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“Ohne Glutamat/Without MSG”: Shelf label design in a Thai supermarket

Abstract

Ethnic businesses are physical manifestations of the mobility of humans and goods around the globe. At the same time they constitute spaces for multilingual practices. One such practice is the design of shelf labels: typically small, rectangular pieces of paper attached to the edge of a product display featuring the price and the product’s name. This paper intends to shed light on the use of German and Thai on handwritten shelf labels in a small immigrant-owned convenience store in rural Germany. The data are a set of photographs of shelf labels and the products they are tagged to, ethnographic observations and fieldnotes, as well as anecdotes and statements by the owner of the store. The use of Scollon and Scollon’s (2003) analytical framework of *geosemiotics* reveals that in producing the inscriptions on the labels the owner draws on her knowledge of various semiotic systems strategically. The production of shelf labels can be seen as a complex activity that demands of the producer to possess the competencies to navigate an array of social discourses in order to cater to her clientele in the most relevant way.

1 Introduction

A recent NBC video shows Washington DC mayor, Vincent Gray, doing a forceful drug paraphernalia search along Georgia Avenue, NW. The video displays him going from shop to shop, warning shop-owners that there will be no tolerance in the future for drug-related business in his town. In one of the shops, Mayor Gray encounters what the news site describes as a “language barrier with an Ethiopian shop-keeper”. As Gray asks the shop-keeper questions about drugs, he realizes with growing frustration that the clerk does not understand him. A news article related to the video reports him lecturing the clerk:

How do you sell anything if you don't understand? ... If someone asks you for something, do you know what they're asking for? ... You never heard of marijuana? ... I don't really

know how you work in here if you can't communicate with the people who are coming here.¹

This excerpt reflects a commonly held view in public discourse today: that immigrants' lack of competencies in the national repertoire(s) of their new home constitutes a problem and an obstacle in the daily pursuit of their work and lives. In this chapter, shifting from the US context to rural Germany, we would like to show that away from this rather caricatural view, the picture on the ground is, as it is often the case, more complex than this news report portrays. We would like to do so by examining one small practice: that of producing shelf labels for products in a small retail store operated by an immigrant owner. While this practice could seem at first glance rather trivial and unremarkable, following a Mediated Discourse Analysis perspective (Norris/Jones 2005; Scollon 2001; Scollon/Scollon 2004; Scollon/de Saint-Georges 2011), we would like to show that this entry point can help us unpack a variety of social discourses and linguistic practices that shed light on the complexity of the multilingual practices of ethnic entrepreneurs. The practices that we will take up for analysis are those of a Thai female shop owner in the region of Saarland, whom we will call "Wipa".

2 Matrimonial mobility and ethnic entrepreneurship

Thai nationals are a minority migrant group in Germany. Of the roughly 7 million foreign nationals registered in Germany in 2011, Thais only account for 0.8%. Even among all foreigners hailing from Asia, Thais are a minority of only 6.7%. But since the early 1980s their overall number has been rising steadily (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012a). An aspect that sets the Thai immigrant community in Germany apart from others is gender: women have always and still do constitute more than 80% of the group. For instance, 86.7% of Thai nationals in 2011 were female. At the same time, registered marriages between German men and Thai women have been on the rise, which leads Ruenkaew (2003, 258) to suggest a causal connection between the migration of these women and marriage.

Research on marriage migration has shown that conjugal unions between Asian women and Western men happen for a variety of reasons and motivations. While early studies describe them as a form of forced labour migration from the economic periphery to the centre (Lipka 1989; Niesner et al. 1997), contemporary investigations highlight that a variety of economic and socio-cultural factors are at play, such as negative experiences in a previous marriage,

¹ The authors wish to thank Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi for pointing the video out to us. A link to it can be found at: <http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/Mayor--216102301.html>

being considered too old to marry, or striving to secure a stable future for children (Lapanun 2012; Ruenkaew 2003; Suksomboon 2009). Marrying abroad thus presents a viable opportunity for both parties involved and ultimately underscores the agency these women exercise in the process when matrimony with a Western man becomes a choice rather than a chore. In this context, transnational family ties are usually not severed but maintained, e.g. through the sending of remittances generated through the wife's paid work. Linguistically, this means that these women seem to maintain their Thai language actively, while at the same time finding themselves in a position where they have to learn one or more new languages to be economically active in their new home.

With regards to work, self-employment presents an access route to the labour market often taken by these Thai women. Like many other countries around the world, Germany shows higher than average self-employment rates for certain migrant groups. Table 1 below illustrates that among South and Southeast Asians in Germany between 2005 and 2011 these rates have been continuously higher than the national average and the average of those with and without a migration background. While non-EU migrants to Germany are usually barred from self-employment, foreign spouses of German citizens have for their part full access to the labour market according to §27 (5) of the Residence Act. This means that after a successful migration process, Thai women have the right to set up and operate a private business.

