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Protean Heritage, Everyday Superdiversity
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Executive Summary

This is a summary of the research outcomes elaborated in detail in the following report, which was conducted as Phase Two of the Birmingham case study of AHRC-funded Translating Cultures project, ‘Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities’. Linguistic ethnographic research was conducted with a Customer Experience Assistant at the Library of Birmingham in 2015.

- In the superdiverse city, where myriad values, meanings, and qualities circulate, the inheritance of the past was a resource from which to choose some features of heritage for the present and future, while leaving others in the past.

- Certain artefacts were imbued with a sense of history, identity and continuity. These artefacts represented values and meanings beyond themselves: they asserted and expressed identity and social and cultural values and meanings.

- Values associated with, but paradoxically remote from, ‘Chinese’ cultural heritage were preserved and protected. Chinese inheritance was viewed from a safe distance, and was a resource from which to select heritage to be safeguarded for the present and future.

- Heritage was \textit{embodied}, and included gestures, bearing, and physical interaction between library staff and users, and between library colleagues.

- The aggregate of discourses circulating in and through the Library of Birmingham was complex, mobile, and heterogeneous, testifying to the mobility and superdiversity of the library space.

- In the public realm of exchanges between library staff and their clients, and in the parochial realm of interactions between colleagues, the library was a place in which language in use and action reflected the mobility and flux characteristic of superdiversity.

- Learning the repertoires required to navigate and participate in the superdiverse city was a dynamic process. It constituted a combination of choosing elements of inheritance and transforming them into heritage, and learning new ways of being based on the changing social world.

- In the Library of Birmingham heritage was suffused with complexity, as indexicals of origin, belonging, and affiliation were woven through everyday interaction. Heritage was \textit{protean}: found not only in a fixed, essential ‘culture’, but also in more unpredictable life elements in the exchanges of everyday life.

- In the superdiverse city heritage was constituted in local ideologies and practices in response to sameness and difference, as well as in practices to protect and safeguard the past.
• In interactions in the library *translation* and *translanguaging* were often deployed as communicative means which transformed interactions between people whose biographies, histories, and trajectories were different from each other.

• In interactions in the library translation and translanguaging were emblematic of a positive orientation to superdiversity, as linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and national differences were acknowledged, and deployed as a resource for communication.

• The Library of Birmingham was a convivial place where a multitude of histories, trajectories and expressions converged in overlapping and intersecting localities.

• The practice of conviviality constituted a means to safeguard and preserve a positive orientation to superdiversity as a heritage for the future.
Contents

1. Studying Heritage and Superdiversity – 5
2. The Historical Body – 20
3. Translocal Histories – 41
4. The Body Idiom – 54
5. Discourses In Place - 67
6. Multivocal Space – 90
7. Terms and Conditions – 103
8. The Parochial Realm – 119
9. The Interaction Order – 134
10. Translation and Translanguaging – 156
11. A Heritage for the Future - 180
1. Studying Heritage and Superdiversity

This report is about the practices and structures by which people in superdiverse cities select, choose and filter values and meanings as they bring the past into the present and the future. It is about how people engage with a vast accumulation of signs and semiotics and work out what is important to them. It is about how people deal with the social reality of an unprecedented proliferation of social and cultural categories (Susanne Wessendorf 2014), and rub along together. It is about how people salvage for the future practices which are of value in the present and will be of value in the future. It is about an active, creative, negotiated process of seeking the basis of common humanity in all available forms (Rodney Harrison 2013). It is about superdiversity as a descriptive means of accounting for the diversification of diversity, and an analytical means for understanding the complexity, mobility, and unpredictability of our cities. More than anything else this report is about interactions between people in the public realm of encounters between strangers, and interactions in the parochial realm of exchanges between people who are known to each other, if not always intimately. It is about the detailed description and analysis of the ways and means by which people communicate when they do not share nationality, ethnicity, biography, or language; when they do not share motives, or trajectories of work and education; and when they do not share economic mobility or stability. It is in these encounters and exchanges that our superdiverse cities stand or fall.

Nexus Analysis: A theory of time and space

Jan Blommaert (2013) argues that ethnography of complex societies – of superdiversity – requires a theorization of space as a historically configured phenomenon, and as a material force on human behavior. That is, ethnography of complex societies requires that we go beyond the here-and-now, beyond localism and presentism, beyond the description of situated events, towards an interpretation of social practices in terms of structural and systemic regularities. Blommaert proposes that ethnography paints only a partial picture if it fails to pay attention to the agency of space, and the salience of time, or history, in analysis of discourse. In seeking an empirical and theoretical framework in which to analyse social practices in relation to their spatial and historical trajectories, Blommaert turns to Nexus Analysis, and the work of Ron Scollon and Suzy Scollon (2003, 2004, 2008).

Ron Scollon pointed out that whenever we use words, that use “encapsulates or resemiotizes an extended historical itinerary of action, practice, narrative, authorization, certification, metonymization, objectivization and technologization or reification” (2008: 233). This perspective, following Bakhtin (1984), proposes that social action is shaped by, and contingent upon, the biographies, histories, and experiences of the social actors concerned, and by the discourses that circulate in and through the space in which social action occurs. Scollon and Scollon (2004: viii) use the term ‘nexus analysis’ to focus on “the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which in itself alters those historical trajectories in some way, as those trajectories emanate from
this moment of social action”. Scollon and Scollon (2004) pinpoint the challenge of ethnographic research, arguing that just about everything we might know can circulate through any particular moment of human action. That is, when a customer in the meat market haggles with a butcher over the price of chicken feet, a volleyball coach shouts instructions to his team from the sidelines, a teacher admonishes a student for talking in class, a business executive interviews an aspirant apprentice, or a student requests information in a public library (and so on and so forth), everything we know about how such interactions are structured, and have come to be structured, circulate in, around, and through the interaction. We might add that much that we do not yet know also comes into play.

Scollon and Scollon (2004) suggest that the analytical trick is to identify the most significant elements for further analysis. They propose that we do this by viewing social action at the intersection, or nexus, of three main elements: the discourses in place, the interaction order, and the historical body. Scollon and Scollon point to discourses in place as the complex aggregate of discourses that circulate in and through a place. In summarizing the salience of the historical body they draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1994, 2000), and particularly his analysis of ‘habitus’ and ‘bodily hexis’, and argue that people’s life experiences, their goods and purposes, and their unconscious ways of behaving and thinking are key features of social action. They refer to, and elaborate upon Erving Goffman’s (1963, 1967, 1981, 1983, 1997) analysis of the interaction order to argue that we should take into account the many possible social arrangements by which we form relationships in social interactions. Analysis of social action should take all three of these elements into consideration rather than focus exclusively on any of them. Blommaert (2013) points out that each of the three elements is a fundamentally historical dimension of social action. Synchronic events display the traces of normative complexes of social action, resulting in habituated codes of conduct which are situated in individual experience, skills and capacities (the historical body), social space (discourses in place) and patterned, ordered, genred interaction (the interaction order). The ethnographic challenge is to make evident the crystallization of histories of iterative human action as they become normative social patterns of conduct, expectation and evaluation. Whenever people enter into social action, they bring along their own skills, experiences and competences, which condition and constrain what they can do in social action. A nexus analysis is the mapping of semiotic cycles of people, discourses, places, and mediational means involved in the social actions we are studying. The term ‘nexus of practice’ enables us to focus on the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which alters those historical trajectories (Scollon and Scollon 2004: viii).

Coming to the study at hand, Winnie, a Customer Experience Assistant at the Library of Birmingham, knows how to interact with library users because she has become skilled in dealing with such encounters. Over eighteen years and many thousands of encounters (we saw dozens of such in four months) she has developed a keen understanding of the possible social arrangements by which relationships with library users may be formed in encounters at the information desk. Her life experiences, including her life in and migration from Hong Kong, and her habitus, are key considerations in our analysis as we come to interpret her social practice. Her embodied practice, recorded in field notes, photographs, and video-recordings, is an important dimension of the way in which she interacts with library users and colleagues. And, as we will see, the space in which she engages in encounters with the public is never neutral. Blommaert (2013: 39)
points out that it is the connection between space and normative expectations, between space and ‘order’, that makes space historical, for the normative expectations we attach to spaces have their feet in the history of social and spatial arrangements in any society. The history of not only this library, but of civic libraries per se, is a part of what we are seeing when we observe encounters between Winnie and library users. We will see that the regulation of space, and transgression of this regulation, is an important feature of interaction. The way people behave in the library is conditioned by the normative expectations of how people behave in the library - and these expectations are rooted in history.

However, as we shall see, the brand new, high-tech beacon that is the Library of Birmingham is some distance from the typification of whispered conversations and oak-panelled walls with which we might once have associated libraries. Coca-cola machines, mobile phones, computers, flirting couples, immigration advice centres, and much besides, are now the order of discourse. Discourses in place are changing discourses. Historical bodies in historical spaces are changing bodies. Here again is the challenge for us as ethnographers. If we see and hear social action now we might identify its location in its historical trajectory – but we need to be cognisant of the fact that the historical trajectory includes the future as well as the past. Where we can identify such trajectories are in the quotidian encounters between human agents in the superdiverse city. Such encounters include interactions between library users and the Customer Experience Assistant. It also includes interactions between the Customer Experience Assistant and her colleagues. Blommaert (2013) puts this concisely, saying the interaction order, the social arrangement of everyday encounters, is the order of communicative conduct that ensues from enskilled bodies in a space inscribed with particular conditions for communication. We consider in detail interaction beyond the public realm and the parochial realm of interaction between colleagues, in the private realm of intimate relations between family members and friends. It is to all of these communicative practices that this ethnographic report will attend.

Discourse, as social action, emerges out of the nexus of these three forces, and an analysis of discourse consequently needs to take all three into consideration (Blommaert and Huang 2009:6). We will take into account the historical body, discourses in place, and the interaction order, and will group analysis of transcripts, field notes, and other material under these three headings. In bringing together analysis of dispositions and structures, of discourses and practices, our analysis brings together Bourdieu’s social theory of practice with Bakhtin’s notion of dialogicality, and Goffman’s understanding of the ritual nature of social interaction. This theoretical nexus informs generation of knowledge from the empirical nexus of practice, space, and interaction. In some examples of human action one dimension of the nexus is more salient than the others. However, in all cases we bring to bear what we can about the interactants’ life experiences and ways of being, the discourses in play in the space in which the action occurs, and the social arrangement of the interaction.
Encounters with everyday heritage

In this report we engage with the question: ‘What constitutes heritage in a superdiverse context?’ That is, what do people value, protect, and wish to preserve in a timespace characterised by complexity, mobility, and unpredictability? And how is this heritage constituted in discursive interactions between people? We seek to answer these questions by directing our empirical gaze towards the interaction order of the historical body in heteroglossic space.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) stated that intangible cultural heritage was constituted in:

The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Janet Blake (2009) notes that the notion of ‘safeguarding’ runs throughout the convention text, from national safeguarding measures to international safeguarding practices. In the convention text there is commitment to the widest possible participation of communities, groups, and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them in its management. However, this remains a challenge more than a decade after the Convention.

The preamble to the Convention stresses the importance of ‘intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity’, which is under threat from the ‘process of globalization and social transformation [and] the phenomenon of intolerance’ (Smith 2006: 108). Laurajane Smith (2006) points to a tension between the idea of ‘heritage’ and current and mutable cultural practices. Despite this tension, the definition of heritage has recently been expanded to include elements like memory, music, language, dialects, oral history, traditions, dance, and craft skills. Smith argues that in dealing with heritage we engage with a set of values and meanings.

Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton (2009) define heritage as the performance and negotiation of identity, values, and sense of place. Smith (2006) proposes that it is value and meaning that is the real subject of heritage preservation and management processes, and as such all heritage is ‘intangible’, whether these values and meanings are symbolized by a physical site, place, landscape or physical representation, or are represented within the performances of languages, dance, oral histories or other forms of ‘intangible heritage’. Rather than solely representing the static and extinct, heritage is “a moment of action” (Smith 2006: 83). Indeed it incorporates a range of actions that often occur at particular places or in certain spaces. The tension between action and material representation is an important element of heritage. The tension may at once be about creating and maintaining historical and social consensus, but simultaneously it can also be a process of dissent and contestation.
Smith (2006) further argues that heritage is a process, a range of moments in which to assert and express identity and social and cultural values and meanings. In moments of heritage social networks and relations are created, and bind and create a sense of belonging and identity. These networks and relations are facilitated through activity in which social and cultural values, meanings and understandings about both the past and present are worked out, inspected, considered, rejected, embraced, or transformed. For Smith heritage is not only about the past, but also about the present and the future. Heritage includes the aspirations and desires of the present, but is legitimised through links to the past. What makes certain activities ‘heritage’ is their engagement with thinking about and acting out “not only ‘where we have come from’ in terms of the past, but also ‘where we are going’ in terms of the present and the future” (2006: 84). Heritage is a social and cultural process that mediates a sense of cultural, social, and political change. Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (2009) add that heritage only becomes heritage when it becomes recognisable within a particular set of cultural or social values, which are themselves intangible.

Mike Robinson and Helaine Silverman (2015) point out that differing worldviews as to what constitutes heritage constantly collide. They argue that at times the construction and consumption of heritage appears to be untraceable and spontaneous in the processes by which new expressions of culture surface. Robinson and Silverman (2015) consider heritage in relation to rapidly changing popular culture. They argue that change is one of the key messages that popular culture carries. New cultural forms become heritage through effective utilisation and community consensus. Some heritage is valued enough to remain in society and some heritage falls away over time. They point out that the meanings of heritage must be understood with reference to how heritage is received, talked about, looked at, circulated, ignored, and loved in the interconnected world and in our own lived realities.

Rodney Harrison (2013) acknowledges that the preservation of heritage (including ‘language’ and ‘culture’) in minority populations has been contested. He points out that the maintenance of multicultural and minority heritage may create tensions within majority groups, who may either disapprove of, or otherwise reject, certain heritage practices. He argues that “the issue of ‘diversity’ as a universal right remains a fundamental problem for heritage” (2013: 164). He proposes that a way forward may be to move from a notion of heritage as salvaging relics of the past to an active, creative, negotiated process of seeking the basis of common humanity in all the forms which are available to us. Harrison’s imperative is towards a notion of heritage as a series of qualities which are constantly chosen, recreated and renegotiated in the present. Regina Bendix (2009) argues that from the warp and weft of habitual practices and everyday experience actors choose privileged excerpts and imbue them with status and value. This notion of heritage as ‘choosing’ is taken up by Ana Deumert (forthcoming). Deumert makes a distinction between ‘inheritance’ and ‘heritage’, proposing that inheritance comes to us whether we like it or not: we inherit ideas, practices, beliefs and artefacts from those who came before us. The past provides us with the possibilities of heritage, from which “we select, choose and filter as we bring the past into the present (and future)”. Heritage, then, is the result of this choosing. Deumert proposes that when turning inheritance into heritage a process of appropriation and delineation takes place: only certain resources from the past are claimed, taken up, safeguarded, preserved, and transmitted. This process of choosing is not neutral, however. It is unlikely that everyone has
equal access to the same choice of heritage, as if this was a ‘pick and mix. Rather, choice of heritage may be constrained by differential relations of power and socio-economic status. Deumert (forthcoming) argues that in the postcolonial context of the global South heritage may not be straightforwardly handed down from the ancestors, as its progress may be interrupted by structures of oppression and inequality. We would make a similar argument in relation to superdiversity, as the transmission of heritage may be subject to conditions of mobility, complexity, and unpredictability.

The historical body is inherited. It is the product of historical practice, of a group’s “ways of being and doing” (Bourdieu 2000: 145). The historical body, or habitus, is a learned system of dispositions to be and to do. It is “the product of a historical acquisition, and what enables the legacy of history to be appropriated” (Bourdieu 2000: 151). Bourdieu emphasises that the appropriation of the past in the present and the future is not an inevitable process. When there is a similar history between the historical body and the social world the body possessed by history appropriates immediately the things inhabited by the same history. However, such a process may not be straightforward when the historical body is at odds with, or even different from, the historical world. Bourdieu (2000: 152) puts this concisely: “Only when the heritage has taken over the inheritor can the inheritor take over the heritage”. As the relations between the historical body and the social world become more complex and unpredictable, so the inheritance of heritage may become less inevitable. In a superdiverse environment it may be that ‘choosing’ heritage becomes a more significant means of bringing the past into the present and future.

The social world is heteroglossic space. The historical body practises its ways of being and doing in heteroglossic space. The social arena, perhaps especially the superdiverse social arena, incorporates discourse which is multivoiced, as utterances are shaped by those that precede them, and anticipate those that will succeed them. Words and other semiotic signs point to specific world views, values, and positions in society (Bakhtin 1981: 291). Discourse ‘indexes’ certain ideologies, socio-economic positions, professions, and social statuses. Detectable in even a half-formed utterance is the voice of the other. In the dynamic interaction of voices, often in a single utterance, the tensions of the social world become visible. The historical body is subject to the heterogeneous discourse of the social arena. One cannot be understood without the other. In superdiverse cities encounters with heritage occur in the interaction between the historical body and the multivoiced, dialogic social world. We can begin to understand how heritage is acquired, or ‘chosen’, in the contact zone between the historical body and heteroglossic space by observing the fine grain of the interaction order (Goffman 1971). That is, by looking closely at the detail of human agents’ ways of being and doing in public, parochial, and private spaces as they navigate the social world, choose privileged excerpts from the warp and weft of habitual practices, and imbue them with status and value. In so doing we may begin to understand what ‘heritage’ means in superdiverse cities.
The Library of Birmingham opened on 3 September 2013, replacing Birmingham Central Library. The library cost £188.8 million, and is a flagship project for the city's redevelopment. It is the largest public library in the United Kingdom, and the largest regional library in Europe. 2,414,860 million visitors went through the doors of the library in 2014, making it the tenth most popular visitor attraction in the UK.

