7). In either case, scale matters. For example, is the ‘Spanish language community’ a specific urban neighborhood fighting for a school program (Diaz, 1997) or a ‘multinational and multiracial’ formation (Flores & Yudice, 1990)? Is the Flemish language community that which is defined and reinforced by the regional federalism of contemporary Belgium, or that which is found in the Turkish neighborhoods in Ghent that are also pressing for multilingual and multicultural education?

A second point concerns the tension between, on the one hand, the demographic statistical imperatives of quantification that are characteristic of tests and performance measurements when the intended policy projection is domain-specific (e.g. education), a national scale (e.g. Flanders) or a cross-national scale (e.g. the EU), and, on the other hand, the practice-oriented imperatives of ethnographic and qualitative sociolinguistic research which emerge as soon as one starts unpacking and deconstructing the categories of research and public debate - e.g. What is “social class”? What is a “home language other than Dutch”? What does it mean to be a “bilingual or multilingual”? Although one is probably right in observing that policy oriented research is generally inclined towards quantification, this is not simply a neutral choice of ‘the best evidence.’ In the US, for example, the implementation of NCLB went hand in hand with successful right-wing efforts, at the state and national level, to restrict research funding in education to ‘scientifically reliable’ studies, based solely on quasi-experimental designs and protocols, and discrediting all qualitative, small-scale studies (For a sampling of critical literature, see Allington, 2001; Coles, 2002). It is worth repeating that questions of scale & indexicality (that is, ‘indicators’) are always implied in research protocols. The question “what does it mean to be a bilingual or multilingual?” is answered differently depending on the scale at which it is answered (compare, for instance, census figures which take the individual person as a unit (Lutz, 2002) versus the complex code alternation dynamics of micro-encounters which highlight sequence, activity and place (Heller, 2001; Urciuoli, 1996) within group communicative practices. Furthermore, the detail, sophistication and thick description of linguistic ethnographic approaches serve
precisely to underline the scale-sensitivity and variability of analytic categories, as they are used in a field of practice (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005b; Collins & Slembrouck, 2007, 2008).

Concerning, for example, the category ‘home language’ there can be considerable variation whether and how it appears in school settings. As observed in Bultynck et al.’s (2008) study, four primary schools in Ghent’s immigrant neighbourhoods have varyingly drawn boundaries regarding the use of home language in the school context, depending on place (e.g. playground v classroom), activity (e.g. learning v managing the classroom organization), sequence and interactional focus (e.g. small group work v whole class discussion). Some primary schools have also entered into more formal OETC-schemes, providing a limited number of hours of teaching in the home language, a practice which has been criticized for taking place in complete isolation from other school activities. At secondary school level, practice has been much more strictly monolingual, in the dominant language. The question we face is how such qualitative sociolinguistic research regarding categories of description and analysis like ‘home language’ and ‘school’ can durably and successfully engage with official, national educational policy. This has epistemological and heuristic urgency, and yet, it is a question rarely addressed.

Third, building upon our previous point, scale matters in our grappling with the dynamics of class and migration-based multilingualism, and such dynamics figure in processes of ‘scaling’. In studying the construction of multilingual identities at the intersection of multilingual language practices and processes of social polarization, we are never simply dealing with demographic facts based on supposedly stable social categories, as denoted by terms such as ‘manual occupation’, ‘high school education’ and ‘home language other than English/Dutch’. We are instead also investigating social fields in which there are volatile ideological conflicts which frame the perception and categorization of groups and their linguistic resources. For example, as Ong (1997) reports, when affluent Hong Kong immigrants bought real estate in Northern California’s most exclusive suburban areas, only a few dozen families were enough to provoke a public outcry from white, middle-class residents, concerned with both scale-specific ‘neighborhood values’ and ‘community identity’ as well as the national-identity indexing ‘use [or non-use] of English’. When, however, several hundred working-class Mexican migrants blend into the urban and suburban neighborhoods of the Capital District Region of New York State, they can remain ‘invisible’ for most of a decade (TU, 2006; Collins, 2007), until the issue of their political status is raised in local, state, and national arenas. This occurred in the Spring of 2006, when there were mass protests demanding the legalization of migrants without official work documents; it was followed when the New York State Governor proposed to expand immigrant access to driving licenses, which provoked heated reactions from local-region legislators and their sympathizers, conflating immigrants with criminals and (international) terrorists (Karlin, 2007). Both the demonstrations and the license controversy led to public calls and supporting legislation, at state and federal levels, aimed at more secure policing of national and state borders and documents, since borders and documents work in tandem to secure identity for ‘US Citizens.’ Immigrants seeking this identity were to ‘learn English,’ as condition for membership in a monolingual rather than multilingual America (Collins & Slembrouck, 2008/forthcoming; Odato & Crowe, 2007).
Conclusion

Two general points emerge from our accounts. One is that we see an understanding of our two cases as crucially informed by geopolitical processes as well as discourses of scale. Cross-national tests and national language policy claim societal relevance at a particular scale, but also move across scales as they are being (re-)articulated at various levels of societal and institutional organization. Rather than stating the distinction between practices observed in neighbourhood sites such as schools and national policy debate or cross-national testing in terms of the contrast between “micro” and “macro”, we prefer to stress that national policy articulations and debates about the international educational achievement measures are also micro events. Conversely, the micro events of on-the-ground multilingual practices also have macro significance. Thus, a second point we argue is that demographic data, ethnography, and analyses of categories and practices of ‘class' and 'minority' must be informed by scale analysis even as they contribute to our developing understanding of the dynamics of ‘scaling’.