Table 1: Self-employment rates in Germany (calculated from Statistisches Bundesamt 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012b)

Self-employment rates in Germany	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
national average	11.2	11.1	10.9	10.7	10.9	10.9	11.0
without migration background	11.5	11.4	11.2	10.9	11.1	11.1	11.2
with migration background	9.6	9.5	9.4	9.5	10.0	10.2	10.3
South & Southeast Asians	17.5	15.4	16.8	15.0	14.8	15.5	15.0

A mixture of push and pull factors explains the greater likelihood of self-employment among migrants. Motivating factors are in particular the need to avoid unemployment, discrimination at work, the prospect of obtaining higher socio-economic status, as well as professional independence and self-fulfilment (Leicht et al. 2005; Leicht et al. 2012). Secondly, institutional structures in the host society only provide a limited number of entry opportunities for migrants. Immigrant businesses thus tend to occupy markets that have low formal entry requirements (Kloosterman 2010), e.g. the catering industry or the retail sector. Thirdly, in these market segments migrants often capitalize on a skill, knowledge, service or product that reflects or bears witness to their cultural or

ethnic origin (Light/Gold 2000). In other words: due to their mobility, these individuals are able to turn cultural capital into entrepreneurial capital in the context of their new home. All this may explain why many Thai women in Germany open up massage salons and convenience stores, such as the one run by Wipa, who arrived in Germany with her German husband 22 years ago and who has been successfully operating her business for the past 12 years.

3 Migration, work and language use

In terms of how language plays out in the work of migrant business owners, the research literature on ethnic entrepreneurs has repeatedly made reference to issues linked to the migrants' linguistic repertoires, distinguishing both its beneficial and problematic aspects for the business. Use and maintenance of the mother tongue or first language aids in securing alternative financial resources and supply chains, managing and contracting staff, and creating customer loyalty within the migrant community (Light/Gold 2000). On the other hand, a successful business venture seems to demand a level of proficiency in the language(s) of the host economy. In particular in the European context, administrative issues are dealt with in a state language that often presents a recent addition to the migrant owner's repertoire. More importantly even, long-term survival of an immigrant business appears to be linked to the ability to rise above the ethnic market, in order to open up the service to an ethnically diverse clientele (Kloosterman 2010). This in turn involves the ability of the entrepreneur to open up linguistically. While this literature on ethnic entrepreneurship provides a broad frame to reflect about the relationship between migration, business and language use, it is however mainly located in the fields of economics and sociology, and does not pay much specific attention to language practices as they play out in the daily work of the entrepreneurs themselves.

The field of "language and work"² has paid more detailed attention to such language practices, even though the number of studies focusing on multilingualism at work is still comparatively small (Hewitt 2012; Kameyama/Meyer 2007; Meyer/Apfelbaum 2010; Roberts 2007). Aspects of multilingual language use have been investigated for a variety of professional contexts around the world, e.g. in the health care sector (Moyer 2011), multinational and transnational companies (Kingsley 2009; Lüdi/Höchle/Yanaprasart 2010; Nekula/Nekvapil/Šichová 2005; Piller/Takahashi 2013), engineering (Hill/van Zyl 2002), supermarkets and IT companies

² The study of language at work has been growing steadily since the 1990s and is now a well established field (for synthesizing volumes see Bargiela-Chiappini 2009; Sarangi/Roberts 1999; Drew/Heritage 1992, among others).

(Franziskus 2013), pharmaceutical companies and humanitarian aid organizations (Stalder 2010), factory plants (Holmes/Stubbe 2004), to name but a few. These studies illustrate, among other aspects, the tensions between corporate efforts to manage linguistic diversity at work and the employees' actual language practices. But here again, despite the fact that the research on multilingualism in the workplace is burgeoning, investigations of multilingualism in small private businesses remain rare, even though communicative practices play an important role in the workplaces of entrepreneurs (Müller/Volery/von Siemens 2012). In fact, only a handful of studies in applied linguistics focus on immigrant entrepreneurs (Collier 2006; Collier 2010; Hewitt 2007; Leung 2009). Their findings present several common points. For instance, ethnic businesses often rely on bi- or multilingual administrative staff and business expansion depends on the development of multilingual repertoires at crucial points in the business. For instance, Hewitt's (2007) study of immigrant-owned businesses in the London area shows that the transnational supply chains of Polish-owned construction companies require the administrative staff to be literate in Polish and English. Solo entrepreneurs with a migration background on the other hand must manage such multilingual demands alone. Collier's (2006, 2010) studies in the US context of nailcare and hair braiding salons illustrate that successful female migrant entrepreneurs competently transform into bilingual and bicultural agents in the context of their businesses. It is in the course of their daily work that they employ their mother tongue and develop their knowledge in the language and culture of their clients.