The library has nationally and internationally significant collections, including the Boulton and Watt archives, the Bournville Village Trust Archive, the Charles Parker Archive, the Parker collection of children's books, the Wingate Bett transport ticket collection, the Railway and Canal Historical Society Library; and the photographic archives of the Warwickshire photographic survey, Sir Benjamin Stone, John Blakemore, Val Williams, and Daniel Meadows. The specialist Shakespeare Memorial Room was designed in 1882 by John Henry Chamberlain for the first Central Library. When the old building was demolished in 1974 Chamberlain's room was dismantled and later fitted into the new concrete shell of the library complex. When the Library of Birmingham was built, it was again moved, to the top floor. It houses Britain’s most important Shakespeare collection, one of the two most important Shakespeare collections in the world. The collection contains 43,000 books including rare items such as a copy of the First Folio 1623; copies of the four earliest Folio editions; and over 70 editions of separate plays printed before 1709. There are significant Shakespeare collections from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, a near complete collection of Collected Works, and significant numbers of adaptations, anthologies and individual editions.

The Boulton and Watt Collection, the archive of the steam engine partnership of Matthew Boulton and James Watt, dates from its formation in 1774 until the firm's closure in the 1890s. The archive comprises about 550 volumes of letters, books, order books and account books, approximately 29,000 engine drawings and upwards of 20,000 letters received from customers. Boulton and Watt manufactured the screw engines for Brunel's SS Great Eastern and the archive includes a portfolio of thirteen albumen prints by Robert Howlett documenting the construction of the Great Eastern, including a rare variant of the Brunel portrait of 1857. These collections make up a significant feature of the ‘authorised heritage’ of the city of Birmingham, and of the Midlands of England.

Shortly after opening, the major new Library of Birmingham was affected by severe cuts to the national government grant to Birmingham City Council. More than half of the 188 members of staff took redundancy as a result of cuts in 2015, which saw its opening hours reduced to 40 a week. In July 2014 a collaboration with the British Library launched the Library of Birmingham’s Business and IP Centre which offered support services for small businesses and entrepreneurs. From July 2015 until 2016, Google took over part of the first floor for training businesses in its Digital Garage initiative. From early 2016 the library extended weekday opening hours to 9 am to 9 pm after an agreement was made with the Council-run Brasshouse Language Centre to occupy space on the second floor of the building. The opening hours increased from 40 hours to 66, but this was still short of the original 73 hours, and in 2016 the library remained closed on Sundays.
Methods

The Library of Birmingham is a national partner to the research project *Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities*. This collaboration meant that initial access to one of the major public institutions in the city was straightforwardly negotiated. In spite of news that there would be cuts to the city council’s funds for the library, which would threaten staffing levels and opening hours during 2015, the library staff were more than willing to accommodate the research team. Following meetings at managerial levels Adrian Blackledge and Rachel Hu were introduced to staff on the different floors of the building. In all cases, and again notwithstanding the uncertainty surrounding people’s future employment, we found a cheerful and warm welcome. We invited Winnie Lateano, a Customer Experience Assistant at the library, to be a key participant in the research project. The library management informed us that Winnie was the only ‘Chinese-heritage’ member of staff at the library in 2015. Rachel Hu and Adrian Blackledge met Winnie, and discussed the project in detail. Winnie agreed to participate. She said she was not sure why we would be interested in her everyday communication, but she was willing to suspend her scepticism as the project got under way.

The research design for investigations in the Library of Birmingham was consistent with the methods adopted across the sixteen case study sites in the research project. That is, over the course of four months the research team selected a key participant, conducted observations, wrote field notes, made audio-recordings in the work-place and the home, collected online and digital communications, interviewed the key participant, gathered institutional documentation, took photographs, and video-recorded the key participant at work. In addition Winnie participated in a three-day research-based training course, the ‘Participant Research Programme’. We will provide a brief account of each of these means of collecting data, with an evaluation of the value of each in this particular context. We will also briefly summarise the analytic process adopted. First, however, we will review the guiding principles of the research design, which we characterise as ‘Linguistic Ethnography’.

Linguistic Ethnography

Linguistic ethnography is an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of people from their point of view, and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures. It is a “disciplined way of looking, asking, recording, reflecting, comparing, and reporting” (Hymes, 1980: 105), combining discourse analysis with ethnography. Linguistic ethnography, a mainly European phenomenon, has been greatly influenced by North American scholarship in linguistic anthropology, and because of this we share many of the same antecedents. At its heart, linguistic ethnography is concerned with how the micro, in terms of talk and action, is played out against the macro, in terms of the wider political social context.

Linguistic ethnography makes explicit what people often take for granted, making accessible new ways of understanding. It does this by discovering knowledge through participation rather
than just observation, and through drawing on interactions in the field. Linguistic ethnographers rely greatly on learning from those with whom they are closely involved. In linguistic ethnography the researcher attempts not to inform, tell or treat, but rather to forge a “partnership of equals” (Blommaert, 2010: 5). This is usually earned through the researcher’s long term investment and involvement in the field. According to Hymes, ethnography as a research methodology is the “most open, the most compatible with a democratic way of life, the least likely to produce a world in which experts control knowledge at the expenses of those who are studied” (1980: 105). Blommaert (2010: 5) calls this the democratic dimension of ethnography in which the ethnographer is agentive:

being an agent thus involves an explicit and methodologised ethics and politics of work – a commitment to construct knowledge in a fair way, balancing the potentially always thunderous and silencing effect of science against the weakness and inarticulateness of local voices, the voices of those who used to be called the ‘informant’ or the ‘subject’

As Blommaert eloquently argues, ethnographers attempt to counter and transform existing social orders through flattening the relationship between researcher and researched. He suggests there is a reward to be gained from being a good agent, “an agent of improvement, not of continued or exacerbated oppression and exclusion” (Blommaert, 2010: 5). A further aim is to bring back “ethnological knowledge” to the community that has provided it, through turning ethnographic research findings into useful and meaningful materials for further learning and reflection.

Data collection

Research Fellow Rachel Hu ‘shadowed’ Winnie Lateano two days a week for twelve weeks, noting her observations as field notes. Joke Dewilde and Angela Creese (2016) refer to ‘discursive shadowing’ in ethnographic research, which involves the study of individuals over a period of time by means of participant observation and making audio-recordings, and puts the conversations between researcher and participant at the core of the analysis. Shadowing is an example of a mobile and a reflexive method, which involves “following selected people in their everyday occupations for a time” (Czarniawska, 2007:17). Seonaidh McDonald (2005:456) also points to what she calls the ‘running commentary’ from the person being shadowed in response to the researcher’s questions. Here the adjective ‘running’ fits well with the constant movement in shadowing, while the emphasis on ‘commentary’ highlights the interactions that go on between researcher and participant, which are at the heart of discursive shadowing. In fact the close company kept by researcher and participant in shadowing offers unique opportunities for relationship building and ‘reflectional’ data (Dewilde 2013). Paola Jirón (2011) offers an account of becoming ‘la sombre’ (the shadow) and describes entering into practices, dialogues and interaction in a constant engagement through moving with people physically and interactionally.

The continuous conversations between the researcher and the key participant not only have the status of ordinary field conversations where the researcher shares and discusses early analysis. They also serve as an additional source of interactional data in which the researcher plays an active role in everyday events. This means that the researchers’ voices are worked into the
analysis as we play our part in shaping and representing the social action we observe. This is in line with what may be called the reflexive enterprise of doing ethnography, which requires the researcher to tell the story we think the analysis of the data warrants. Accordingly, Monica Heller (2008:251) points out that in telling our story we must find our own voice, reflecting on and taking responsibility for what we say, how we say it, and to whom it is said. Discursive shadowing involves the study of individuals over a period of time, and across different spaces. The joint movement, common reflection and ubiquitous recordings create opportunities in terms of understanding key participants’ everyday lives, and of investigating how the interactions they engage in are infused with institutionally salient discourses. It also provides for opportunities for fruitful partnerships between the researcher and the participant where both parties mutually invest in the research relationship. In this sense Rachel shadowed Winnie through the spaces into which her working day took her, across several floors, in a number of different departments, front-stage and back-stage, and into the kitchen and lunch room.

Adrian Blackledge observed Winnie once a week, always while Rachel was shadowing. Angela Creese also attended on occasions. In all Rachel Hu and Adrian Blackledge wrote 29 sets of field notes, amounting to 101,225 words. The field notes are a primary data set, and describe as much as possible of what Rachel and Adrian could see and hear as they observed Winnie at work, and in her break time. Field notes also describe more broadly the institutional context of the Library of Birmingham. Whereas in the first phase of the research project Rachel and Adrian had stood somewhat uncomfortably against the wall of the meat market (Blackledge, Creese, and Hu 2015), in the Library of Birmingham they were able to sit more easily with their laptop computers to write field notes. At times Rachel was too involved in the business of the library to type much, but she was very well placed to understand what was going on in service encounters around the information desk.

On many occasions Rachel was taken for a member of staff at the library, and did what she could to help members of the public, or referred them to Winnie or her colleagues.

After writing field notes for five weeks we asked Winnie to audio-record herself while we continued to observe her at work. We continued to write field notes throughout the data collection period. Winnie audio-recorded herself with a small digital voice recorder, which she
kept in her pocket. A tie-clip microphone was secured to her clothing close to her throat. This meant that we were able to audio-record Winnie’s speech and, in most cases, the speech of those with whom she interacted. Winnie’s colleagues had been told that audio-recording was happening, and we also reminded them personally. They were told institutionally that they had the right to avoid participation in the research project if that was their preference. It was impractical for us to gain the written, informed consent of all members of the public who interacted with Winnie at the information desk. We therefore devised a highly visible sign which informed members of the public that if they did not want their voice recorded they may inform Winnie, and she would let the research team know. Winnie recorded herself at the Library of Birmingham for 42 hours, including recordings during break times.

We asked Winnie to send us examples of her online, digital, and social media communication. Although she was not an enthusiastic participant in social media, she used ‘WhatsApp’, and also used e-mail at work. Winnie copied and sent to the research team five hundred WhatsApp messages (forty screen shots) and fifty e-mails. The research team took photographs in and around the library, and also at Winnie’s home. In all three hundred photographs were taken. After twelve weeks we asked Winnie to audio-record herself either (or both) in domestic or friendship group settings. She did both, and these recordings, many of them at the dinner table, amounted to sixteen hours of interaction. Winnie also audio-recorded Skype conversations with her (adult) daughter, who was living in South Africa at the time of our data collection. We collected around two hundred leaflets and documents associated with the library. Rachel interviewed Winnie on two occasions, and also conversed with her many times while shadowing her at the work station and in the lunch room. Finally, we video-recorded Winnie at work in the library. The video-recorded material amounted to two and a half hours. We had planned to interview senior members of staff at the Library of Birmingham. The library had agreed to this. However, the period we had set aside for interviews coincided with the time when the library announced severe cuts to staffing and to opening hours. The library management were wary of increased media attention at this time, and told us that they therefore did not want us to interview staff. This report therefore lacks the perspective of senior managers in the institution.

**Participant Research Programme**

Winnie took part in a three-day research training course run by the research team and accredited by Open College Network (OCN) at Level 3. The training introduced Winnie to linguistic ethnographic research methods and analysis. It also enabled her to view and reflect on some of the data we had collected. The Participant Research Programme (PRP) was designed to offer researchers and key participants involved in the research project the opportunity to learn about the methods and processes used to gather information, to understand linguistic and cultural changes in superdiverse settings, and to better understand the project’s aims, rationale and organisation. The PRP was delivered through a series of interactive workshops. Participants’ involvement in these workshops, and the collection of key evidence, enabled them to opt in to the OCN accreditation, which took the form of three-credit unit entitled ‘Research in Multilingual Settings’.
Figure 3: Participant Research Programme

Researcher and researched

We can gain insight into Winnie’s everyday experiences by reflecting on the collaborative relationship between the researcher / field worker, Rachel, and the subject of her observations, Winnie. They worked side by side, in close proximity, for extended periods of time over four months. Their relationship was fundamental to the success of the data collection. In this section we present some of Rachel’s ongoing reflections on the relationship, and on the process of the research. These reflections are often filtered through another level of descriptions of Winnie’s communicative and embodied practices.

On the first day of observational field work Rachel wrote:

The clock soon shows that it’s two o’clock which means it’s my time to leave. Winnie walked me to the lift and waved goodbye to me: “next time remember to show me how to write your daughter’s Chinese name”, she said before the lift’s door closed. “Sure thing! Winnie! See you on Saturday!” I waved to her before the door closed. This is it! Day one is done and my heart is really thrilled when anticipating all sorts of interesting data we can get from this magic place.

Rachel’s enthusiasm for, and excitement about, the research process is palpable in this brief extract.

Winnie was initially a little suspicious of the process of Rachel writing field notes about her as she worked:

The counter became quiet and Winnie stuck her head in front of my laptop to see what I was writing. After staring for a few seconds she turned and looked at me: “You put down all that I just said? My body language, my English and my everything, are you going to note down everything about me?” I tried my best to explain why I needed to do so, and to convince her that she will have the chance to read what I wrote about her. “My English is different from the others, you know. Why don’t you ask the others whose English is much better than mine?” Winnie looked unconvinced. “Their English might be better than yours but they can’t speak Cantonese, can they? So we only want you!” I patted
Winnie’s shoulder and we both laughed. “It’s my whole profile you wanted, isn’t it? I will try my best.” Winnie seemed relieved and I stopped her by saying “Be yourself, Winnie, that’s all we want.”

Here Winnie seemed to express her initial nervousness about the research process. Winnie expressed some reservations about her own English proficiency.

The developing relationship between the researcher and the key participant was exemplified a couple of days later, as Winnie offered Rachel a compliment on her appearance:

“Lovely dress”. With no customer and no manager around, Winnie came to chat to me, commenting on my clothes. It’s the Chinese custom that people should never say good stuff about themselves so I said “Maybe the style is too young for me”, without telling her the truth that this was the only clean one I could pick out from my wardrobe.
“I don’t feel old at all. Young at heart, isn’t it?!” Winnie laughed at herself. “I don’t behave like old person.”
“You don’t look old either! Actually far from it. I never thought you are old.” I like her spirit and am being honest. With her very petite and slim figure she looks much younger than her actual age.

In the field note Rachel comments on her own response to the compliment, and accounts for the response through a stereotype about Chinese customs. We gain an insight into Winnie’s perception of herself here, as she is reported to say that she doesn’t ‘behave like old person’. Winnie sees herself as ‘young at heart’, in both spirit and body. Here Rachel and Winnie work together to oil the ethnographic wheels, as they establish their relationship.

Winnie and Rachel also shared their experiences as migrants to the UK. Winnie had asked Rachel to help her with her written English, and Winnie had written a short piece about her experience of arriving in the UK. Rachel’s field notes record a discussion of the immigration process when Winnie presented her with a piece of writing on this topic, as a practice essay for Rachel to correct as she assisted Winnie with her written English (the text is presented as Figure 8, page xx):

“Did you have the feeling of being isolated when you first arrived in the UK? Lonely, cold, no friends?” Winnie asked me, looking into my eyes closely.
“That’s exactly how I felt, Winnie.” I am being very honest with her. “I also agree with you about getting to know your first batch of friends though the toddlers’ group your child went to. We have so much in common.” I was quite excited by this heartfelt comment.
“Yes, but we have different, you know, different, what’s the word, expectations. You are so much younger and more energetic, much better educated and have a great opportunity to get a bright future. If you have little education your husband and child would be your world and you are stuck being a housewife.” Winnie started to sound like a feminist. She seemed to hate the idea of staying at home, being a wife and mum.
Here Rachel reports Winnie’s perspective on her aspirations and values. We can see that Winnie valued very highly her public-facing role at work. She frequently argued that her work avoided the danger that she might find herself ‘stuck being a housewife’. Winnie’s strongly-felt principles about this constituted an important dimension of her identity. For her housewives were isolated and at home, whereas working women inhabited the world.

In another example Rachel records remarks in her field notes as the two women were able to find common ground in relation to motherhood:

When I told Winnie that my daughter wasn’t well today and I had to pick her up from school she nodded her head, “I know exactly how you feel. Not easy, not easy, us being mums and having family to look after”. Then our topic easily slid to schools, and eleven plus exams. “When my daughter was at that age I had to drive her to her tutors twice a week. It’s hard work but you have got to send your children there. Good schools will lay a good foundation for your child. Make things easier for them and yourself.” Two ‘tiger mummies’ couldn’t agree with each other more on this point, and our chatting became interesting to me.