We titled this paper “Is class relevant in constructing a multilingual Europe?” and have suggested various ways in which it is. But the cogency of our argument and the viability of our research program – concerned with spatiotemporal scaling in contemporary society, the logics of social polarization, and the dynamics of multilingual practice – depends on the important question of how class and multilingualism are understood. Regarding the former, we assert that it is absolutely essential to have a principled approach to class hierarchies and dynamics, drawing on the best theoretical and empirical work, in order to understand such things as the relation of different class groups to major institutions such as schools (for which there is a huge research literature) or immigration offices (for which there is a small but sufficient literature that, for instance, visa policies are tied to income and education levels (Ong, 1997; Horton, 2004; Zenner, 1991)).

We must also maintain an ethnographic alertness (what Bourdieu called ‘epistemological vigilance’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)) concerning the ways in which accounts of class are constructed in policy discourses and public media representations as well as in the research literature. For example, the term “kansarmoede,” or ‘poverty of opportunity,’ has been salient for a number of decades now in Belgian-Flemish discourses about socio-economic inequality across various domains (e.g. health, social welfare, and education). It is a term which has mostly been used to refer to family situations where there is an accumulation of often interlocking risk factors such as low income, unemployment, low parental education, poor housing, weak health, large family, relational difficulties, drugs and alcohol addiction, limited parenting skills, etc. The term “kansarmoede” alludes to a vicious cycle of mutually-reinforcing detrimental conditions and effects. It is also a concept which originates in a dual and dubious reading of society, suggesting a majority of haves and a minority of have-nots. It avoids any references to the received terminology of social class analysis (e.g. upper, middle and working classes, and it plays on the old illusion that the majority of given nations are ‘middle class’ (suggested by North American terms such as “mainstream”), when that is not the case (see, for example, Zweig, 2000, for U.S. data on what he terms ‘the working class majority’). Influenced by neoliberal political discourses, “kansarmoede” highlights a preferred scenario in which the majority of families make the best possible use of opportunities of employment, education, and so forth, while accepting that for an unspecified minority of families this ‘optimization of opportunity’ is unlikely to happen, given the material circumstances and cultural practices that prevail in the family. Although we do not have time to unpack them, terms such as “underclass” and “poverty” serve a similar function in U.S. policy and public discussion, pointing to class-differentiated constraints and conditions, but
detached from an understanding of class systems, racialization/ethnicization dynamics, or the
effects of gender.

Our approach to language and multilingualism requires a similar commitment to theoretical
innovation and empirical grounding. In our earlier work and in this paper, we take an
approach to multilingualism that eschews assumptions of bounded linguistic or social
communities (see also Hymes, 1996). In line with classic work in sociolinguistic diversity, we
assume that all speech communities are internally-differentiated, and that class hierarchies are
one principle of such differentiation (Labov, 1972b). Curiously, this robust finding from intra-
language variation has been largely absent from studies of multilingualism. Rejecting
language-and-group essentialism, our research to date has focused on the need to study the
social organization of multilingual practices. We recognize certain recurrent research
findings, such as that in multilingual communities the socioeconomic elites will display more
proficiency in the given standard national languages (Heller, 1994; Lutz, 2002; Woolard,
1989; Zentella, 1981). But we recognize also, and find in our own research, that non-elite
multilingual groups often show a wider range of intra- and cross-linguistic repertoires than
will elite multilingual groups (Collins and La Santa, 2006; Collins and Slembrouck, 2007;
Gross, 1993; Zentella, 1997). Which multilingualism is valued and which devalued is an
empirical question, one that deserves our theoretical and ethical attention.
REFERENCES


NOTES

1 This paper is a revised version of a presentation at a panel on “the construction of multilingual European identities,” organized by Michal Krzyzanowski and Ruth Wodak, at the Sociolinguistic Symposium 17, Amsterdam, 4 April 2008. We are grateful to the panel participants and audience for constructive comments.

2 Paragraph I.1 of the 2005 Act which introduced the portfolio of a European commissioner for multilingualism opens by stating that “[t]he European Union is founded on ‘unity in diversity’: diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs - and of languages. Besides the 20 official languages of the Union, there are 60 or so other indigenous languages and scores of non-indigenous languages spoken by migrant communities. It is this diversity that makes the European Union what it is: not a ‘melting pot’ in which differences are rendered down, but a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding” (European Commission, 2005).

3 As explained on the website of National Center for Education Statistics, “The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a system of international assessments that focus on 15-year-olds’ capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy. PISA also includes measures of general or cross-curricular competencies such as learning strategies. PISA emphasizes functional skills that students have acquired as they near the end of mandatory schooling. PISA is organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization of industrialized countries. Begun in 2000, PISA is administered every 3 years. Each administration includes assessments of all three subjects, but assesses one of the subjects in depth. The most recent administration was in 2006 and focused on science literacy.” Most EU countries participate in the programme, but the attention which the PISA results have received vary from country to country. In the Flemish context, the PISA results have been given much prominence in public debate on educational achievement (http://www.pisa.oecd.org/, accessed 28 April 2008).

4 At the age of fifteen, most youngsters will have had 4 years of French and at least 2 years of English.

5 In this aspect of the public debate, Bourdieu’s term of ‘cultural capital’ is frequently used and referred to, but with little attention to his concern with variation in the ‘forms of capital’ or the historical dynamics of capital and social fields (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu et al., 1999).

6 For example, Crawford’s (2007) plenary address before a statewide teachers’ union conference on NCLB correctly referred to economic diversity among ELLs, but the teachers union’s press release omitted this fact (NYSUT, 2007). Diaz’s (1997) impassioned critical analysis of the dismantling of bilingual education programs in a Pennsylvania town nonetheless ignores the obvious class differences among the Puerto Rican families in the community she lived with and studied, even though those differences correlated with readiness to defend the bilingual program.