4 The multilingual practice of designing shelf labels

The brief review of the literature above makes clear that while issues of language knowledge are directly related to the successful management of immigrant businesses, still little is known about the actual language practices occurring in these workplaces. In this chapter, we intend to give a glimpse into them. More specifically, we have chosen to focus on the literacy practice of producing shelf labels by Wipa, the Thai manager of a small convenience store in the German region of Saarland, a rural area bordering with France and Luxembourg. Shelf labels are the small rectangular strips of paper indicating information about the name, the price, the container, or weight of the products on the shelves. While small, they constitute a conspicuous feature of the semiotic landscape of a retail store, as they can be found on almost all the displays in the shop. Interestingly, in the case of Wipa's store they do not display a uniform design principle with respect to the languages used for their inscriptions. Consequently, our aim here is to attempt to understand and explain why this is so: What are the motives behind the use of German and Thai on the shelf labels? Why do the shelf labels show variation with respect to the use of

languages? And beyond that, what does looking at these shelf labels in the context of their production tell us about issues such as: the identity and agency of the producer of the signs, her trajectory of migration and mobility, or broad discourses related to managing a food retail store?

To explore these questions, our analysis is based on two kinds of data. On the one hand, we analyzed a set of photographs of the shelf labels and the products they are tagged to in the convenience store. On the other hand, we relied on 50 hours of ethnographic observations carried out during the first half of 2013 by one of the authors to research and document language practices in several immigrant-owned businesses.³ In the tradition of linguistic anthropology and the ethnography of communication, these observations were recorded through fieldnotes, still photographs, as well as audio and videorecordings. They also included specific anecdotes and statements made by the owner of the store about the use of languages on the labels. In combining the close study of shelf labels as multimodal objects with a broad materialistic and ethnographic approach to these signs, we have also aligned with a specific framework, that of geosemiotics (Scollon/Scollon 2003), which we describe briefly below.

5 Geosemiotics: the study of signs in place

Shelf labels can be viewed as signs that take on a specific meaning because of their placement in some public or semi-public space. Traditionally, as Blommaert and Huang (2010) note, two approaches have specifically looked at such signs. Linguistic Landscape studies have had an early interest in studying posters, billboards, road signs, etc. and have traditionally focused on the *linguistic* aspects of signs in public spaces, counting, for example, the distribution of languages (e.g. Backhaus 2007; Gorter 2006; Shohamy/Gorter 2009). The other discipline that has paid particular attention to how signs are designed and used is the field of social semiotics (Kress/van Leeuwen 1996). Multimodal approaches to signs have, for example, sought to analyse their visual, textural, textual and linguistic aspects, in order to find out “what they can teach us about the social processes in which they are embedded” (Blommaert/Huang 2010, 13). In this study, we have chosen to adopt yet another perspective on signs in public space, that of *geosemiotics*, partly building on social semiotics and multimodal approaches to discourse, but also contributing its own original framework and empirical studies to the study of signs in space (de Saint-Georges 2004; Lou 2007; Scollon/Scollon 2003).

³ This chapter is part of the PhD research project by Stefan Karl Serwe, entitled “Exploiting linguistic resources for success? Language use among ethnic entrepreneurs” (University of Luxembourg).

Geosemiotics was first articulated as a framework by Scollon and Scollon in their book *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World* (2003). In this and subsequent work, the Scollons put forward the idea that a focus purely on language constitutes a form of analytical self-censorship. “A close focus on language”, Scollon (2005, 470) notes, “leads to insights about language but tends to lead away from engagement with ... social issues”. They thus propose that both the study of language and that of social questions can be illuminated by investigating the relations between the political and the social economy of a place and the semiotic signs designed and used in that socially, historically, and culturally shaped place (e.g. Lou 2007). In their view, these relations can be best investigated by attending to the close analysis of three interlinked semiotic subsystems: (1) visual semiotics, (2) the interaction order and (3) place semiotics.

Roughly speaking, *visual semiotics*, in the tradition of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), studies how signs are designed and analyses what kind of multimodal ensembles they form: what is represented on the sign and how is the representation composed? how are signs materially designed (code-preference, inscription, color, typefont, etc.) and what meanings are stressed or repressed? what types of interactions do the signs assume with their potential reader?, etc. (Lou forthcoming).

The *interaction order* is a term borrowed from sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) to refer to the specific configurations participants in an interaction take up to each other. Signs, for example, take on different meanings depending on the type of encounter they figure in (e.g. a service encounter, a meeting, a conversation). The meaning of a political text is not the same whether it is read at home in front of a mirror, in front of a large group of members of one’s own party, or during a TV interview facing one’s political opponent (Scollon 2008, 19).