Rachel reports that both she and Winnie are comfortable inhabiting the stereotype of the ‘tiger mummy’. Winnie’s son and daughter both attended Birmingham schools which had a policy of selective entry through ‘eleven plus’ exams. These were, in Winnie’s view, ‘good schools’. Her belief in the value of ‘good schools’ in laying ‘a good foundation for your child’ appears to be unquestioned, and unquestionable. Her meritocratic beliefs dispose her to act in certain ways. She is also aware of the ‘rules of the game’, which determine that in order for her children to pass the entrance exam and gain entry to ‘good schools’ they will need to be shuttled around the city to private tutors twice a week. The brief discussion of this process unites the two women, as their values and practices overlap.

Rachel’s physical positioning in the research process was crucial to the kind of data we were able to collect. She almost always sat or stood next to Winnie behind the information desk, and as such was often treated by the public as a member of the library staff:

I lowered my head as much as possible behind a computer monitor and started typing my notes, though my ears and eyes were on alert for everything happening at the counter. The counter could be really busy and almost every two or three minutes new customers would come and ask questions. The questions I got asked the most were where the toilet was, or directions to the nearest café, water machine, cash machine, and so on.

Rachel was relatively comfortable in the role of ‘shadow’ customer experience assistant. Winnie too offered her appreciation:

“I think you can work here!” Winnie looked at me, tilting her body towards me and smiling. “I don’t mind trying though I need training. It’s nice to work here on this floor and you can have a chat with people if you want.”
Winnie was generous and sincere in her participation in the project, and in her relationships with others. In her field notes Rachel recorded a typical moment of generosity:

Winnie gave me a discarded Chinese book this morning, very thick and heavy with numerous photos of fine Chinese traditional paintings drawn in water and ink.

Winnie’s trajectory through the research process was one which travelled from suspicion, anxiety, and concern that she did not fully understand the focus of the project, through acceptance and willingness, to confidence, and ownership of her own participation. This positive trajectory was a testament not only to Winnie’s positive attitude, but also to Rachel’s ability to develop good relationships in the field.

Analysis

During and beyond the data collection period Rachel transcribed the audio-recorded material. She listened to all of the interactional audio-recordings, and selected sections for transcription. She then sent the transcripts to Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese, together with a reference to the audio file, which was commonly available to them. The research team listened separately to the audio recording while annotating the transcript. They held weekly meetings to discuss the transcripts. This activity continued for some months, as the transcripts ran to some hundreds of pages of text. During and after this period Adrian Blackledge wrote thematic summaries of the field notes, and these formed the basis of a subsequent report. This report was 60000 words in length, and became a valuable resource in the development of the present report.

During the early development of the analysis it became clear that Nexus Analysis would be a helpful theoretical lens in the construction of knowledge from the massive data sets with which we were engaging. This lens allowed us to view the discourses and signs in play at the nexus of three main elements: discourses in place, the interaction order, and the historical body. A working document was scribbled by Adrian Blackledge, complete with tea stain (Figure 4). The first draft of the present report was produced by Adrian Blackledge, and was sent to Angela Creese and Rachel Hu for additional material, amendment, and critical commentary. However, much of the detailed analysis of data was done either collaboratively in weekly meetings, or was shared between the three authors of the report. That is, the whole effort was collaborative, and was a shared enterprise.
Figure 4: Work in progress
2. The Historical Body

Scollon and Scollon (2004) defined the historical body as “the life experiences of individual social actors”. Somewhat more explicitly, they also described it as people’s “life experiences, their goals and purposes, and their unconscious ways of behaving and thinking” (2004: 46). Whenever people enter into social action, they bring along their own biographies. Each participant enters a social situation carrying an already established biography of prior dealings with the other participants - or at least with participants of their kind, and enters also with a vast array of cultural assumptions presumed to be shared (Goffman 1983: 4). That is, interactants bring to each exchange their ‘historical body’. Historical bodies have been formed in particular social spaces and they represent the ‘communicative competence’ of people in such social spaces (Blommaert and Huang 2009). Thus, a Customer Experience Assistant in a library has grown accustomed to the library system, the materiality of the place she works, her colleagues, the rules of the institution, the ways of professionally organising her work, and how to interact with library users. The outcome of this is that the Customer Experience Assistant can perform her role competently, understanding as she does the expectations of the library users and her colleagues and bosses. The historical body has been formed in such a way that she will be perceived as a source of information and support by library users, and that most of the actual practices she performs can be habitual and routine. Precisely the habitual and routine character of these practices makes them – at a higher level of social structure – ‘professional’ (Blommaert and Huang 2009).

The Customer Experience Assistant engages in many types of interaction during her working day. However, the predominant type is a service encounter with a library user, as she either stands or sits behind an information desk. In such a context a limited range of discourses, including bodily discourses, is normative. Discourse often refers to library loans, library cards, booking computer carrels, fines for overdue returns, information requests, PIN numbers, and support with technology. Nevertheless, the Customer Experience Assistant engages in a practised set of micro-movements, which is “replete with semiotic signs and signals, and carries social risks and rewards” (Blommaert and Huang 2008: 9). Goffman (1983:4) points out that social situations provide the natural theatre in which all bodily displays are enacted, and in which all bodily displays are read. Bodily position is embodied cultural knowledge – movements and positions of the body that convey cultural information, and have the shape of routine skills. The service encounters we observed were largely ‘routine’, and required a routine set of skills. However, they were also more than this, as they enabled us to ask what principles inform the bearing of social structures on service encounters, and how will the features of the interaction order be connected up with and tied into social structures, including social relationships (Goffman 1983). Through the notion of the historical body we see how a connection is made between semiotics and embodiment. Participants in social action bring their real bodies into play, but their bodies are semiotically enskilled: their movements and positions are central to the production of meaning, and are organised around normative patterns of conduct (Blommaert and Huang 2009). The historical body is narrowly connected to historical spaces: the Customer Experience Assistant becomes skilled in the use of social and physical space, and her body accommodates to the space each time she enters or leaves the information desk. Blommaert and
Huang (2009) point out that the material world is a spatial world, a real material environment full of objects, technologies and signs, upon which we act semiotically.

Scollon and Scollon (2004: 13) acknowledge that Pierre Bourdieu referred to the phenomenon of the historical body as *habitus*. Scollon and Scollon “prefer historical body because it situates bodily memories more precisely in the individual body”. It is worth considering the relationship between the notions of ‘the historical body’ and ‘habitus’. For Bourdieu “*habitus*, the product of a historical acquisition, is what enables the legacy of history to be appropriated” (2000:151). More precisely, it is the “deep-rooted dispositions of the bodily hexis” (1991:88), rooted in posture, “a way of bearing the body” (2000:144), that articulates a more-or-less unconscious sense of ‘how to be’ and ‘how to behave’ in a social arena. Scollon and Scollon similarly propose that “a lifetime of personal habits come to feel so natural that one’s body carries out actions seemingly without being told” (2004:13). Bourdieu argued that the *habitus* “ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (1990:54). That is, we know how to be because we have been in the world and experienced how people act in certain social situations. In Goffman’s terms, we come to understand the rituals and ceremonies of social practice by engaging in social practice. In Scollon and Scollon’s terms, social practices “seem entirely ‘natural’ to the person in whose historical body they reside” (2004: 23). For Bourdieu the notion of *habitus* is most illuminating when viewed (as it always should be) in relation to *field* – the social arena in which habits and dispositions become practice. Similarly (if a little differently) the ‘historical body’ is most illuminating when viewed in relation to discourses in place at the time of action, and the interaction order (the social groupings) within which they occur (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 23).

In our analysis we view the historical body of the individual social actor in relation to discourses in place and the interaction order. Winnie’s life experiences, goals and purposes, and her unconscious ways of behaving and thinking are evident in discourses in and about her life in Hong Kong, migration to the UK, English language learning, family, cultural beliefs, her national hinterland, her ethnic background, her multilingualism, her literacy practices, and her socio-economic status. These discourses are visible in field notes of observations when she is at work and in her breaks from work; in audio-recordings of her interactions with library users and colleagues; in observing her in her home; in her online and other digital communication; in interviews with her; and in video-recordings and photographs.

**Personal history**

In an audio-recorded conversation when Rachel visited Winnie at her home, Winnie talked about her life in Hong Kong before she migrated to the UK in 1990. Winnie spoke about her life in Hong Kong, saying that in her view she had been an unusually independent young woman:

> it was very rare at that time for a single woman to live alone, by myself. At the time they all stayed at home until they get married. I, I just can’t stand it. I had to move out and to live by myself. But of course, my attitude changes, because I see things my friends did,
because I told you before, I always involve in the community work, and also I know a lot of people, from the newspaper and all that, from the student, they changed me quite a lot, from seeing things

Winnie considered herself to be a little different from the mainstream, which she viewed as being ‘all about money, money, money, all the children have to be, well, no one to sweep the floor, everyone has to be the manager, businessman and all that’. She said she was not interested in such a philosophy, and was more concerned with making the world a better place. She spoke of herself as someone with a social conscience, who was active in what she called ‘social organisations’. When she was young in Hong Kong she worked for an organisation which supported refugees:

I think it’s people I met inspire me, and then also, when I work in the social care organisation I work as a secretary, because of the funding, America, Germany, they always sending a lot of visitors to our organisation, so I’m like a tour guide, to show people around, to the asylum areas, the boat people in Hong Kong, they live in a boat, like the old residents, and I see some of the poor housing in Hong Kong, so I think it is from that, and also because there are a lot of student and staff, they do a lot of student talk, this and that, so I went, my own time, and that’s how I got started.

She said that when she was at college she took a course in Women’s Studies, and found it ‘very, very interesting’. She also went on ‘study tours’ to Beijing and The Philippines, and travelled to America as well. These were study tours organised by the Church:

I was very active to get involved, to go with those actual social workers to learn from them. Well I remember this was years ago there was a fire in the asylum area, thousands of people were homeless, they asked for the government to accommodate, and then they have a protest, then I went to join the students, to protest against the government, yeah, I went, I almost forgot about this! Yea, I remember, years ago, I disguised myself as Filipina, to go to the Embassy to protest what issue in Philippine, I forgot now. It’s a bit naïve, I think around that time. I just like to be there, to witness to attend, that’s it.

Winnie reflects on her past, positioning herself as an activist and ‘witness’, who wanted to experience protest, albeit as one who was, in her reflection from the present day, ‘a bit naïve’. Winnie spoke about a Vietnamese family she had supported in the refugee camp, and said ‘one of the families, they ready to leave Hong Kong for Australia, and they gave me this before they left’. She pointed to a painting displayed on the wall of her home:
Winnie said that many of the Vietnamese refugee families she worked with were originally from China, but had left for Vietnam during the Cultural Revolution, and were displaced to Hong Kong by the Vietnam War.

Winnie said that following the experience of working with refugees she ‘started to change’. She became interested in conservation activity:

because I no live with my parents, yea, I live by myself in an island, a flat, it’s called 南丫岛 [Lamma Island] it’s called Lamma Island conservation society, we form it for people to clean, and reserve for example we organise a cleaning day for people to clean the beach, so I’m door to door to visit them from the camp site, I joined that, a lot of activities there

Winnie said that one of her enduring interests was collecting beautiful objects from around the world. She spoke about how this interest had been inspired thirty years ago, in 1985, during a study tour of Beijing:

I tell you a story, I bought it in nineteen, nineteen eighty-five. Because one time I went to China, Beijing, for the study tour, and then China just open door, and then one evening, there was this poor farmer, clothes all tatty, and they came to see us, they got all these porcelain, you know, and then I said, this is eh, [民间] folks, it’s hand-made, they made, it’s not a factory, because they said the wording, it’s different, and then I said, ohh
Rachel pointed out that the porcelain vase (Figure 6), now displayed in Winnie’s house, was inscribed with ‘traditional Chinese characters, 双喜 <double happiness/blessing>, which Chinese people use to celebrate marriage and decorate wedding ceremonies’. Winnie agreed, and said this object was ‘like treasure’.

Winnie talked about another object (Figure 7) which she ‘got from Burma, because when I was young I travelled a lot’. She referred to her collection of precious objects as her ‘treasure’, which would be passed on to her son and daughter. She said she had many more objects in her attic, collected from Singapore, The Philippines, Indonesia, Bali, America, and Burma. The objects were a tangible part of Winnie’s personal heritage.

**Family**

Winnie left behind in her homeland members of her family, including her mother and her siblings. Winnie’s relationship with her mother was a recurrent theme in her discussions with Rachel. During the period of our observations Winnie’s mother became seriously ill, and Winnie travelled to Hong Kong to see her. A short time after Winnie returned, her mother died. The following field note was written at the time she learned that her mother had become ill, and she was planning to return to Hong Kong:

“I have two things to tell you, Rachel,” she started, and I became a bit nervous not sure if it is something serious. “You know, my mum became really ill recently, so quite likely I will need to fly to Hong Kong to see her any time my family rings me from Hong Kong.”
Although she did not enjoy long haul flights, Winnie said that she was determined that she would travel to Hong Kong to see her mother.

Winnie also often spoke about her daughter and son, as noted in another of Rachel’s field note entries:

“Did you talk to your daughter recently?” I asked her when we were waiting outside the staff lift.

“Oh, yeah, because WhatsApp is so convenient. I can ask her to send me a photo or a message to tell me about what has happened at her place; it feels like she’s just next door, very close, very convenient!” Winnie didn’t seem to miss her daughter a lot.

“My son went to Chile in his gap year. Teaching English. We could email each other quite often. Otherwise it took more than two months to receive a letter or if you wanted to post him something”, she continued.

Winnie appeared to be accepting of the fact that her adult son and daughter liked to travel, and were making lives for themselves. At the time of our observations Winnie’s daughter was in South Africa, where she had an internship with a company. Winnie told Rachel that she missed her daughter, but she thought her daughter didn’t miss her at all.

While she was audio-recording herself at home Winnie told a visiting friend that she had changed her name from ‘Lam’ [藍] to ‘Lateano’ when she got married. Although she used her maiden name when she went back to Hong Kong, she hardly used it otherwise. When she was audio-recording herself at home Winnie told a friend that her husband’s name was Italian:

My husband, eh, what is it called, descendants, I think it’s called descendants, you know the generation, his grandfather is actually Italian, yea, according to what he said, because he never met his grandfather, years ago, I think his grandfather, nineteen, I don’t know what the days now, I think is nineteen twenty or something like that, he travelled from Italy to Argentina, OK, his grandfather married a Scottish woman in Argentina, I don’t know what this Scottish woman doing in Argentina, and then they settled in Argentina, and have nine children, and his dad is the youngest of the nine children, so his dad is Argentinian, speak Spanish, so my husband speak Spanish, I do remember his Dad speak Spanish

Winnie went on to tell her friend that:

his mum, means my mother-in-law, she’s from eh, Wolverhampton, and then, nineteen fifty or nineteen forty something I don’t know, around that time, and she went to Argentina, to travel and live, then his mum met his dad, and then after getting married, my husband’s mum had to come back to England, because of family business

When she was talking to Rachel at work Winnie spoke of her relationship with her late mother-in-law. In one instance she typed her mother-in-law’s name into the library computer and pointed it out to Rachel:
“She’s my mother-in-law.” Winnie told me and I then understood why she kept typing in this name. “She passed away long time ago, say in 1996, and I miss her so much!” Suddenly my throat was choked and tears wet my eyes. Sitting next to me is just the woman I expected Winnie to be, an affectionate and fair mum- and daughter-in-law. The way she’s talking about her mother-in-law proved that she’s a woman who is kind and can treat others kindly.

Winnie reiterated this point, articulating her gratitude for her mother-in-law’s support with her children when they were young:

“My mother-in-law and I, we were very close friends and she helped me a lot looking after my children when I needed to go to the college.” Winnie continued, and her tone became very soft.

In audio-recorded conversation with Rachel Winnie commented on her attitude to young people, saying

The young, the younger generation is so, you know, so open up, they go to holiday, they go to travel, they can work overseas, you can have jobs, and marriage, of course, if you want, wow, you got the whole world right in front of you! Why, should one, go to marriage?

Winnie seemed to be supportive of young people leading independent lives rather than relying on the domesticity of married life. She spoke about this on a number of occasions, saying ‘if you are intelligent, why marry a man and be like a servant? How about you? Who serves you?’ She also valued independence for herself within her relationship, saying ‘I want to learn, my learning first. No, but also I am lucky as well, because my husband very supportive.’ On another occasion we heard Winnie say that she valued learning more than staying at home as a housewife. Her orientation to work was that it was a learning environment for her.

During the period of our observations at the Library of Birmingham cuts to opening hours and staffing were announced. Staff were told that they had the option to apply for their own jobs or apply for voluntary redundancy (VR). When she was considering that she may apply for voluntary redundancy Winnie said she was already making plans for activity to replace work, telling her son’s partner, in an audio-recorded interaction at home, ‘I can do some voluntary work, and eh, hm, urm, I definitely like go to, the eh further study for my for my English writing’. She added that

there is a course, online, it’s languages, languages and writing, let’s see how the course going. Because the course is not only about languages, it's about how you treat log, eh, like Facebook, to to the wider audience, so maybe to promote my social media, wider wider social media that would be good

Winnie was keen to continue learning, and to make the most of any opportunity. This interest in languages and learning would be a recurrent motif across the data sets as we continued to observe Winnie.
Migration

Another set of life experiences that constituted Winnie’s historical body was her history as a migrant. Rachel recorded in her field notes a conversation with Winnie about how she migrated to the United Kingdom:

Winnie told me she was married to her husband before she came to the UK twenty five years ago. She told me her husband was an English teacher in Hong Kong then, and had been working there for quite a few years. They got to know each other and moved to Birmingham soon after they got married.