Place semiotics refers to the idea that space is never a neutral container for action but that it also affects both what is going on in it and how it can be interpreted. How signs are placed in space is another meaning system, “neither located in the persons of the social actors [nor] in the framed artefacts of visual semiotics” (Scollon/Scollon 2003, 8). Or, as Blommaert and Huang (2010, 3) note,

Sociological, cultural, sociolinguistic, and political features of ... space will determine how signs look and work in that space, and signs will contribute to the organization and regulation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences and by imposing particular restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences.

Scollon and Scollon (2004) also insist on the importance of looking at the Discourses that circulate in any one place and that make up that space as a unique nexus of discourses in tension.

In that sense looking jointly at the emplacement of signs, their semiotic design, the type of interaction order they enter, and the discourses they materialize can teach us a lot. It can be a window to learn something about the designers of the signs: what is their legitimacy in constructing signs and space? what linguistic and other cultural resources do they have available to do so? It can also inform us about the users of the space: what do they do with signs? do signs affect users? do users shape the signs in any way? It also provides information about the belief systems of the targeted audience: what kinds of social discourses are made visible through the way the signs are constructed? which ones are attended to by the producers and readers of signs? In the analysis that follows we take a closer, geosemiotic look at shelf labels. Using a contrastive approach to highlight what is at play with shelf label design, we begin by considering a standard type of shelf label as it is used in a large German supermarket chain, before comparing it to the label found in the Thai-owned convenience store.

6 What's in a shelf label?

In most supermarket chains, the production of shelf labels is tied in with the stock management system. The labels are machine-printed on a regular basis. Employees slot them into the plastic covered skirting that is glued to the edge of the rack, so that they appear directly underneath the product. Figure 1 depicts an example of such a shelf label together with the product, here stock cubes, as it is used by one of Germany's biggest supermarket chains. What kinds of information are available on such labels? To find this out we need to pay close attention to the label's visual composition, its place in the interaction order of the supermarket, and its physical placement on the shelf.⁴

⁴ Legal regulations regarding price labelling do exist in Germany. The *PreisangabenVO* (Price Regulation Act) states that the price per unit must be clearly visible on a label and easily accessible for the customer. There are no guidelines with respect to language use, however.

Figure 1: Stock cubes Asia



There are various information units on a shelf label: product name, manufacturer, packet size, price per unit, price, date of label printing, the barcode, and numerical codes identifying the product and the supplying warehouse. These pieces of information are not randomly placed on the label but follow a polarized left-right arrangement. On the left is the information about the product and store internal information. On the right are the details about the product price. Certain elements are also given salience due to their font size and type face, or in other words the *modality* of the inscriptions on the label (Kress/van Leeuwen 1996; Scollon/Scollon 2003). The large font size and bold type face visually highlight the price in comparison to the packet size above or the price per single unit immediately below. On the left, capital letters and bold type face emphasize the name of the product and the manufacturer over the store internal information. Composition and modality of the information units on the shelf label thus follow a certain order. On the one hand, the visual composition permits distinguishing internal information for store employees from information for the clients. On the other hand, the label can be said to materialize a certain interaction order often found in retail settings: the service encounter.

In more traditional settings (for example, a weekly fresh market or the corner store), researchers have noted that service encounters typically involve an interactional routine comprising three stages (Ayoola 2009; Bailey 1997): the sale request or opening, the negotiation of the business transaction, and the purchase itself. Supermarkets, by and large, are on the contrary organized so as to keep direct interactions between seller and buyer to a minimum. This is possible because as part of the infrastructural discourse of the retail space, the shelf labels materialize information exchanges in the form of an artefact. By informing the clients about the price of the product, the labels relieve the employees of the potentially recurring need to answer clients' requests for information in face-to-face interactions. This explains the visual salience of

pricing and product info. However, the meaning of the label is only complete through its physical emplacement and thus its alignment with the product and other labels.⁵

As in our example, in many supermarkets, the shelf label is positioned immediately below the product. Primarily due to this vertical alignment of product and label, onlookers link the information on the label with the product. This is particularly true for the visually most salient information on the label, the price. The connection between the label and the product is further strengthened through the reproduction of the product name and the manufacturer on the label via a process of exophoric indexicality (Scollon/Scollon 2003, 153). Moreover, if the product were to be missing, the label would act as a place-holder, reminding the client of what *should* be stacked on the shelf. Finally, even more broadly speaking, the shelf label enters into an intertextual relationship with other labels around it (not shown here). Comparing labels, for example, allows to immediately identify which product is the cheapest in the same row.

The labels in Wipa's store, such as the one shown in Figure 2 below, follow the same basic semiotic principles. They contain fewer information units, but their composition and the modalities of the inscriptions support the commercial interaction order. They are also pasted to the edges of the shelves just below the products. Unlike the corporate labels though, the inscriptions are handwritten and the product name is given in two languages, German and Thai, but, as mentioned above, not consistently so. In the following sections, we intend to investigate why the inscriptions sometimes draw on one language and sometimes on two and what this tells us about the multilingual practices and the agency of Wipa as the producer of these signs.

7 Bilingual labels: Catering to the needs of all customers

A distinctive feature of the inscriptions on the shelf labels in Wipa's store is the use of both German and Thai for product names. In Figure 2 the label is not attached to a shelf but pasted on the inside of a fridge filled with fresh vegetables, so that it appears just below the product when the door remains closed. While the vegetables themselves are not labelled, the inscription helps to identify the product, specifies the package size, and announces the prize and the

⁵ There are surely other modes of price labelling, e.g. by displaying the price directly on the product through a tag or in writing. Shelf labels, however, have become a staple feature in food retail. More generally, the practice of price labelling ties in with the fixed pricing policy prevalent in the retail industry. Attaching a price label to a product indicates that the merchant intends to refrain from bargaining over the price.

currency.⁶ For the name of the product “coriander”, Wipa used two languages: German *Koriander* and Thai ผักชี

Figure 2: Coriander



A bilingual inscription such as this one basically gives off a variety of sociolinguistic information (Scollon/Scollon 2003, 116-124). Firstly, the use of German points to the shop’s location and embeddedness in a German-language consumer economy. The use of Thai suggests the Asian or Thai theme of the store. Secondly, assuming that the Thai script does not express a symbolic value only – much like European languages signal trendy and fashionable retail outlets in Asia (Blommaert 2010; Curtin 2009; Scollon/Scollon 2003; Serwe/Ong/Ghesquière 2013) – the languages index an audience that is literate in both or either of the languages. And thirdly, it suggests that the producer of the sign, Wipa, is able to use these two linguistic resources.

While these descriptions account for some of the reasons these two languages are displayed, ethnographic evidence allows us to take the analysis one step further (Blommaert 2012; Scollon/Scollon 2003, 122-124). Observations in the store confirm that female Thai customers are responsible for a significant part of the overall revenue of this business. Particularly popular with Thai customers are vegetables, all of which Wipa obtains through a German wholesaler who imports them directly from Thailand, so that the greens are freshly available every Tuesday. At first sight, the use of Thai seems to indicate Wipa’s effort to accommodate to the language knowledge of a particularly loyal community of customers. However, Wipa’s statement in Excerpt 1 below reveals her motivation for using Thai for the product name on the shelf label:

⁶ Interestingly, on the supermarket shelf label the currency (Euros €) was not explicitly mentioned, but simply assumed.

Excerpt 1

W: also hauptsächlich ich hab geschrieben damit die,
 well mainly I wrote that they,
viele kann nicht Deutsch lesen.
 many cannot read German.

Wipa construes the lack of German reading skills among her Thai customers (referred to with the definite plural article *die*) as the main reason for using Thai on the shelf labels (*hauptsächlich* “mainly”). Therefore, the use of Thai is not only a means of representing the seemingly strong or preferred resource in her Thai clients’ repertoires, but Wipa presents its use as a necessity, based on a concrete social fact. She wants to ensure that the situated indexical meaning of the shelf label remains intact even for those among her customers that cannot read German. The ethnographic contextualization of this bilingual sign makes clear some of the socio-political realities within the Thai community in this part of Germany that a descriptive analysis alone would not allow us to recover. It also reveals something about Wipa. In designing the signs, she makes active use of both her knowledge of the conditions in the local community and her linguistic knowledge of German and Thai.

In the next section, we look at another bilingual shelf label in the vegetable section, but now we focus on the part of the sign written in German. The analysis will tell us more about the types of knowledge Wipa draws on to produce the inscriptions on the label.

8 Bilingual labels: Showing expert knowledge

Figure 3: Bean sprouts



The discussion in the previous section illustrated that Wipa’s use of Thai is grounded in her familiarity with the state of language and literacy knowledge of the local Thai migrant community. As we are about to show, the use of German

on the label in Figure 3 seems to rely upon her knowledge of the product and the commercial register in German.