Winnie migrated to the United Kingdom from Hong Kong in 1990. She married in Hong Kong, and had two children, both now adults.

Winnie spoke to Rachel about the migration experience:

it’s not easy for people to live in a civilised society, the people are polite, pick up the rubbish, but for people from elsewhere, it’s not easy in the society, not only Chinese, mix with friends, for instance, you can go with them for a coffee or things like that but is not easy to mingle with the English, it’s not easy but it’s not that you can’t, takes time and space, unless the person I mean English, they interested in other culture and eh, interested in you as a person as well and eh to say缘< destiny> timing and the situation all at the right time, and starting to build up bit by bit otherwise ohh

Winnie’s view was that establishing relationships with ‘English’ people was not always easy for ‘people from elsewhere’. In making this point she went on to deploy a stereotype of the English character:

And their culture is very keep themselves to themselves isn’t it? It’s not very nice to say but like English weather it’s very cold, cold culture but on the other hand if you understand them is a way of life, yours is yours mine is mine, shake hands, give you a hug, and that’s it, don’t follow me don’t come close, but that’s a way of life here, isn’t it, that’s why some Chinese like to make friends with Chinese because one, when I talk about something it’s easy to relate and you know what I’m talking about and mentality is similar as well, it’s easy to communicate

However, Winnie’s view of the migration and post-migration experience was more nuanced than simply saying that it’s easier for migrant groups to stick to their own. In the same conversation she discussed with Rachel stereotypes of Chinese cultural practices. Rachel gave as an example the custom that Chinese people don’t like to go to their friends’ house empty-handed. Winnie responded by saying:
I’ve been living here for twenty-five years, I found this etiquette Chinese etiquette quite troublesome呀！I found this Chinese etiquette quite troublesome > I don’t do this any more. Because when I was at home, I live by myself and my mum is a Catholic, we don’t have this

Winnie pointed out that the stereotype of Chinese heritage cultural practices, which implied a homogeneity among ‘Chinese’ people, did not hold true for everyone. She said ‘sometimes you have to be very careful with Chinese’, as there could be complaints if you did not follow the expected custom. She said she preferred what she called (deploying another national stereotype) the ‘British way’. She said she and her friends (some of whom were both ‘Chinese’ and ‘British’ and, in fact, neither) ‘don’t do it otherwise we won’t get along’. She was concerned that stereotypical social niceties were ‘太客气了，要就要，不要就不要’ < too polite! If you want it just say it, and if you don’t, just don’t >. She said she appreciated ‘the British way of doing things’. She expressed her view that whereas it was sometimes difficult to navigate the nuances of polite behaviour in relationships with ‘Chinese’ people, ‘British don’t do this, they very straightforward 你别麻烦了，我这样就很好。 < you don’t bother and I’m fine with it > simple and frank, oh, that I like’.

Winnie spoke about her impressions of Chinese migration to the UK. She said the ‘older generation’ of migrants were farmers in Hong Kong, and had not taken steps to integrate in British society. She said

they came to England, they live here for forty years, the only places they know is they know how to go home, they know how to go to work, Chinese take-away, and they know how to go to casino, the three places that’s it

She was intolerant of Chinese migrants who had lived in the UK for forty years without learning ‘how you integrate with society’. At the same time she felt that ‘people in China’ did not appreciate how hard migrants worked:

they must think wah all the pound coming in, they must live in Buckingham Palace, they didn’t know they are working like a dog twenty four hours, chop chop chop, they have no lives no family no children and that’s about it, there’s no difference in China, America, or England, everywhere

Notwithstanding her frustration that some migrants did not make an effort to ‘integrate’, Winnie had a compassionate view of the lives of migrant workers in the UK. She was concerned that there was potential for some children of Chinese migrants to move away from their parents when they became well-educated and found good jobs. She said

some kid, oh, the Chinese parents support so much - money, energy, feeling, everything, but they get up to the top, they don’t see their parent at all. They don’t bother to talk to you. That’s a sad thing

Later in the same discussion she repeated this point, saying that she had noticed
some children of immigrants, when they are successful they look down their parents, that’s the most unforgivable, isn’t it. they mingle with the white, they forget their root

Winnie also suggested that Chinese parents may inadvertently drive their children away by making too many demands. She said that migrant parents often were ‘working hard like a donkey, work, work, work’, to support their children’s success.

In the piece of writing to which we referred earlier, Winnie neatly summarised her attitude to her experience of migration (Figure 8). She presented this to Rachel as a text for an English literacy support exercise:

**Figure 8: A sense of belonging**

Winnie’s English language learning was an important concern for her. She saw the research project at least partly as an opportunity to address this concern, and to avail herself of support.

One of Winnie’s recurrent concerns in her migration experience was learning English. She spoke to a friend about this in an audio-recorded conversation at home:

you know the language it’s hard. It’s hard isn’t it? You know the language you know the society and culture. You know the law and order so that you know ah, if you go to cross the road you have to check the traffic light. Maybe you come from country there is no traffic light you can drive wherever you like, isn’t it? You, you, any offence, you paid the money and get away from that, isn’t it. It’s not like that all the society here. Again, learn English helps a lot of course. You can then ask, but if you don’t know the language, you don’t know want to learn you just want to stay at home, then what’s the point here? You you lost completely, you lost identity, the society is not yours. You, you’d better get back home at least you got family, you got friend to talk to.

Winnie sees learning English as fundamental in order to participate in society and belong in British society. Winnie’s example of the potential hazards of going to ‘cross the road’ in an unfamiliar environment resonates with Scollon and Scollon’s (2003: 198) discussion. They propose that “A person comes to the moment of crossing the street with a personal history of knowledge and experience, a set of habits, a set of intentions”. Blommaert (2012) points out that
pedestrians must make sense of multiple discourses, and such sense-making processes are part of the habitual routine practice of crossing a street. The street, or a particular point on the street, is “a historical micro-space with a particular order” (Blommaert 2012: 42). On the whole we know how to cross the road because we have acquired the codes valid in such micro-spaces, and “all of us are capable to shift in and out of such codes when we enter and leave such spaces” (43). Blommaert points out that we all possess an array of enskilled knowledge, capable of navigating us through complex spaces. We experience this complexity when we leave our familiar environments and find ourselves in places where we do not share the same knowledge as others. Winnie agrees. However, her concern is for those who have not had the opportunity to learn, or to acquire the necessary codes to enable us to navigate the spaces of the city. If ‘the society is not yours’ it may be a hazardous place to be. A willingness to learn, she suggests, is a first step to getting safely across the busy junction.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) argue that also key here is the habitus of the social actor. The person about to cross the street signals to others whether he or she is the sort of person who waits for the light, and in doing so is contesting or ratifying the regulatory and other discourses present. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 200) suggest that in such a context we see a form of “dialogicality between the habitus of the social actor and the discourses present in that place”. At the same time, they point out, the person about to cross the street is a social person within an interaction order. When people are ‘with’ others they may follow the lead of the other in crossing the street rather than paying close attention to the lights or the traffic. Among the discourses in play in crossing the street are those which index the organization of the society. This is not the least of Winnie’s points. When she refers to ‘law and order’ she means that in some places there is a relatively permissive orientation to attempting to cross the road when the lights have not changed and the traffic is still moving. In other societies such transgressive behaviour is both frowned upon by citizens and the subject of sanction in law. Winnie’s anxiety is that it is not a straightforward matter to cross the road without sociocultural knowledge of the society in which the road is to be crossed. She proposes this as a metaphor for migration, learning, and identity. In the same audio-recorded conversation with her friend she spoke of the importance of her public-facing, public sector job as a means for learning English:

yea, like me, if I haven’t been working in the public. Having been working the public, you know I work in public, for so many years as well, you are bound to improve, isn’t it. And for me to like a front-line worker, you have to deal with so many inquiries, even just say, where is the toilet, you have to direct them, and tell them where the toilets are, that is, on which floor, turn left, turn right and things like that, day in and day out, and all year long, just, it just helped. But instead imagine, I come here, I never work, I think I can speak English, but the understanding is not that good, because is not only what you speak, is to understand what’s the question. Sometimes I do muddle up, because depends on people their way to speak, sometimes, because sometimes I just guessing. Some people come to me, in front of me hehehe I just hehehe

Winnie’s description is of herself as ‘front-line worker’ whose historical body has become enskilled in the ways of being a Customer Experience Assistant. In patterns of equivalence (Jakobson 1960, Hymes 2003) she points to the importance to her of ‘working in the public’, ‘working the public’, ‘I work in public’. It is the intersection of ‘work’ and ‘public’ that has been
her site of learning, ‘day in and day out, and all year long’. In fact day in and day out for eighteen years long Winnie had engaged in service encounters with members of the public. She rhetorically invites her friend to imagine what her historical body would be like if she had not had the opportunity to work in public.

**English language learning**

One of the crucial means of enabling migrants to integrate in British society, Winnie believed, was through learning English. She saw herself as an advocate for Chinese people to learn English, but was anxious that she may patronise them:

> I feel I patronising people, you know. Go on, learn some English, it’s very good for you. I just feel, they live in England, so simple form, you don’t need big deal, for me, my English is not perfect, I don’t have to

Here Winnie represents her doubts about offering encouragement to other migrants, ventriloquating (Wortham and Reyes 2015) herself as a character at a slight distance from herself as narrator in the present: ‘Go on, learn some English, it’s very good for you’. In doing so she is able to articulate both her opinion that migrants should make an effort to learn English, and her reservations about appearing to be over-insistent in offering this opinion to migrants. Winnie believed that learning English was an important means of facilitating migrants’ understanding of education, health, welfare, and, indeed, the library service. She said it was necessary to learn English to be able to engage in the simple things of everyday life, such as making appointments with the doctor, and attending children’s school parents’ evenings.

Winnie valued her work role very highly as a means of participation in the public realm. In her conversation with Rachel, audio-recorded in her home, she said she felt sorry for people who did not make an effort to find work, and to spend time outside the home. In the same conversation she spoke of her own English proficiency, saying ‘my English is not perfect, I’m not Professor of English, but I’m able to know what’s going on’. Winnie said that although ‘no way we can speak English like the native speakers’, at least she could make people understand. She said that sometimes she didn’t know whether her English was right or wrong, and she found this frustrating. She acknowledged that there were limitations in her English proficiency, but she was proud that she had learned through constant, recurrent engagement in the public realm.

We saw a number of references to language learning of one sort or another in our observations at the Library of Birmingham. These included examples of Winnie seeking Rachel’s help with her written English, and commenting on her English proficiency, reference to spoken or written proficiency in Chinese languages, and examples of translation. Winnie made it clear to Rachel from the outset that she saw their close contact over the observation period as an opportunity to improve her written English. Winnie kept this on the agenda throughout the period, often asking Rachel to check e-mails, and to give feedback on other pieces of writing. For example, Winnie
asked Rachel to check an e-mail to her supervisor in the library. Rachel recorded the exchange in her field notes:

Winnie started to type loudly on her computer an e-mail to MN, the supervisor who is responsible for setting out the cover rota for all the floors. “Ah, come here, have a look for me, is this correct?” Winnie beckoned to me and pushed her screen towards me a bit. I stood behind her to read her draft email:

“Hi [name]  
Week beginning 27th April  
Adrian and Rachel are coming on Wednesday 29th 11am to 2pm and Thursday 30th from 11am to 2pm  
Winnie”

I made several suggestions for things she could change so to make it more business-like, with correct grammar. She looked pleased and grateful after finishing the e-mail corrections. “You see, I’ve started to ask you to help me writing already.” She smiled at me and asked me if my offer of free English lessons was still on. “Since you’ve offered I am going to take advantage of it!” She laughed and started to tell me what she really needed to improve her English.

Rachel was always helpful in responding to Winnie’s requests for support. On a number of occasions Winnie asked Rachel to check e-mails she had drafted. Composing emails emerged as an anxiety for Winnie, as she repeatedly asked Rachel for help with drafts. Rachel not only taught Winnie a number of points about written English, but also taught her the basics of word processing and drafting e-mails on the computer. Rachel invested a considerable amount of time in keeping her promise to help Winnie with her English literacy skills. Rachel took a supportive and encouraging role in relation to Winnie’s writing, and in addition to helping her with emails and with short essays she assisted Winnie with her application for her own job as part of the library’s restructuring process. It was not uncommon for Winnie to comment on her own English proficiency at work, as in the following example, recorded in Rachel’s field notes (B is Winnie’s colleague):

B was checking the two books Winnie had left on the counter earlier on. It turned out Winnie had done everything on the system, she just needed to put them away. But Winnie didn’t seem to understand what B was asking so B had to repeat herself several times. “Ah, that’s all I am asking, Winnie!” “Ah, sorry! Sorry about my English hehe!” Winnie turned her head towards B, smiling. “Don’t worry, don’t worry!” B shook her head at me.

On a number of occasions Winnie commented on her English proficiency as a response to a criticism or error. She saw learning English as a challenge, but also as a lifelong project.

*Chinese*
Winnie sometimes made reference to Chinese languages. She spoke Cantonese, but she was not confident with written skills in Chinese, or with spoken Mandarin. In the example which follows a Chinese student comes to Winnie’s desk to apply for membership of the library. Rachel was shadowing Winnie, and wrote the following notes:

“Hi I need to apply for membership. I came from student accommodation, do you need my student card?” A Chinese student laid out several documents in front of Winnie, looking at her eagerly. She was very young and carried a huge cello case on her shoulder. “How long do you stay?” Winnie asked her while checking her documents. “Um, I have been here since last year but they told me my card was out of date so I can’t use it any more.” “OK. What’s your name? Do you have your card with you?” The girl read out her name slowly for Winnie to spell. Winnie tried to copy the pronunciation but her pronunciation showed that she didn’t know how to spell the name. “I am rubbish with Pinyin. Write it down for me, here.” Winnie gave the girl a piece of paper and a pen so the girl quickly jotted down her name. Winnie picked it up and tried to read it out in Mandarin but still didn’t succeed.

Winnie’s comment on her proficiency with Pinyin, the means of transcribing Chinese with the Latin alphabet, suggested that she was not significantly invested in this written form. Another example of her lack of confidence with Mandarin occurred shortly after Winnie returned from her trip to Hong Kong to visit her mother. Rachel asked her whether she had eaten good food in Hong Kong:

“Winnie, did you eat something nice in Hong Kong? Something that you’ve always wanted to eat?” I asked. Winnie’s face lit up. “Yeah, yeah, the noodles!”. Winnie tried to speak in Mandarin but gave up before even starting the sentence: “There’s no past tense in Chinese, right? Yeah, I have eaten loads of stuff I dreamed about”. “No, there isn’t but we use the word 过 < have > after the verb to express an action that happened in the past. Like 你吃过…? < Have you eaten…? > or 你去过 < Have you been to…? > “是的，是的。我吃过上海的面。好好吃！很粗，很辣，很好吃。 < yes, yes. I have eaten Shanghai noodle. Yummy! Very thick and spicy, very delicious! >

Winnie attempts to speak in Mandarin, but loses confidence and initially gives up. Her metalinguistic comment betrays her insecurity. However, encouraged by Rachel’s mini-language lesson she resumes, and is able to describe the noodles she enjoyed in Hong Kong.

Translation

We regularly observed occasions when translation came into play in the library. These included acts of translation between languages, and, in an extended interaction, a teacher of Deaf young people translating Winnie’s words in British Sign Language. A group of sixteen and seventeen year old Deaf students came to the information desk with their teachers and wanted to join the library. There was a clear need for the teachers to take on the role of translator, as only they were
able to communicate with both the students and Winnie. In Rachel’s field note ‘S’ is one of the students:

A group of six teenagers all wearing hearing aids and using sign language got stuck by the self-service machines. Two adults who looked like their teachers were talking to them in sign language, trying to identify their problems. One of the teachers came to speak to Winnie, saying her students had got stuck when trying to activate their library cards on the machines. Winnie offered to help and started to check the cards for the students one by one. The teacher was running between the counter and her students to let them know what Winnie told her, with her hands dancing in the air swiftly and her students looking at her and talking in hands and muffled voices. Finally a young girl came with the teacher.

“All right, you are number one”, knowing the girl can’t hear her, Winnie smiled and talked to the teacher. “So she knows her PIN number?” Winnie looked at the teacher. “So do you remember your PIN number?” the teacher spoke very loudly and slowly with her hands doing the signs as she is translating Winnie’s questions for the girl. The girl quickly understood her teacher and started to tell her the numbers. The teacher copied the signs from the girl and spoke loudly so Winnie typed in the number. She then asked if the girl was still under sixteen, and the teacher acted as the translator again. The girl smiled and nodded her head and started to tell her teacher her date of birth. The teacher told Winnie what the girl said to her and sighed, “unfortunately I am not as young as S!” She was talking to Winnie but did the signs so S laughed, looking into her teacher’s eyes. They smiled at each other.

“That’s it! You can borrow books from today”, Winnie declared to the girl. “Thank you!” the girl mumbled, looking excited and happy. “She said thank you”, the teacher told Winnie. “How do you say ‘thank you?’” Winnie loves to grab any opportunity to learn new things. The teacher put her right hand on her mouth and moved the hand forward in a curve as if blowing a kiss. Winnie copied correctly and looked at me, smiling.