The label in Figure 3 refers to a popular ingredient in Asian cooking, namely bean sprouts or ถั่วงอก in Thai. There are two major types of bean sprouts: the commonly used mung bean sprout, which is white in colour, and the larger-sized soy bean sprout, which comes in a yellowish hue. Both types are used in Asian cuisine, but due to its milder taste and smaller size mung bean sprouts are the more popular. While in Thai ถั่วงอก “bean sprouts” does not make reference to the type of bean, the respective German noun compounds do: *Mungbohnenprossen* “mung bean sprouts” and *Sojabohnenprossen* “soy bean sprouts” or simply *Sojasprossen* “soy sprouts”. The sprouts that Wipa sells originate from the mung bean and are thus *Mungbohnenprossen* in German. Wipa uses the appropriate referring expression and has written it on the shelf label. With this practice she follows the commercial register in German, which differentiates between *Mungbohnenprossen* and *Sojabohnenprossen*. However, in colloquial German the referring expression to any kind of bean sprout is *Sojasprossen*, despite the fuzziness of the term. Indeed, recordings of sales interactions in Wipa’s store show that the term *Sojasprossen* is almost exclusively used in reference to the sprouts by customers and owner. Excerpt 2 below shows that Wipa is aware of the difference between the commercial and colloquial use and her customers’ preference for the term *Sojasprossen*, but she still prefers to use the technical term:

Excerpt 2

W: ich hab mungbohnenprossen geschrieben,

I wrote mung bean sprouts,

weil eh,

because uh,

anfang hab ich auch sojaprossen geschrieben?

in the beginning I also wrote soy bean sprouts?

S: ja.

yes.

W: und dann nachher,

and then later on,

dacht ich nee das ist nicht von sojabohnen ne?

I thought no this is not from soy beans right?

S: ach [so].

[okay].

W: [wollt] dann korrekt schreiben.

[then] wanted to write correctly.

es gibt auch schon dat die deutschen kunden kommen wundern,

it happens also at times that the German clients come wonder,

dieser name aber,

this name but

dat ist mungbohnen.

that is mung beans.

nee wir wollen sojabohnen sprossen haben.

no we want to have soy bean sprouts.

S: ach so.

okay.

W: dat ist es,

that is it,

dann muss ich wieder erklären.

then I have to explain again.

Although Wipa's use of *Mungbohnen sprossen* "mung bean sprouts" on the label may lead to misunderstandings among German-literate customers and subsequently to her efforts to resolve them, as she expresses in the quote, Wipa is convinced that she should continue to use the accurate biological term instead of the colloquial one as the referring expression. This provides us with some clues about Wipa. First, she demonstrates her German language knowledge by showing awareness of register variation. The choice of the technical over the lay expression reflects her choice to be congruent with the commercial jargon commonly used by retailers. At the same time, the non-standard spelling (*Mungbohnen Sprossen* instead of *Mungbohnen sprossen*) can be said to give away her German learner identity. Second, Wipa's choice of *Mungbohnen sprossen* rests on expert conceptual knowledge relevant to her occupational field. Her word choice can thus be seen as an expression of her professional integrity.

The majority of the products in Wipa's store are imports from Asia. Depending on the country of origin, the product labels feature Asian languages and scripts, such as Thai, Chinese or Vietnamese, but also English. Therefore, another function of the bilingual inscriptions on Wipa's shelf labels is to provide a translation that will inform clients about the product. It is to this next aspect of Wipa's multilingual shelf label design that we turn now.

9 Bilingual labels: Mediating between culinary cultures

Customers may encounter products that only feature English on the packet as in Figure 4 below, so that on her shelf label Wipa appears to provide the translations of the product name. The inscription in German and Thai accommodates to the linguistic resources of her customers. In this case, however, both the German as well as the Thai phrase do not provide literal translations of the product name. The German phrase *Würzpaste für hainanesisches Reisgericht mit Huhn* "spice paste for Hainanese rice dish with chicken" is an informative rendition of the original, and the Thai one เครื่องปรุงข้าวมันไก่ "seasoning rice fat chicken" is a free idiomatic translation. The question now is: which resources does Wipa draw on to arrive at these translations?

Figure 4: Chicken rice paste



As the lower part of Figure 4 illustrates, the German phrase on the shelf label is copied from the product description on the back of the product itself. It is important to mention here that German legislation on product safety (ProdSG) requires all importers of food to provide translations of the product information in German on each unit, so that consumers are able to quickly and clearly obtain relevant information. Consequently, food products usually carry details on the ingredients as well as cooking instructions in German (here also in Dutch and French). They are usually provided on an adhesive that is stuck to the back of the product.

On the other hand Wipa also relies on her own translation skills. The Thai phrase has not been lifted from another source, but it represents a free idiomatic translation based on Wipa's familiarity with the dish as it is displayed on the product and her knowledge of the culinary customs in Thailand, as she reports in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 3

W: ich hab das geschrieben ne? auf thailändisch.