Winnie is helpful and patient throughout the exchange with S and her teacher. It is typical of Winnie’s attitude to languages that she has a go at learning (or at least performing) the sign for ‘thank you’ as the young student leaves the desk. The teacher translates with good humour and confidence.

Translation was a feature of this interaction throughout. Rachel’s field notes reveal a sense of the convivial nature of the interactions, as both Winnie and the students are delighted that the exchange is progressing successfully. The second teacher also became involved in translating between Winnie and the students who wanted to join the library:

The male teacher walked back to his students waiting at the self-service machine, talked to them with his hands and came to Winnie: “They need to activate the cards there first before coming to you, right?”

“是呀 [yes]” Winnie agreed in Cantonese unconsciously, which sounded like she was greeting the man by saying ‘hiya’. Their conversation rolled on as Winnie explained to
the man what he would need to tell his students. The man walked back to his students and started to tell them what Winnie told him.

Winnie, perhaps carried away with enthusiasm, deployed a Cantonese word to confirm that the teacher was correct. Then Winnie and her translator turn their attentions to the next student in line, D:

“How old is D?” Another girl called D was the next Winnie served. “Sixteen?” the teacher wasn’t very sure so after answering on behalf of her student, she turned to D and asked by making signs with her hands.

“Seventeen this June.” D looked at her teacher and quickly answered with her hands. The teacher said it aloud while D was talking to her with her hands.

“How do you have your e-mail address? Oh, write it down here, please.” Winnie picked up a slip of paper and handed it over to the girl with a pen.

“All right, that’s the e-mail.” D quickly wrote it down and pushed the piece of paper back to Winnie. Winnie started to type in the e-mail address while reading aloud the letters written by D. She seemed to have problems reading the handwritten letters so the teacher took over, reading it out from the paper by facing D, her hands flying in the air repeating the words she just said, to double check with D. The girl nodded her head while the teacher went on. Finally Winnie got what she needed and successfully processed the card.

In this example we see a further level of translation and interpretation, as the teacher reads aloud D’s handwritten e-mail address for Winnie, who had struggled to comprehend the handwriting. The interaction was carried throughout by the teachers’ translation skills and Winnie’s openness to diversity, and her patience. Not only was the historical body of Winnie importantly in play in this interaction. So were the historical bodies of the students and their teachers, “formed in such a way that s/he will be perceived as a teacher by others, and that most of the actual practices s/he performs can be habitual and routine” (Blommaert 2012: 36).

Travel

As we have seen, Winnie represented herself as someone who enjoyed travel, and who was sufficiently independent to visit distant territories. In relation to her stance as an independent person Winnie also told us that she sometimes goes on holiday with her friends rather than with family members: ‘I would, I often go holiday with my friend’. Winnie’s values became visible in her discourse about holidays, as we heard in the following audio-recorded conversation with Rachel at Winnie’s home:

```
1 W I myself like travelling. When I ah, when I eh late twenty I travelled really quite a lot. I can’t remember all the places I went travelling but I remember every time I travelling, buying tickets to travel to the undeveloped country I like to buy something unusual
2
3
4
5 RH very unique
```
very unique, but particularly you know, for instance, if I have the chance to go to Tibet, Qinghai, something like those really remote areas, they have those lovely wenjian folks, you know, I definitely will get those you know. That’s my hobby, eh a

that’s your interests and you like to collect those things

yea, my interests, yea yea

cos it’s something you don’t see very often

yea yea. so even now I travel for example last year I went to Croatia

so what did you get from Croatia?

normally they have Gucci, Chanel, I don’t want that. they just find anything that is very special. I keep looking and people say oh you like shopping, but they don’t know actually I look for something very unique. they don’t understand, because they can’t, they can’t share my joy, because like, people like you, some people like to buy expensive handbags, isn’t it? it’s their joy, you know, oh, I buy Miu Miu, Gucci, Chanel, you know, they are joy for them but I don’t share this joy, because I thought, um, um, people say oh buy those ugly boxes what for?

Winnie positions herself as someone who, in her younger days at least, was a keen traveller, a cosmopolitan who travelled to so many places, including undeveloped countries, that she can’t remember them all. At line 4 she takes up a position as someone who always likes, or liked, to buy ‘something unusual’ on her travels. In her next turn at talk she tells Rachel that she still has ambitions to journey to ‘remote areas’, and says that her hobby is collecting unusual artefacts on her travels. At line 13 Winnie positions herself as still an active traveller. Within this short interaction she has located her traveller self in the past (‘I travelled really quite a lot’), the future (‘if I have the chance to go’), and the present (‘even now I travel’). We can see from the photograph of Winnie’s fridge door (Figure 9), which displayed fridge magnets from the Taj Mahal, Toronto, Sydney, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, and many other travel destinations, that Winnie valued travel highly. When asked what she brought from Croatia on her recent travels, Winnie expands on her values, distancing herself from stereotypical glamour products such as Gucci and Chanel, saying that she looks for ‘something very unique’. In oppositional discourse she positions herself at odds with people who ‘don’t understand’.
Figure 9: Winnie’s fridge door

She even includes her interactant, saying ‘people like you’. In what might be termed ‘lines of equivalence’ or parallelism (Hymes 2003, Jakobson 1960), Winnie takes the notion of ‘joy’ as a fault line between people like her (or perhaps just her) and people unlike her:

> they can’t share my joy (18)
> it’s their joy (19)
> they are joy for them (20)
> but I don’t share this joy (21)

In the first example people who don’t understand ‘can’t share my joy’. Implicitly such people are not sophisticated enough to appreciate the uniqueness of the objects Winnie collects. In the second example Winnie ventriloquates the people who ‘like to buy expensive handbags’, saying, in a somewhat stylized voice, ‘oh, I buy Miu Miu, Gucci, Chanel’, and in doing so making such discourse verbal art, displayed for the purposes of negative evaluation. The joy enjoyed by such people is ‘their joy’, and is definitely remote from Winnie’s values. The third example sits at the other end of the ventriloquated voice of the other, book-ending the stylized, evaluated discourse. Finally, in the fourth example, Winnie makes an equivalent but converse statement of the first: she does not share the joy of the Miu Miu crowd any more than they can share hers. In this discourse the stereotypical brand names do much work as emblematic templates (Blommaert 2012b), indexing a life style and value system to which she does not subscribe.

In an example from the same conversation less than a minute later, Winnie speaks of the kind of goods sold in some department stores in China and Hong Kong:
pink flowers, they put everything pink pink pink, they think is beautiful actually it’s ugly

in Hong Kong, in the, we got quite nice a department store, all the
products from mainland China, of course all for tourists, all very expensive
what sort of stuff?

vase, because of the high market, you know

OK oh yea

yea the vase the figuery my god pink pink pink big flower pink wah, so ugly! where’s the artistic eyes?
hahaha

good job you don’t like pink colour otherwise I don’t talk to you

no it’s this pink? [RH pointed at her scarf] hahaha

no no is not pink hehehe

feel ashamed

no I am only joking, but I must say I never buy a single thing for my daughter
that is pink clothes, but having said that sometimes she wears pink clothes
because it’s a gift, because it’s gift it’s OK. it’s nothing wrong with it because
everybody has different favourite colour but (xxx)

but does she like pink when she was a little girl?
she don’t bother because it’s me eh um brings to her what to wear isn’t it?
now it’s up to her um eh but again hehehe, she don’t buy pink things hehehee,
not these days they don’t buy it it’s the upbringing isn’t it

it is

yea (6) I think it is just pink pink it’s too feminine, lack character I think I
think isn’t it?

oh definitely I think colour, your choice of colour can reflect your personality

Again Winnie introduces an oppositional discourse to affirm her aesthetic sensibility. She is scornful of stores which display ‘everything pink pink pink’, and says they think pink is beautiful when ‘actually it’s ugly’. For Winnie it is a mark of distinction that she is not seduced by ‘pink’. At line 5 she creates another opposition: the pink goods, from Mainland China, are ‘all for tourists’. Here both tourists and China seem to index bad taste. At line 9, in an equivalent structure to line 1, Winnie repeats her emphatic dismissal of pinkness, ‘pink pink pink big flower pink wah so ugly’. Her rhetorical question confirms that her opposition to pink is on aesthetic grounds: ‘where’s the artistic eyes?’. The rhetorical question positions Winnie as one who has an artistic vision and appreciation, in opposition to the crude and unsophisticated commodification of ‘pink’. As we have seen, Winnie had previously said to Rachel ‘people like you’ lack something in understanding the value of unique objects. Now she teases Rachel, saying ‘good job you don’t like pink colour otherwise I don’t talk to you’. This may have been a remedial move (Goffman 1967), as Rachel was wearing a (partially) pink scarf at the time of this interaction. At line 14 Winnie denies that the scarf is pink but nevertheless Rachel professes herself to be ‘ashamed’ (15) to be wearing the scarf in the face of Winnie’s emphatic critique. Winnie offers a further ceremonial move to remedy the awkward moment, saying ‘no I am only joking’. Winnie goes on to say that she never buys pink clothes for her daughter, but her
daughter will wear a pink item if she receives it as a gift. Perhaps still feeling that she needs to offer ritual remediation, Winnie says ‘nothing wrong with it because everybody has different favourite colour’. When Rachel asks whether Winnie’s daughter liked pink when she was a little girl, Winnie takes any potential embarrassment out of the equation, assuming full responsibility for her daughter’s taste: ‘she don’t buy pink things…it’s the upbringing isn’t it’. In deploying the present tense she takes the credit as much as the responsibility – she appears to be proud that her daughter has not grown up to like pink clothes. Here Winnie seems to invoke the notion of the habitus, the “systems of durable, transposable dispositions”, the “principles which generate and organize practices” (Bourdieu 1990: 53). That is, in Winnie’s view at least, her daughter’s adult self does not like the colour pink, or pink clothes, because of her ‘upbringing’. Winnie concludes with a more explicit rationale for her own opposition to the colour, saying pink is ‘too feminine, lack character’. Winnie is opposed to the stereotypical connotations of ‘pink’. She steps outside of the stereotype, and deploys it as a resource with which to critique a sensibility to which she is opposed.

Winnie also spoke to her friends and family at home about travel. She considered that her husband was less enthusiastic about travel than she was, and told one of her friends that ‘I said I have never been to Italy, I quite like to see like Florence, Rome’. She had recently seen a television programme about Rome, and was interested in going to The Coliseum, ‘thousands of slaves live there, and then how the underground water go into the city, and then how um mai, how some eh noble buried there, some artistic, wow that’s amazing, such huge, massive underground city’. Winnie’s enthusiasm for expanding her horizons through travel appeared to be undimmed. Her historical body, in her discourse at least, was a travelling historical body.
3. Translocal Histories

Winnie’s philosophy of life was one which valued activity and curiosity. She audio-recorded a social interaction in which she told a woman friend that

you got to make yourself active, you know, nobody live your life, isn’t it, you have to make your life interesting you know if if, if me yea, i i isolation is really hard isn’t it

Winnie told another friend that she treated domestic chores as a form of exercise:

I do it myself, and in some way I treat cleaning as exercise, and I I mentally up and down and cleaning this and that, but mentally, first I need to make an effort on things like that, today I should go out but no I better make an effort to clean all that and then I treat it as exercise

This positive outlook on the mundane activity of everyday life was characteristic of Winnie. She told one of her friends about the physical demands of library work, but she did not do so in order to complain:

some people complain that they stand too much and they hurt this and that, I’m, luckily I’m fit yea, some of my colleagues they suffer like arthritis then it’s like certain jobs they can’t do, the jobs like I do they can’t do because standing a long time they can’t just do it

Despite the fact that she is older than most of her colleagues Winnie sees herself as fit and robust. Winnie’s account is that she brings her historical body into play as an enskilled entity which stands as a real means to act in the social world and as a fundamental metaphor for her philosophical and historical trajectory. Nobody lives your life for you, so get out there and get things done in bodily practices. Make the best of your historical body: turn cleaning into exercise; be fitter than your colleagues. Live your own life.

Although she resisted the stereotype of the woman as wife and mother staying at home to look after the family, Winnie told Rachel that she regretted that her adult daughter had not learned what she considered to be some basic domestic skills:

my daughter doesn’t know how to sew and the basics, the buttons, has to come to me. I said to her then that will help you but then ah well I haven’t really sit down with her. I kept saying you need to learn this basic stuff, you need to learn this simple job, even man can do it, you can’t rely on your mum
She said that she knew how to do ‘a few stitches and that’s it’ herself, and would have liked her daughter to be more acquainted with such skills. She was more confident of her ability as a cook, and said that her daughter had learned how to cook using a ‘cook book’:

because I cook when I cook at home you don’t need wah a big cuisine, I don’t really have time so I made it very simple. for me because I’m working I just do the very basic you know. to serve the purpose you know what I mean, it’s not like a a VIP coming you know, so my cooking is very quick quick, as quick as possible you know. I myself always believe although there are many different ways of cooking, Italian, Indian, Moroccan, I’m still very Chinese cooking, because it’s simple, we don’t have so much powder you know like Indian, wah, so many powder you know because we eat fresh just veg, lots of vegetable you know just simple, stir fry put some prawn or you steam fish that’s enough, you don’t need to put so many things because you eat the freshness isn’t it

Here family values correspond with ‘Chinese’ values in Winnie’s discourse, as she describes her cooking as having the virtues of simplicity and freshness.

Cooking was perhaps a metaphor for Winnie’s values and beliefs. Although she valued different types of cuisine, she said she was ‘still very Chinese’. At home she told her son ‘I prefer the authentic cooking’ – that is, cooking fresh ingredients rather than processed or ready-meals. Despite her allegiance to Chinese cuisine, she was a keen observer of food preparation as an index of social change. She considered that cooking in England had changed significantly in recent times, telling her son that:

in the last twenty years because here in England you can able to buy herbs, twenty years ago there’s nothing you can buy, rosemary, oregano, bay leaves, fresh, and what is it called, here in this soup, basil you know, and all these herbs you can you can buy here but twenty, thirty years ago it’s part of French cuisine you know

Although her son was unwilling to concede that the ‘typical’ English family was interested in cuisine from different parts of the world, Winnie’s view was that English tastes had become more open to change. However, Winnie had strong views about hierarchies in international cuisine. She said to her son, ‘Korean and Japanese food, I don’t think they can rise up as
international cuisine’, and said that in Hong Kong ‘if you talk about international cuisine you were taking about Italian, French, you say it’s really nice, and food, proper food, you know, Chinese as well’. Winnie held certain national stereotypes associated with taste to be marks of distinction at the expense of others. Having said this, Winnie also at times resisted stereotypical indexicals associated with the judgement of taste (Bourdieu 1994). When her son talked about a friend’s interest in wine tasting, and having the correct glass for each wine, she said of her family that ‘we know nothing about the wine, wine tasting’. Rather than seeking out hierarchies in family and social life, Winnie was, as she put it herself, ‘open-minded’.

Marriage practices

Closely related to Winnie’s discourse about families and domestic life was discourse about cultural practices related to weddings. We audio-recorded an extended discussion about wedding practices which took place in the lunch-break at the Library of Birmingham. The participants in the discussion were Winnie (a migrant to the UK from Hong Kong, China), Rachel (a migrant to the UK from Mainland China), and A, a migrant to the UK from India. Winnie and A had worked together at the library for some years at the time of the exchange. They each had two adult children. As we join the discussion A directs a teasing joke towards Winnie, asking whether Winnie would like her son to marry A’s daughter, B, who was a doctor:

1. A would you like a doctor daughter-in-law?
2. W my daughter-in-law?
3. A um, B
4. W B? yeah, why not, I don’t mind, I don’t mind
5. A there you are! [laughs] let’s arrange a wedding
6. RH yeah the arranged marriage [all laugh]
7. W back into old time oh ah
8. A you are proud to get rid of that. I did promise her that you know because my
9. wedding was an arranged marriage, and I did promise them that, you know what,
10. I’m not going to let my daughters go through what I’ve been through
11. W um
12. A so let them make their choice you know I was qualified as well, I was uprooted
13. from school
14. W what do you mean by qualified?
15. A you know when you are back home if you are qualified like what they are
16. saying, that I want the entry level say just like GCSE level
17. W oh oh educated you mean like qualified oh I see
18. A I was more than qualified I was going prepared to for a degree you know, the
19. skills that my parents didn’t ask for, just you know OK, just

In the first five lines A asks Winnie whether she would like her son to marry a doctor, and Winnie responds at first by echoing A, a strategy she commonly deployed in exchanges in both service interactions and social relationships when she was unsure how to answer. In line 3 ‘B’ is
the name of A’s daughter. Then Winnie understands the question, and replies in a playful, somewhat stylized voice, deploying humour to remedy any potential awkwardness in the interaction. The basis of A’s joke appears to be that Winnie is not the sort of person who is likely to have daughter-in-law who is a doctor. It is therefore unlikely that A was aware that (ironically) at the time of the interaction Winnie’s son was engaged to be married to a medical student. Winnie does not reveal this in the exchange, but instead deflects the possibility of the destabilization of the exchange by adopting a ‘funny voice’ to reply. At line 5 A sounds delighted at Winnie’s agreement, and says ‘let’s arrange a wedding’. This is both light-hearted and culturally charged discourse. Indeed it is a joke because it is culturally charged. It is a permitted discourse because it is not serious: there is no actual suggestion here that an arranged wedding may be in prospect. Rachel picks up the suggestion with an echo, but changes ‘arrange a wedding’ to the more familiar, and more culturally charged, ‘arranged marriage’. At line 7 Winnie responds by locating arranged marriages in the past, saying ‘back into the old time’. A agrees, saying ‘you are proud to get rid of that’. Here ‘proud’ is an emphatic dismissal of the practice of arranged marriage, and privileges the present over the past: her pride is in the enlightenment of the present in replacing what she sees as the darkness of the past.

However, A then immediately changes the focus of the discussion, introducing a personal narrative about her own family. She tells Winnie and Rachel that her own wedding was an arranged marriage, and she had promised her own daughters that she was ‘not going to let my daughters go through what I’ve been through’. Here lines of equivalence (‘I did promise’, ‘I did promise’) add emphasis to her statement, as does the aside ‘you know what’, which creates a space in which to make her assertion. She continues to say ‘so let them make their choice’. At lines 12-19 A relates a short narrative in which she three times repeats the word ‘qualified’. The point of her story is that her education was interrupted by her arranged marriage, she was ‘uprooted from school’ as she was preparing to do a degree. Here ‘uprooted’ acts as a striking metaphor for the unwilling transformation of the historical body. We have not included the transcript for the next fifteen lines of the discussion, for reasons of confidentiality. However, as A ends her personal narrative the exchange take a more general turn, as Winnie and Rachel discuss arranged marriage in China:

35  W  but all these, all these modern time, you know in China, oh it used to be like, oh
36  RH  arranged marriage as well
37  A  really?
38  RH  you know in old China
39  W  whoa how many years? how many years ago? a thousand years ago, arranged
40  marriage?
41  RH  not that old
42  W  a hundred years ago
43  RH  yeah at least
44  W  my my mum was arranged marriage
45  A  oh in India that is still happening oh it happened a lot especially in the
46  countryside, see it’s not like here people from countryside are rich and things are
47  like that
48  RH  yeah
A back home countryside is completely opposite so it’s still happening Winnie
still happening oh
I mean
the village oh the city?
city as well
[to RH:] is your parents arranged marriage?
no
so it’s already liberated, isn’t it
they moved to the city
oh they moved
they got to know each other in the university
ah
it’s different I think that arranged marriage still was there depending, depending on the situation
that’s what I said like in India back home there are still a lot especially on the
what should I say like dowry

At line 35 Winnie offers an oppositional discourse which distinguishes between ‘modern time’ and what ‘it used to be like’, or, as she put it in line 7, ‘old time’. In this turn at talk Winnie invokes the timespace of modern China and the timespace ‘old China’. Rachel completes Winnie’s sentence (‘arranged marriage as well’), and A expresses surprise. Now the timespace is negotiated: Rachel speaks of ‘old China’ (38), and Winnie offers ‘a thousand years ago’ (39). Rachel disagrees, and Winnie offers another stab: ‘a hundred years ago’ (42). Having narrowed the gap from old China to modern China Winnie adds a further dimension: ‘my mum was arranged marriage’. Here the scale (Blommaert 2015a) shifts again, as Winnie refocuses the discussion from the history of China to family narrative. A relocates the discussion to the timespaces of India in the past and present, saying ‘oh in India that is still happening’, ‘it happened a lot’ (45), and ‘it’s still happening, Winnie’ (49). A brings together past and present India as chronotopes in which arranged marriage is a continuing practice. Here we see chronotopes mediated by scales, as the cultural anchorage of chronotopes is conditioned by the sociolinguistic conditions (Blommaert 2015a).

However, ‘India’ is not a homogeneous timespace: A goes on to distinguish between the ‘countryside’ and the city. She also invokes ‘here’, the United Kingdom, where ‘people from countryside are rich’, in opposition to ‘back home’, where the countryside is much poorer, and ‘completely opposite’. She suggests that although arranged marriage may be more prevalent in the poor, rural areas, she acknowledges that it is ‘still happening’ in the city as well. Winnie asks Rachel whether her parents’ marriage was arranged, and Winnie takes her answer as a positive sign that ‘it’s already liberated’. It is not clear whether the pronoun here (‘it’) refers to ‘China’, or the practice of arranged marriage. Rachel’s rationale for her parents’ liberation appears to be that ‘they moved to the city’. Again timespaces are held in opposition to each other as they index patterns of cultural practice. Rachel makes no claims about the demise of arranged marriages, however, saying it ‘still was there, depending’. A, too, speaks in the present tense to accept that ‘in India, back home, there are still a lot’ of arranged marriages.
A notable feature of the interaction between Winnie, A, and Rachel is the role of time and space. Blommaert (2015a) considered the role of time and space in narrative and identity, and, drawing on Bakhtin, argued that chronotopes involve specific forms of agency and identity. He proposed that specific patterns of social behavior ‘belong’ to particular timespace configurations, and when they ‘fit’ they respond to existing frames of recognizable identity, while when they don’t they are ‘out of place’, ‘out of order’ or transgressive. That is, “chronotopes invoke orders of indexicality valid in a specific timespace frame” (2015a: 2). Blommaert suggests that this happens through the deployment and appraisal of chronotopically relevant indexicals. Here the discussion of marriage is initiated through the deployment of a particular indexical in line 1, as A reminds Winnie, and perhaps informs Rachel, that her daughter is a doctor. This instance of social manoeuvring does not go far. However, it is sufficient to introduce another indexical. Blommaert (2015b:5) points out that “language-ideologically ‘loaded’ semiotic features (indexicals) come in as a ‘translocal’ but ‘locally’ enacted layer of historical meaning”. The phrase ‘arrange a wedding’, quickly recontextualised as ‘arranged marriage’, is just such a language-ideologically loaded term. It points to histories, beliefs, values, controversies, and contestations which are rarely far from the political and public consciousness. The phrase is located with reference to specific timespace configurations which shift and return on themselves as the conversation about cultural practices progresses. The chronotopic nature of cultural practices explains “generations, anachronisms and obsolete cultural practices” (Blommaert 2015a:5).

The here-and-now of the lunch-break conversation sits in dynamic tension with other timespaces, as translocal discourse moves not only between the discussion and its historical context, between the synchronic and the diachronic, but also between the ‘translocal’ and the ‘local’ in the sense that while some of the talk is located with reference to broad histories of cultural practices in China, India, and (implicitly) the UK, some is located with reference to local family narratives. In the discussion chronotopes are invokable histories, elaborate frames in which time, space and “patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value, and can be set off against other chronotopes” (Blommaert 2015b:9). Within this complexity is further complexity, which can be made visible with reference to chronotope and scale. The discussion is replete with translocal and local contexts, as discourse weaves deictically in and between ‘old China’, ‘in China’, ‘old time’, ‘modern time’, ‘a thousand years ago’, ‘a hundred years ago’, ‘still happening’, ‘still was there’, ‘in India’, ‘back home’, ‘the countryside’, ‘the city’, ‘the university’, and ‘here’. Discussion of arranged marriage at the level of the individual scales up to discussion of historical cultural practices in China and India. The identity work going on here is chronotopically organised, with reference to specific timespace configurations which become compelling contexts. Timespaces are crucial dimensions of the tiny narratives which do so much identity work here. A says ‘I did promise them that’ in a timespace which does not have to be further defined, but shifts tense from the past to the present (‘I’m not going to let my daughters go through what I’ve been through’) and the timespace is now located simultaneously in the past, present, and future. Bringing chronotopes and scales together contributes to a complex, vivid account of context and contextualization.

A little while later the three women remembered that the audio-recorder had been recording their conversation. A said to Winnie, ‘we have it on record, you did accept my daughter as your
daughter-in-law’. At this Winnie laughed and maintained the role of the future mother-in-law, and asked how much dowry she should expect from A:

1. W: hehe oh my god haha wai how how much dowry you?
2. RH: it’s on the recorder
3. A: uhum you didn’t ask for it she didn’t ask for it
4. W: OK ask now actually whey whey we talk about it later hehehe, where’s the gold ring and everything you get prepared for your daughter?
5. A: no no no
6. W: because otherwise I don’t accept her
7. A: I just give her qualification
8. W: aw it’s good I I know it’s good
9. A: but you still want to try don’t you? hehe
10. W: mai mai
11. RH: it’s something you’ll talk about later on hehehe
12. W: it are you in Chinese in Chinese wedding did you see how many banquets is it called banquet? how many table? you know you holding the banquets for the wedding? is it the Indian do it as well? or Pakistan?
13. A: no Winnie they they do the same they would say how many guests you are going to get how many guests you are going to invite
14. W: so how many guests you have?
15. A: eh not that many don’t worry
16. W: hehe so is it is it girl’s family pay for it in Indian wedding?
17. A: in India it’s girl’s family pay for it
18. W: OK that’s not bad then
19. A: now in this country in this country what they do is that the boy and the girl they pay
20. W: share share
21. A: yea like boy’s side girl’s side they pay you know
22. RH: it’s (xxxx) family
23. A: but back home they are not
24. W: equal
25. RH: even nowadays?
26. A: yea yea (xxxx) but after the wedding you know there is gonna be like reception you know like (xxxx) but still back home some people still ask for it
27. RH: all right
28. W: en
29. A: whose side to pay they will try anything
30. W: OK I ah I ah understand it now
31. A: you understand it now. OK think about it and how are you going to pay yea have a lovely weekend it’s nice talking to you
32. RH: yea very nice talking to you too
33. W: yea see see you next week
34. A: same time next week same office
35. W: OK same office same office eh we call this her office
36. RH: OK
A, in role as the mother of the bride-to-be, tells Winnie and Rachel that Winnie did not ask for a dowry when she was being recorded. At line 4 Winnie, also still in role as the mother of the groom-to-be, asks A ‘where’s the gold ring and everything?’ The context here is a stereotype of cultural practices in Indian families. All are happy to play along with the stereotype for the purposes of the interaction. In an ad hoc mini-drama which they play out partly to entertain themselves, partly perhaps because they are now aware of the audio-recorder, and partly in a spirit of competition over their ambitions for their daughters, A makes a theatrical denial that she is offering wedding gifts: ‘no no no’. Winnie, equally theatrically, insists ‘otherwise I don’t accept her’. A, falling back on biographical detail to flesh out her part, privileges meritocracy over plutocracy, and says she will offer only her daughter’s ‘qualification’. It is not clear whether Winnie steps out of role to compliment her friend’s daughter’s education (‘it’s good, I I know it’s good’), but she is probably both in and out of character at this point. At line 13 Winnie seems to come out of role to ask questions about the extent to which weddings in India and Pakistan are organized in the same way as in China. Having ascertained the answer she steps back into role at line 18, and (in character) is relieved when she learns that in India ‘the girl’s family’ pays for the wedding, and comments ‘that’s not bad then’. However A, keeping the story alive, tells Winnie that ‘in this country’ costs for weddings are shared between ‘the boy and the girl’. As before A makes a distinction between ‘back home’ and ‘in this country’. Rachel asks ‘even nowadays?’, implying that the bridal dowry must be a practice from a bygone age. A tells her ‘back home, people still ask for it’, and the chronotope creates a timespace configuration which traverses present and past, and here and there. A deploys a stereotype which speaks to the local yet political (translocal) nature of the dowry: ‘whose side to pay, they will try anything’. She concludes by stepping back into role and saying to Winnie, ‘think about it and how are you going to pay’. The interactants all engage in a cheery access ritual as they part.

Here again the local and the translocal are contexts in which identity work is played out. Again context is complex: it is played out in the here-and-now, but the here-and-now is a dramatic, fictive timespace in which bridal dowries are argued over, gold is demanded but educational prowess is offered, chronotopic traditions are invoked and set aside in favour of traditions in other timespaces. Stereotypes are deployed, and underpin the dramatic narrative, as they are agreed upon and disagreed about. The past, present, and future of characters in the dramatic narrative co-exist with the past, present, and future of the actors taking their parts. At times there is little to distinguish the actor from her role. The action is played out with good humour, but is never a million miles from the identity positions taken up by the same actors at other times.

**Distinction**

In a further example of interaction between Winnie, A, and Rachel in the staff room, the conversation is about tea. Here fine tea appears to be a mark of taste and of distinction:

1. RH are you drinking loose tea leaves?
2. A I made a mistake, what I did is to start with I start with tea bag, now the loose
In response to Rachel’s question A explains her particular technique for making tea, which seems to involve both tea bags and loose tea leaves. At line 9 Rachel deploys a stereotype in order to inform A about ‘Chinese’ cultural practices in relation to tea-drinking. The relationship between B and Winnie is elaborated upon here, as we learn that Winnie brought back tea for B from her recent visit to Hong Kong. At line 14 A struggles to recall the name of a particularly fine tea, and Winnie, perhaps ironically parodying the notion of tea as distinction, says (unhelpfully, but comically), ‘tea?’. A echoes Winnie as a retort. She is still unable to recall the name of the tea, but says it was ‘boiled jasmine, something like that, very expensive’. A is at
pains to make clear that the tea was a commodity of distinction. She holds up her finger and thumb and says a small amount was ‘about ten pounds’. Winnie engages in what sounds like double-voiced discourse: on the one hand she goes along with the indexicals of distinction; on the other hand she lightly teases her friend and colleague for showing off about the value of her very fine tea. A says her daughter’s friend is going to Hong Kong again, and she had said ‘I don’t want it this expensive’. However, it seems that she has been given further stocks of fine tea. She speaks of the quality of the tea (‘you can see the jasmine flower’), but also of its monetary value: ‘eight pounds. this time is eight pounds’.

Bourdieu (1984: 76) points to cultural inheritance as social identity which transmits from generation to generation “the values, virtues and competences which are the basis of legitimate membership in bourgeois dynasties”. His analysis recognizes that the sense of belonging to a more polished, more polite, better policed world of harmony and beauty “is nothing other than a relation of immediate familiarity with the things of taste” (77). The distinction of taste is what sets us apart from those who do not have taste. To borrow from Michael Silverstein (2003), as A consumes the very fine tea and ritually denotes that consumption, she becomes the well-bred, interesting person iconically corresponding to the metaphorical ‘fashion of speaking’ of the perceived register’s figurations of the aesthetic object of connoisseurship, tea. We have seen that Winnie set herself apart from those whose taste was seduced by the world of high-end glamour products. Her son alluded to the good taste represented by fine wine, but she denied any interest in (what Silverstein termed) ‘oinoglossia’. Winnie’s colleague places herself in relation to the social structure of the ‘fine tea’ world by using a phrase (‘jasmine tea’) entextualized according to the tasting note genre. Silverstein (2003: 226) continues, “Elites and would-be elites in contemporary society seek to use these enregistered forms; using them confers (indexically entails) an aspect of eliteness before-prestige-commodities, of which ‘distinction’ is made”. Here Winnie’s colleague, despite her apparent protests, tells the company at some length that she has very expensive, high-quality tea. In doing so she puts on the table her credentials of distinction.

For some it may be the opera, for others fine art, for yet others good wine. For Winnie’s colleague her good taste is distinguished by her appreciation of the finest tea. Just as the museum, the theatre, a shiny new car, or a fine wine may be a mark of distinction in other timespaces, so here (discourse about) a very good tea is an indicator of the judgement of taste. Silverstein points out that the specialty prestige comestible shops of any affluent neighbourhood include coffee and tea tasting notes, cheese tasting notes, paté tasting notes, and so on, prominently displayed to orient (and reassure) the elite consumer that these are — right here, available to purchase — the paraphernalia of the correctly-indexical ‘life style’. Silverstein points out that lifestyle commodities exist verbally in constant dialectic tension from above the plane of mere indexicals of standardization, and the trope of ‘aboveness’ bespeaks the anxiety of ‘distinction’ that is hegemonic for those most caught up in their indexical values.

**Destiny**

Distinct from commentary on the judgement of taste, Winnie discussed the ‘cultural’ notion of ‘destiny’. This arose in relation to her narrative about an unfortunate incident. Just before the
beginning of our data collection period Winnie was attacked and robbed in the street. She described the incident to one of her female friends in an audio-recorded conversation at home:

I got a little bit eh accident, no no it’s nothing hurt but um, I usually work on Friday night you know, in February I finish and walk back home from the bus stop and somebody slashed my handbag from behind

Winnie was clearly upset by the incident, which happened as she was on her way home from work:

somebody is is very dark, quiet, in the whole road and my head is I always said when I walk I lot of thinking you know, and take it for granted because I’ve been walking for fifteen years, and then somebody they hold me press me from the back and push me down to the floor

The incident caused Winnie emotional trauma, physical injury, and the inconvenience of lost bank cards and other personal belongings. On more than one occasion Winnie referred to the notion that events in life are predestined. This was at least partly her explanation for a series of events which had caused her concern or unhappiness. Rachel made notes about this conversation:

“This year, you know, yang nian “羊年 < year of goat > is no good for me.” With nobody around the counter Winnie spoke to me in a low voice, looking very serious. “You see, I got the thing, then my mum is ready to die, no good,” Winnie shook her head and frowned, “and then the library is changing and they sent out the voluntary redundancy and so a lot of uncertainties, no good.” Winnie looked worried. I really hoped that I could say something comforting to encourage her to think positively.