I wrote that right? in thai.

damit die thai wissen,

so that the Thais know,

weil dat ist auch bekannt in thailand?

because it is also known in Thailand?
nur? eh wie sagt genau nach wort zu übersetzen,
 only? uh as I said to translate word by word,
nach meiner meinung,
 in my opinion,
die leute die leute versteht nicht.
 the people the people don't understand.
 (...)
 gai ist huhn.
 gai is chicken.
kao man ist typisch wenn ma äh,
 kao man is typical if one uh,
reis mit was fettiges fetthaltige so zum kochen dann ne?
 rice with something oily containing oil to then boil right?
zum beispiel wenn äh,
 for example if uh,
meersalat kochen wir auch kokosmilch und reis,
 sea food salad we also cook with coconut milk and rice,
den Klebereis.
 the glutinous rice.
fast ähnlich wie dieser Hainan Chicken Rice aber,
 very similar to this Hainan Chicken rice but,
machen wir dann mit kokosmilch.
 we do it with coconut milk then.

The first part of the Thai compound เครื่องปรุง means “seasoning” or “ingredients to mix”, which is semantically the closest expression in Thai to the English noun compound *spice paste*. The second part, ข้าวมันไก่, are three nouns that mean “rice fat chicken”. As a compound noun they make up the name of a popular dish in Thailand, which, as Wipa explains, turns out to be very similar to *Hainanese Chicken Rice* as it is known in Singapore. The Thai inscription on the shelf label thus rests on Wipa’s knowledge of the two languages involved here, but equally on her knowledge of the subtle differences and similarities in Asian cooking. This allows her to act as a cultural and culinary mediator through language.

We hope that our discussions of the bilingual inscriptions on these shelf labels illustrate that a close analysis is able to reveal the various resources that are drawn on in their production. The practice of producing the labels compels Wipa not only to consider the resources in her customers’ and her own linguistic repertoires, but it builds upon her knowledge of the professional, cultural, and culinary contexts in Germany, Thailand, and Southeast Asia. The next examples look more closely at monolingual inscriptions on the shelf labels and the motives behind the use of one language only.

10 Monolingual labels in German: Opening up access

As indicated above, the shelf labels in Wipa's store exhibit a common design, but the product names are not always provided in two languages. The label referring to stock cubes in Figure 5 below is such an example that begs the question: why is only one language used for the inscription in this case?

Figure 5: Stock cubes without MSG



Figure 5 shows the product and the way it is displayed to the customer and the shelf label with a monolingual inscription in German: *Bouillonwürfel ohne Glutamat* “stock cubes without MSG”. The product packaging only features descriptions in Thai script. Therefore, Thai-literate clients do not require the shelf label to identify the product. For them the label is merely important for the price, which is emphasized through a larger and thicker font. The absence of German on the product packaging thus explains the monolingual German product name inscription on the shelf label, because it ensures the identification of the product by Wipa's German-literate clients. Unlike in the previous example, Wipa did not take the German noun phrase from the ingredient list on the back of the product, however. Figures 6 and 7 below show that the reference to the flavour has been dropped in favour of the prepositional phrase *ohne Glutamat* “without MSG”. Excerpt 4 below illustrates Wipa's reasons for incorporating this additional piece of information in the shelf label product name.

enhancer” or the numerical code E621 are most commonly used. As for the particular type of stock cubes that Wipa sells in her shop, they do not contain any MSG, as the product list in Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7: Pork broth cubes: Ingredients label – Details



Obviously, Wipa chose to highlight the absence of MSG in these cubes via the inscription on the shelf label. She explains her addition of *ohne Glutamat* “without MSG” through her knowledge of the potentially negative impact that MSG has on some of her customers’ health. Yet her use of a monolingual inscription in German here suggests that this information is projected in particular to her German-literate customers, who may be considerably more concerned about MSG in Asian food products than her Thai-literate clients.

To sum up, this example illustrates the general motivation behind a monolingual inscription in German on a shelf label, namely the presence of Thai and absence of German on the product packaging. German-literate customers require the inscription on the shelf label to identify the product, while her Thai customers have access to the information on the packet. More than that, however, by choosing to add the prepositional phrase *ohne Glutamat* “without MSG” Wipa demonstrates awareness of her customers’ health concerns and potentially a greater interest by her German speaking clientele in issues of food content and safety. As in the previous example the inscription is not simply a translation but a strategy to accommodate her customer’s concerns and preferences. While a monolingual inscription in German is fuelled by efforts to be more inclusive, the subsequent discussion shows that a monolingual inscription in Thai has the opposite effect.

11 Monolingual labels in Thai: Restricting access

Monolingual inscriptions in Thai are rare on the shelf labels in Wipa’s store. The shelf label in Figure 8 was placed in the fridge underneath a stack of transparent

plastic containers filled with a red paste as shown in the same image. The inscription in Thai identifies the product as น้ำพริกตัวมันกุ้ง “roasted shrimp chilli paste”. Since the plastic containers lack any further product information, the use of Thai only suggests that the product is advertised to Wipa’s Thai-literate community of customers.