In this extract the voice of Winnie resounds with anxiety as she tries to rationalize the recent series of events that has shaken her. She accounts for her mother’s illness and the threat to her job as a predestined effect of the calendar. Some believe that people born in the Year of the Goat 命苦 [have a bitter life and bad luck]. They believe that these people will have no luck and no money in their lives. There are anecdotal reports saying that some pregnant women whose due dates are in the last month of the Year of the Goat hope to delay the delivery of their baby so that they are born in the Year of the Monkey instead. Rachel’s notes make a stern metacomment on Winnie’s words, making a distinction between Winnie’s religious faith and her apparent belief in predestination. At the same time Rachel’s account of her response to Winnie is of lending a sympathetic ear rather than an admonition. Rachel’s narrating self in her field notes is at a slight remove from her character’s narrated self.

In a similar example two weeks later Rachel again summarised Winnie’s account of her personal misfortune, reporting Winnie’s words directly:

“This year is very bad year for me. You see, I got mugged at the very beginning of the year, then my mum, then my job. This year is no good for me.” Winnie looked at me and told me as if she’s a fortune teller when we were in the staff lift going downstairs. She shook her head looking very worried
Winnie again rationalizes her run of unhappy experiences with reference to the Year of the Goat. In another example, noted by Rachel during a break at work around six weeks later, Winnie made a more extended statement about ‘destiny’:

Not many staff were around in the dining lounge so we sat down by an empty table, drinking tea and eating biscuits. “随缘 < go with the destiny >” Winnie wrote the words down. “How do you write the 缘 < destiny >?” She asked me and handed over her pen. I tried several strokes and wrote down something that looked similar but I know there must be one or two strokes missing. “Something like that. I forget, you see.” I told Winnie who’s watching me closely. “I know, and I forget more, after staying here for twenty five years. I quite like the words. I believe the destiny decides who our family are, who our friends and relatives are.” Winnie said emotionally. “I believe this destiny was written on the star long before we were born. So knowing you and having you here doing this project with me was destined by fate”, Winnie sighed.

In this example Winnie appears to accept the notion of ‘destiny’ as a force, but now in a more positive sense than in the previous examples. Whereas in the earlier examples Winnie was rather agitated and worried, now she seems more reconciled. This extract from Rachel’s field notes gives us an insight into both Winnie’s and Rachel’s perspective on the notion of ‘destiny’. The interaction recorded in the field notes was also audio-recorded:

1 W wai, 普通话里，你怎么写缘字 < in Mandarin, how, how do you write it? >
2 RH 缘 [destiny]
3 W 缘 < destiny > hehe, something like that
4 W something like that. yea yea yea yea
5 RH something like that. you forgot the strokes, is it
6 W um um. mai, is it dou or ya?
7 RH 都, 都, 也可以, actually < dou, dou will also do actually >
8 也, 也是, 意思是 too < ye, or yeshi means too >
9 W 都是有缘 < all is destined >, ya? 也是有缘 < it’s also destined >
10 RH 广东话怎么说缘？ < how do you say yuan in Cantonese?>
11 W 缘, 缘, 有缘 [destiny, destiny, it’s destined]
12 RH [copies W’s pronunciation:] 缘, 缘, 有缘 [destiny, destiny, it’s destined]
13 W destiny destiny
14 RH yea, destiny. yea, I said it in the first place but you said yuan is actually Buddhist, hehehe. Buddhism, they, they said, yuan actually is a concept of Buddhism
15 W yea yea, it’s true. 但是, 不一定, mai, 需要有一个, 宗教的观点 < but you
don’t necessarily mai, need to talk about it from a religious point of view >
In this exchange Winnie and Rachel discuss how to represent the Cantonese and Mandarin words for ‘destiny’ in traditional and simplified Chinese characters. As they speak they are writing the characters:

Figure 12: ‘destiny’

Figure 13: translingual writing

In the resulting text simplified and traditional Chinese characters sit side by side with their translations into English (figure 13). The literacy event characterises the importance to Winnie of the notion of ‘destiny’ to explain life events.

Winnie’s historical body, constituted in her life experiences, their goals and purposes, and her unconscious ways of behaving and thinking, was perhaps summed up in the Chinese text accompanying a framed picture on the wall of her home: ‘don’t be a lazy cat’:

Figure 14: ‘don’t be a lazy cat’
4. The Body Idiom

A significant dimension of Winnie’s historical body was her ‘body idiom’ in the work place as well as at home. Encounters between people are characterized not only by ritual speech, but also by what Goffman (1963) calls ‘body idiom’ – dress, bearing, movement, position, and physical gestures. During face-to-face interaction participants are present to each other as living physical bodies in a particular situation (Goodwin 1986/2009: 29). Gesture is a typical but often unnoticed feature of communicative repertoire. Sometimes gesture is essential to the speech it accompanies, and at other times it is less essential. In some instances gesture is made particularly salient, as in the market-place when a customer does not speak, but points to a display of pigs’ hearts and holds up six fingers (Blackledge et. al. 2015). Furthermore, gesture may be more than a simply visual phenomenon (Goodwin 1986/2009). A hand clap, for example, contributes sound to the communicative interaction. In other instances a gesture may be extended to attract attention through touch. Charles Goodwin proposes that gesture plays a key role in the complex organization in both space and time of the access participants have to each others’ bodies as visible phenomena within moment-to-moment interaction. Gesture may be used to organize, dismantle, and re-assemble the spatial configuration of an interaction. It provides a resource for negotiating features of the moment-by-moment organization of the interactive processes within which it emerges. Gesture is not simply a way to display meaning but an activity with distinctive temporal, spatial, and social properties that participants not only recognise but actively use in the organization of their interaction (Goodwin 1986/2009: 47).

Included in embodied communication is mutual eye-to-eye activity, or what we might more simply term eye contact, which plays “a special role in the communication life of the community, ritually establishing an avowed openness to verbal statements and a rightfully heightened mutual relevance of acts” (Goffman 1963: 92). Sustained eye contact in an interaction allows the participants “to monitor one another’s mutual perceivings” (95). In contexts where interactants’ mutual perceivings are in question, sustained eye contact offers scope for evaluation. We cannot assume that all people are equally comfortable with sustained eye contact, however. For some people such behaviour may be construed as inappropriate or even offensive.

In the following example we observe Winnie at the customer information desk in an everyday encounter with a young woman who speaks English with a European accent. Immediately prior to this section of the interaction the European woman had returned to the information desk a CD which she had meant to return with a book the previous week. She had recently discovered that she still had the CD. One of Winnie’s colleagues had left the information desk to look for the book. As we join the interaction the European woman is asking for information about access to the computers in the library. A video-recording of the exchange can be viewed at the link https://youtu.be/EohOBqz7t1A

Adrian Blackledge wrote the following field note as he was observing the encounter:
Winnie chats to the young woman. I am guessing that she is East European. The woman gestures with her hands, waving each to the side in turn. She moves her right hand back and forth on the desk. Winnie touches the woman on the forearm, and they laugh together. Winnie says ‘one four four is over there’. ‘Thank you very much’ says the woman. ‘You’re welcome’, says Winnie. The woman goes to a computer where a man in a suit has to give up his position and move to another station.

In the transcript of the audio-recording Winnie is ‘W’ and the library user is ‘E’:

1 E this all the computer, we can use it or not?
2 W er is the job search
3 E job search
4 W particularly for the use of the CV, the jobs
5 E CD? for CD, for the study?
6 W CV
7 E for CD, no, CD, and look when I want to study in the library
8 W oh, oh, OK
9 E which, which computer could I use with CD?
10 W it’s um, for the um, I think for the study, yea um let me check for him um yea
11 E because the computer system all changed
12 W because because I haven’t laptop actually
13 W oh yea oh so use a laptop you can use any floor anyway with a wifi, every floor
14 E OK every floor every computer could I use it?
15 E this is as I said this is only mainly for the job search
16 W and other is for internet
17 W internet yea the rest is for the internet and also you can use a laptop as you say
18 E you got laptop with you?
19 W no
20 E no? OK so you want to book a internet?
21 W there isn’t (..) OK there isn’t any computer here to use CD?
22 E CD yea they have ah for the um
23 W which floor?
24 W um I think it’s one-oh-two, one-oh-three
25 E one-oh-two
26 W one-oh-three
27 E OK
28 W so you want to use the computer to s- study?
29 E yes, in library
30 W in library
31 E for listening
32 W for listening oh oh OK
33 E CD
34 W ah OK
35 E because my laptop damaged I haven’t laptop now
36 W oh I see
and eh yea sometimes I want to use
you when when he come back let let me um ask you know my colleagues yea
knows better because
one time I I ask a staff she said you can use here
ah ah OK do you want to book it for you? do you want to book it for you?
I should book?
do you want to book it now? do you want to book the computer for you to use for
study here?
yes
now do you want it now?
eh, eh
have a think
not today
OK not today
I should book, yes?
I think so yea let let me double check for you when you come here next time
come here ask again
OK
yea

In this interaction both participants communicate by whatever means possible. Each of them brings particular histories and biographies, and certain understandings of how service interactions in a library normally proceed. Their repertoires include ‘English’, embodied gestures, and the environment of the library. They also include the invoked voices of other library staff. The interaction walks a line between uncertainty and stability, and is throughout oriented towards the preservation and restoration of normal relations. Despite this, the interaction is suffused with miscommunication and frustration.

As we join the interaction the library user is seated at the information desk in the Business section of the library. She sits facing Winnie, the Customer Experience Assistant. There are desks with computers about seven metres from the circular information station. There is a low desk, or counter, between the two women. The library user wears a coat, and rests her right elbow on the counter, leaning her upper body towards Winnie. On the desk there is a computer screen, a mouse, a telephone, a card scanner, and a printed information sheet in a plastic holder. The library user points towards the desks with the computers and asks ‘this all the computer, we can use it or not?’. Winnie’s response is quick to introduce a regulatory position, introducing what Goffman (1967) calls an interdiction, a negative ritual: ‘er is the job search…particularly for the use of the CV, the jobs’. This type of prohibitory decree (Goffman 1971) was common in this section of the library. Whereas the hyper-modern library’s regulations were relatively relaxed (there were drinks machines, cafés, and people regularly took photographs, flirted, and chatted), this part of the building was dedicated to those seeking business advice or looking for jobs. The library user is concerned whether her return of the CD had been acceptable to the library, and she readily hears Winnie’s ‘CV’ as ‘CD’. At line 5 the library user opens the palm
of her left hand towards Winnie, and fixes her gaze to Winnie’s face, making sustained eye contact (Figure 15i). Winnie returns her gaze. The European woman turns her head away from Winnie momentarily at line 7, pointing behind her to where Winnie’s colleague has gone to search for the book which accompanies the library user’s CD. She then returns her gaze to Winnie’s eyes, pointing to the table emphatically as she emphasises ‘I want to study in the library’. At line 9 the woman makes another request for information, ‘which computer could I use with CD?’. Winnie’s response is full of uncertainty, ‘it’s um, I think, for the study, yea, um’. Confronted with this uncertainty Winnie deploys interaction ritual which is evasive (Rampton 2014), and which also refers - and defers - to her colleagues: ‘let me check’. This is a typical move for Winnie: on many occasions in our observations we saw Winnie ask for help from her colleagues when dealing with an inquiry from a client. In times of uncertainty she looks for salvation from those around her. The ritual action here is two-fold. As well as referring to her generalised colleague she invokes the regime of the library: the computers may only be used for study. On a number of occasions we heard library staff (sometimes convivially, at other times less so) impress upon computer users that they were not permitted to use social media sites for their entertainment when they had formally booked a computer carrel. Winnie further excuses her inability to respond straightforwardly to the request by saying ‘the computer system all changed’. Goffman (1971) suggests that an apology is a means of transforming an unacceptable situation or act into the acceptable, in a type of negative ritual, or remedial interchange. Winnie argues mitigating circumstances, and the more she can do so, the more she can establish that the situation is not a reflection on her character.

The library user now leans both elbows on the counter between the two women, fixes Winnie with her gaze, and performs what looks like a rather forced open smile, saying ‘because because I haven’t laptop actually’ (Figure 15ii). Winnie apparently mishears the client’s ‘haven’t’ as ‘have’, as she immediately responds with what she clearly intends as a gift of ‘free goods’ (Goffman 1971), inviting the woman to ‘use a laptop, you can use any floor anyway with a wifi’. At line 14 the library user in her turn misunderstands Winnie, asking whether she can use any
Figure 15ii: ‘I haven’t laptop actually’

computer on any floor. Winnie recognises the woman’s misunderstanding (but not yet her own), and again in the face of tension or uncertainty she reverts to her prohibitory decree, in a further example of negative ritual: ‘as I said this is only mainly for the job search’. Both women make an expansive gesture with an arm at this point, initiated by the client and mirrored by Winnie (Figure 15iii).

Figure 15iii: mirroring gesture

The gesture seems to refer to all the computers in the library beyond the Business section, as the woman asks ‘and other is for internet?’ Winnie immediately picks up the opportunity to again offer free goods, telling the client she can use a laptop. Winnie seeks to confirm what she believes she has already been told, ‘you say you got laptop with you?’. Finally understanding her misunderstanding, Winnie says (line 20): ‘no? OK, so you want to book a internet?’. The offer to book a computer with internet is within the normative scope of Winnie’s activity – something she does many times a day. It is part of her institutional script, and one of the brief rituals she is able to perform for others at the service information desk, attesting to civility and good will on her part, allowing an interpersonal ritual which restores the stability of the world (Goffman 1971). However, the positive ritual offering is not yet taken up by the European woman as a
patrimony of sacredness. Instead she expresses a sigh of exasperation and frustration as she almost whispers, ‘there isn’t (. ) OK’. As she does so she looks to one side, takes a deep breath, and appears to steady herself to re-start her information request. At this point Winnie makes a positive ritual action which may be both transgressive and redressive: having lost eye contact with the client, and lost confidence that she has control of the exchange, she touches her on the hand (figure 15iv). The effect is immediate, as the woman returns Winnie’s gaze, and leans further forward across the counter than she had hitherto. Goffman (1967) referred to the ‘touch system’, in which certain categories of people are permitted to touch other persons as a means of conveying friendly support or familiarity. In some contexts, on the other hand, touching is not permitted, and rights of apartness and inviolability hold sway. In the interaction here it is not clear that Winnie has gained permission to touch. However (and notwithstanding the fact that there is a desk between the interactants) Winnie touches the woman. The small ceremony of thanks and appreciation which follows suggests that all is well, and the woman’s personal space has not been fatally violated.

The client gathers herself and repeats, almost word-for-word, her earlier information request made at line 9: ‘there isn’t any computer here to use CD?’ As she does so she talks slowly, loudly, and clearly, as if to make her best effort to be clear. At the same time she deploys highly deliberate gestures with her hands, tapping the counter three times with her finger tips, and slicing the air first vertically and then horizontally, in each instance punctuating the intonation contours of her own question. Winnie again seems uncertain: ‘CD yea, they have ah for the

Figure 15iv: transgressive / redressive touch

um’ (22). When pressed for more specific information (‘which floor?’) she responds with room numbers rather than floors. Again, in the face of her own uncertainty, she reverts to the negative ritual act of interdiction, checking that the client wants to use the computer to study (28). This may be a means of restoring her own status and power in an interaction in which she has become vulnerable. In the utterances which immediately follow, Winnie seems to buy time to regain her equilibrium by resorting to echoing the client (29-32):

29 E yes, in library
30 W in library
Until now the woman’s gestures have been a resource for negotiating features of the moment-by-moment organization of the interaction, and as such have been relatively abstract and generalised. Now however, a little frustrated at the progress of the transaction, she deploys a gesture which may ensure that Winnie understands that she wants to use the computer to listen to a study CD, pointing directly to her ear with her right hand (Figure 15v). Again the two women remain fixed in sustained eye contact.

The client continues to explain, saying ‘because’, and then swallowing hard before saying, ‘my laptop damaged, I haven’t laptop now’. Winnie again staves off uncertainty and vulnerability by falling back on future salvation from her colleague, who ‘knows better’ (39). Whether strategically or otherwise, the client now invokes the voice of an anonymous colleague of Winnie in support of her cause, pointing to the computer desks in the Business section as she says, ‘one time I I ask a staff she said you can use here’. In deploying reported direct speech (‘you can use here’) she presents the colleague as a character with authority. Used to deferring to her colleagues’ judgement, Winnie needs no greater authority than this. She returns to the positive ritual of her comfort zone, three times asking the client whether she wants her to book the computer for her, in a repeated offering of free goods. Winnie appears to be more confident when engaged in positive ritual interaction. Conversely, the client now seems more vulnerable and uncertain, no longer insistent, and appearing distracted and hesitant. She decides against booking the computer for the same day, although it is not certain that she understands the term ‘book’ in this context. Despite regaining her confidence in the interaction, Winnie has lost eye contact with the woman, and seeks to re-establish it with another gesture which takes her into the

Figure 15v: Pointing gesture for clarification
client’s space. This time she does not touch the client, but gestures towards her with an extended arm which again has the effect of regaining eye-to-eye activity (Figure 15vi). Winnie concludes the interaction with one more deferral to anonymous colleagues: ‘let me check for you’. Goffman (1967) suggested that there are complementary relations between deference and demeanour. The minor ceremonies in which Winnie defers to her colleagues are brief, involve little outlay on her part, and can be performed by her in any interaction in the library. Through such ritual actions she can present herself as a well demeaned person, as one who is competent, and without embarrassment. Through such ceremonial interaction she is able to preserve her sense of self. Through such rituals she will maintain her pride, honour and dignity, and a certain amount of poise (Goffman 1967).