Figure 8: Roasted shrimp chilli paste



In an anecdote recorded in the field notes, Wipa related that the proceeds of the sale of this paste were meant to support the visit of a Thai Buddhist monk. Using only an inscription in Thai on the label was thus a strategy to restrict access to the product to fellow Thai Buddhists who may have wanted to support the event. But Wipa gave another reason for regulating interest in the product via the use of Thai only. The paste is not commercially mass-produced, but it is home-made by herself. Due to the fact that the sale of such home-made products in her store may not be entirely legal, she chose a monolingual inscription in Thai as a strategy to advertise the product to a community of clients that she largely knows well personally. While she is sure of the good quality of the product, its sale among the Thai immigrant community may be less likely to lead to an official complaint, should anything be wrong with the paste.

In summary, monolingual inscriptions on the shelf labels are used strategically by Wipa, but with contrasting objectives. Similar to a bilingual inscription, an inscription in German renders a product more accessible to her clients, because such a monolingual label is usually attached to a product that only features Thai on its packaging. But we have also shown that the monolingual German inscription is based on Wipa’s knowledge of her customers’ culinary preferences or concerns. On the other hand, a monolingual inscription in Thai on the shelf label aims to limit interest in the product to a specific subgroup of customers.

12 Concluding discussion

In closing, we might take up again our initial question: what have we learned from looking at the seemingly inconspicuous practice of producing shelf labels in the context of an ethnic entrepreneur's business?

From a social perspective, the practices analysed first speak about the internationalisation of local markets. Processes of globalization and increased mobility of people and goods are often talked about in the context of highly populated urban centres, but they also have an effect on regions at the periphery of Europe, such as the Saar region in Germany. A visible, material testimony to these movements is the presence of ethnic businesses such as Wipa's convenience store in rural or small town areas. One of the differences between Wipa's business and businesses in urban centres, however, is that owners of ethnic businesses in the periphery cannot entirely fall back on a predominantly co-ethnic clientele to generate returns. In order to thrive economically, they are in need to open up their business as much as possible to a more mainstream market. What we have tried to show in our analysis is that this process of opening up as described in the economic literature also leaves linguistic traces, including down to very small practices, such as the inscription of product names on shelf labels.

From a linguistic perspective, studying the production of shelf labels can work as a diagnostic tool (Blommaert 2012). Their examination allows making visible the levels of multilingualisms that are usually invisible on a regional or even national scale in Germany. It also gives useful information about the linguistic regime operating in the space of the shop (Blommaert 2012). This regime, unlike the regime of more mainstream supermarkets, is one in which a differentiated approach to the clientele can be organized. For example, the fact that many Thai women lack German literacy skills motivates Wipa to provide product names in Thai and more generally, the presence of Thai in the shop alongside German marks the shop as a space where these two resources are valued equally. On the contrary, in mainstream supermarkets, shelf labels are the product of a management system that is not able to cater to the linguistic repertoires of the customers.

From the perspective of individual geographical mobility, the study of Wipa's practices of designing shelf labels also speaks about her own trajectory. Her mobility has exposed her to at least three cultural systems: Thai, German, and the community of (Thai) migrants in Germany. The patterns of language use on the shelf labels present traces of all of these. Consequently, we can regard Wipa's language practices in designing the shelf labels as instances of what Pütz (2003) refers to as *everyday transculturality* exercised by migrant entrepreneurs. Everyday transculturality is the routinized ability of globally mobile individuals to access the resources of various semiotic systems in daily social practice. But Wipa is not just making use of this everyday transculturality for social reasons.

She is also a business owner who strives to make profit. In the retail sector where competition is fierce, going the extra mile for your customers may keep you above the rest. We would argue that Wipa's use of German and Thai on the shelf labels also needs to be seen in this economic light. As a business owner she is able to draw on her familiarity with various semiotic systems consciously, in order to gain an advantage over competitors. This is what Pütz (2003) calls *strategic transculturality*, the ability of individuals to make goal-directed use of the semiotic resources at their disposal.

From a discourse perspective, the study of the design of shelf labels also made clear that a shop floor such as that of Wipa's convenience store is the converging point of a complex web of discourses. Labelling in the small ethnic business thus appears to be a complex activity, carried out by making various choices at the intersection of many social discourses related to health, literacy, language policies, migration, economy, religion, culinary practices and food regulations among others. Navigating these discourses, we saw, is one of the competencies owners of such businesses need to develop, if they want to cater to their clientele in the most relevant way.

Altogether, we hope to have shown that a geosemiotic approach, aiming to provide thick ethnographic descriptions of signs in place rather than merely listing languages used on them, can shed a more nuanced light on the multilingual practices on the "ethnic" shop floor. In particular, we hope to have made clearer that the linguistic and cultural competencies required to carry out one's daily business as a self-employed entrepreneur of migrant background are much more versatile and multifaceted than Mayor Gray and many commentators in public discourse usually acknowledge.

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