This everyday interaction is typical of those we saw many times in our repeated observations in the Library of Birmingham. It is an interaction characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability. However, it is more than this, as the two women do their best to communicate with the resources available to them. Furthermore, it is an interaction which, while relatively fixed in a particular space, is highly mobile in its fluctuations over time. These fluctuations are constituted in miscommunications and mishearings, and are countered with Winnie’s deployment of positive ritual offerings and negative ritual interdictions, both of which restore order when things appear to be on the verge of falling apart. The fluctuations in the trajectory of the transaction are corporeally inscribed in the gestures of the two women, who use their physical resources to give structure and shape to the exchange. They further ritually establish an openness to verbal engagement through sustained eye contact, mutually fixing each other’s gaze. The resources available to the two women are not limited to their own voices and their own bodies, however. They also have access to the voices of real or invented staff in the library, either as a promise of redemption and solace for Winnie, or as authoritative evidence to support the claims of the European woman. The rules of ritual interaction determine the evaluation Winnie and the library user will make of themselves in the encounter, and will inform future social encounters.

In a study of service encounters in a Persian shop in Sydney Dariush Izadi (2015) found that the process of understanding the site of engagement at which a social action occurs entails an
understanding of the analysis of the interaction order, discourses in place and the historical body. Such close analysis can shed light on what is going on in a service interaction in that relying solely on the linguistic means can lead to a distorted and incomplete picture of the semiotic realities occurring when face-to-face interactions are met. Joint actions are not carried out merely through language use. Rather, they frequently incorporate non-linguistic conduct and reference to material objects in the physical environment. Such elements cannot be overlooked and should be paid attention within a multimodal approach to discourse. In the transaction between the library user and the customer experience assistant we can view the situated, contingent, cultural and corporeal experience of two women communicating in “the dust of social activity” (Goffman 1971: 63). In analysing such everyday dust we conclude, with Rampton (2014), that interaction ritual practices may well be fundamental to human society in general.

Winnie’s ‘body idiom’ was constantly in evidence as we observed her quotidian life in the library. Other examples of staff entertaining themselves and their colleagues were more extended. In this example, observed in the Music section of the library and recorded in Rachel’s field notes, Winnie and her male colleague F waited outside a room where there is a trade union meeting about the proposed staff cuts:

“Hello, is the staff meeting still going on?” A tall and slim man with red hair and a walking stick walked up to the information desk. He looked at Winnie and asked. “F, what’s going on there?” Winnie walked up to F. “I am late already!” F looked at Winnie, took a seat nearby. “It’s me and you, you are boss!” “Queen of the floor,” Winnie laughed. “The glass needs cleaning. Look at the state of it!” Winnie pointed at the window walls wrapping the small square. Chris walked immediately to the walls with his walking stick and started to wipe the glass with his sleeve. “Oh, oh, stop, come back!” Winnie was a bit shocked that F seemed to take her words seriously, and shouted in surprise. F turned back, looked at Winnie and laughed. “Yes, Yoyo Ma!” and walked back to the counter. “Why call me Yoyo Ma?! Stop calling me that! I am not Yoyo Ma!” Winnie looked relieved to see F was joking. She turned to me and said “He always calls me Yoyo Ma and do you know who he is?” “The world famous Chinese player of the cello. I am a big fan of his as my nephew plays cello.” “Playing cello,” F stood between the desk I was sitting by and the information desk, facing Winnie, who’s standing next to my desk. “Not very suitable for women”, he said. He stooped down and stopped as if sitting on a high stool, spreading his two feet widely apart. “Why not, women can play can as well.” Winnie took a jump in front of F, copying his position with her legs spread apart, lowering her upper body as well. They stood facing each other, with hands mimicking the action of sliding bows on cello strings. The three of us laughed out loud like children at their silly performance.
In this exchange Winnie initially takes on the role of the manager, issuing mock orders to her colleague, who takes up his cue and mock-obeyes them. Then Winnie’s colleague, in his turn, deploys a non-too-subtle stereotype and makes a mock-sexist statement, perhaps to provoke Winnie. Physical clowning ensues, and this provides great entertainment for the two staff members. They pass a few moments in convivial banter before returning to the mundane world of their work roles. For Bourdieu (1990) habitus is a set of embodied dispositions. This is what Bourdieu called ‘bodily hexis’: the embodied dispositions which operate at the most mundane and even unconscious level. Here Winnie’s bodily hexis, her historical body, her body idiom, plays a crucial role in the convivial interaction. It is her embodied self that brings into being physical humour. At the same time discourse here is double-voiced, as both Winnie and her colleague deploy stylized language to entertain themselves and each other, and to make hay with typifications of social categories.

Winnie’s embodied self was also in evidence in regular and frequent encounters with library users who were seeking a particular resource. In the example here Rachel’s field notes record her observation of a woman with a small child arriving at Winnie’s desk in the children’s section of the library:

A mum in her early thirties came to Winnie with a little boy hiding himself in a small buggy. “Hi, can I help you?” Winnie greeted the young mum.
“Yeah, my child is going to start school soon. I wonder what books I could start him with.”
“The young readers then. Come this way.” Winnie was happy to show where the books were. The woman left with Winnie, with the little boy in the buggy protesting in a low and reluctant voice.
“I just want to find some books which I can read to him and prepare him for school.” In a few minutes they returned to the counter, with no books in hand.
“In that case, come this way, the parents’ collection.” Winnie led the mum and her little boy to the other side of the room and explained to her patiently. She left them there and the mum started to check the books on the shelf very carefully.
“Oh, I’ve found it. Thank you! Really appreciate it.” In about fifteen minutes the young woman went away with books in her hand, smiling at Winnie, holding her son’s hand with one hand, the other hand on the empty buggy.
In a few minutes the young mum came back to the counter, dragging her little boy and the buggy behind her. “When does he start school?” Winnie scanned and stamped the books, chatting to the mum. “This September.”
“Mum, I don’t want to go to school!” The little boy whined.
“He’s a bit scared.” The young mum shook her head at Winnie and turned back to her son “You are not going to school today.” The little boy sat himself back in his buggy, his big blue eyes looking closely at his mum’s face nervously. Winnie laughed and said something to comfort the little boy. They soon left with the young man thanking Winnie repeatedly.

It was typical of Winnie that rather than merely telling the library user where to find the resource she was looking for, she physically took her to where she thought it might be. Winnie was rarely still, often moving away from her position at the information counter to show customers how to
use the self-service machines, how to work the scanner, or where to find a book. Again we see that the habitus is not simply linguistic, but is embodied. In this interaction we also note Winnie’s ‘identificatory sympathy’, expressed through supportive questions such as ‘when does he start school?’, and by her comforting words to the child, which provoke gratitude in the young mother. Goffman (1971: 64) pointed out that when we focus on minor rituals performed between persons who are present to each other, the giving statement tends to be followed immediately by a show of gratitude, and these moves taken together form “a little ceremony – a supportive interchange”.

Winnie commonly walked with customers to the self-service machines, to show them how they operated. This was particularly usual when the library user was new to the system. In the example which follows Winnie goes with a man to show him how to use the machine to issue and renew books:

“Hello I want to borrow this book.” A man came to Winnie holding the book she wanted to borrow.
“OK,” Winnie quickly checked and told the man he can as it’s a yellow sticker on the book. “Come with me and I will show you how to use the self-service machine if you want to renew it in future.” Winnie walked out of the counter towards the machine so the man followed.
“Press this one if you want to renew, touch this one, press this one”, Winnie stopped by the machine and started to show the man how to use it. “Here finish, you want a receipt, yea?” Winnie looked at the man who nodded at her.
“Do you know how to do this if you want to take the book out of the library?” Winnie put the book underneath the scanner inserted in the machine and the scanner blinked red lights. “Press this, here, finish, that’s it. Here you go!” The man thanked Winnie and walked away.

Here Winnie demonstrates how to use the self-service machine rather than explaining from her fixed position at the desk. Winnie appeared to be more at ease with showing customers how the library’s systems worked than with telling them. Her way of being in the public and parochial realm was an embodied way of being.

*Heritage and the historical body*

What can we say, so far, about Winnie’s historical body and heritage? What does she value, protect, and wish to preserve in her complex world? It is clear that she comments on and invests in aspects of what we might call ‘cultural heritage’. That is, in the terms of The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), she values, and has opinions about, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that she recognises as part of her cultural heritage. We can see that Winnie imbues certain artefacts with a sense of
history, identity and continuity. The picture on her living-room wall is emblematic of her narrative about her younger self. This was a self engaged in the support of refugees, an active, activist self, preserved in her narrative. She chooses the picture as an indexical of personal heritage. Winnie also preserved and protected values associated with, but paradoxically remote from, ‘Chinese’ cultural heritage. She said ‘sometimes you have to be very careful with Chinese’, and had an ambivalent attitude to what we might call ‘Chineseness’. On the one hand she valued some Chinese cultural practices, perhaps represented by her ongoing investment in cooking Chinese food. On the other hand she found some of the stereotypical social niceties associated with Chineseness to be ‘fake’. This dynamic tension between investment and distance was further indexed in Winnie’s response to the notion of ‘destiny’ as a shaping force in life. She accepted the notion of ‘destiny’ as a force in her lived experience. At times she saw destiny as a positive force, sometimes as negative. In either case destiny was an aspect of Winnie’s inheritance which she chose to engage with as heritage.

Winnie’s engagement with cultural practices as heritage was at once about creating and maintaining historical and social consensus, but was simultaneously also a process of dissent and contestation (Smith 2006). In her extended discussion of marriage practices with her Indian colleague and her Chinese ‘shadow’ Rachel, Winnie constructed herself as both critical commentator on practices of arranged marriage, and inheritor of these practices. She emphatically dismisses the practice of arranged marriage, and privileges the present over the past: her pride is in the enlightenment of the present in replacing what she viewed as the darkness of the past. She acknowledges what ‘in China it used to be like’, but distances herself from arranged marriage practices, saying this was something that looked ‘back into the old time’. However, we learn that Winnie is only one generation removed from her own mother’s arranged marriage. Winnie feels the inheritance keenly, but chooses to view even the recent past as one from which she is ‘liberated’. This is her choice: she moves on from inheritance to her chosen heritage. Smith (2006) suggests that rather than solely representing the static and extinct, heritage is “a moment of action” (Smith 2006: 83). It incorporates a range of actions that often occur at places or in certain spaces. In the discussion about arranged marriage heritage is shared, negotiated, and contested. For Winnie Chinese inheritance was viewed from a safe distance, and was a resource from which to select a heritage to be safeguarded for the present and future.

Winnie also chose to tell a narrative about her younger self with reference to a porcelain vase and a Burmese bamboo pot. These artefacts were indexical of her ‘traveller’ self. She focused on these artefacts as emblems not only of her cosmopolitan heritage, which allowed her to travel widely, but also as symbols of her values. These were objects which she appreciated as ‘unique’, and the antithesis of what she saw as crude indexicals of consumerism: Miu Miu, Gucci, and Chanel. For Winnie the artefacts thus represent values and meanings beyond themselves: they “assert and express identity and social and cultural values and meanings” (Smith 2006: 83). Winnie chooses these particular artefacts to represent her heritage and her taste, which at the same time she constructs as oppositional to the heritage and taste of others.

Winnie also viewed her work, and her learning through work, as heritage. Her work in the library was of immense value to her sense of self-worth. It was the site of her learning, ‘day in and day out, and all year long’, for eighteen years. It was not clear that her work ethic had been ‘handed down’ to her intergenerationally. If heritage is “an active, creative, negotiated process of seeking
the basis of common humanity in all the forms which are available to us” (Harrison 2013: 164), then Winnie’s values and qualities are her heritage, as much as her memories and artefacts. Work and learning are highly prized by her. This is a notion of heritage as “a series of qualities which are constantly chosen, recreated and renegotiated in the present” (Harrison 2013: 165). We will see that Winnie’s values and qualities frequently extended to embracing diversity, and seeking common humanity. This was clearly evident as a group of Deaf students came to her desk to become library members. Winnie’s interest in translation and translanguaging – in short, her interest in people – became heritage as it was recognisable within her own particular set of cultural or social values (Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa 2009). In her superdiverse environment, in which myriad values, meanings, and qualities circulate, ‘choosing’ heritage becomes a significant means of bringing the past into the present and future. Winnie views the resources of inheritance and chooses to bring some of them into the present and future, while leaving others in the past.

Winnie’s independence and activism in Hong Kong as a young person, her experience as a migrant to the UK, as a mother and wife, as a multilingual speaker, as a constant learner, and as a public servant in the Library of Birmingham, all constitute aspects of her historical body, or *habitus*. In the next section we consider a further dimension of her historical trajectory coming together with the aggregate of circulating discourses which enable that trajectory to be altered: *discourses in place.*
5. Discourses In Place

In her study of a large city library in Vienna, Austria, Brigitta Busch (2009) conceived the library as a nexus of practice, as a symbolic space constructed through the social practices of its users. The library is conceived as a node that gives access to different networks of communication, where other nexuses of practice intersect. Busch found that the users of the library included those interested in borrowing resources for private consumption, usually books; those interested in visiting the library as a tourist attraction; and those interested in the library as a meeting-place. Many of those in the latter group also had an interest in the library as a place to study. They were also interested in the technological facilities offered by the library, in particular access to the internet. Busch argued that in its function as a node where different media practices intersect, where access to web resources is possible, the library had a clear translocal dimension. She found that young people in particular engaged in ‘transidiomatic practices’, which Marco Jacquemet (2005:265) defines as the result of the co-presence of multilingual talk and electronic media, in contexts heavily structured by social indexicalities and semiotic codes. Busch concludes that the example of the Vienna Library shows that initiatives which provide open access to spaces in which communication between linguistically and culturally diverse groups can take place publicly can contribute to inclusive language policies. What makes the library particularly interesting is that it is a place which respects the needs of people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

This study of the Library of Birmingham is similarly concerned with the library as a meeting-place, as a place where people from different backgrounds intersect, where people access web resources and send messages on social media, where people come for information, for help and support, and for a few moments of contact with others. The Library of Birmingham is a space inhabited by locals, and by people from away. It is a space inhabited by people from different generations, ethnicities, socio-economic groups, dress codes, and linguistic proficiencies. Some go for tea and cake, some to ‘hang out’ with friends, some for the view of the city from the top floor, some for Shakespeare, some for the archives, some for children’s books, some for music, some for table-tennis, some for performance poetry, some for immigration advice, some because they are setting up a business, some because they haven’t been before, and some because they have.

But the visitors are not the only ones who inhabit the library. The staff and volunteers are the people who make the Library of Birmingham work. The public-facing staff – the Customer Experience Assistants – are in effect the nexus at which social practice is regulated, negotiated, stabilised, and made civil. In the face of an apparently massive diversity in the constituency of library users, Customer Experience Assistants ensure that the social relations of service encounters between strangers flow as smoothly as possible. In doing so they negotiate regulatory institutional discourses, they deploy the linguistic and cultural capital at their disposal, they draw on ritual practices in interaction, they engage in metacommentary, they invoke stereotypes as resources, they translate, and they translanguage. In doing so they engage in the kind of social and linguistic practice that enables cities to succeed. By looking very closely and in great detail at the social and linguistic practices of one of the Customer Experience Assistants in the Library
of Birmingham we learned something about not only how we live now, but how we may live in the future. In doing so we understand more about social practice that may well be fundamental to human society in general.

The interaction between the space in which Winnie encountered library users, and the needs and expectations of the library users themselves, was neither stable nor static. That is, the constitution and identity of the space was determined by the discourses in place, the discourses that were in circulation. The spatial repertoire (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015) of the library was dialogic, and heteroglossic.

![The Library of Birmingham](image)

*Figure 16: The Library of Birmingham*

*The library as meeting-place*

Ragnar Audunson (2004) pointed out that in their original conception public libraries were linked to the rational project of enlightenment. Enlightenment, in turn, was based on the conviction that in the fields of culture, literature and knowledge, we can distinguish between products of high value, which the library should promote, and products of mediocre or low value, which the library should not promote. That is, public libraries are conceived as a force for good in the community, and in the city. In their study of the use of library space and the library as place in Norway, Svanhild Aabø and Ragnar Audunson (2012) identified heterogeneous ways in which libraries are meeting-places for their users. They are places where people accidentally bump into friends and acquaintances, places where people are exposed to the diversity of the city, places where people live out their role as citizens, sites of joint activity between family and friends, ‘meta-meeting places’ which provide a channel to identify other social arenas and organizations in the community, and virtual meeting places. Aabø and Audunson also found that libraries play an important social role as sites which relieve isolation, and places which invest in
fostering imagination, creativity, and personal development, and strengthening local culture and identity, social cohesion and community empowerment. Furthermore, they concluded, libraries contribute to community development by providing free community space, technological resources, connection to the local economy, a sense of ownership by community and a high level of community trust. They also had a role in the development of confidence in individuals and communities. Ragnar Audunson, Sophie Essmat and Svanhild Aabø (2011) focused on the role of libraries in relation to immigrants, and found that libraries have the potential to provide immigrants with the information they need to adapt to their new circumstances, and provide them with opportunities to keep in touch with their place of origin. They found that the public library offered a meeting place that facilitates communication and offers bridges between minority cultures and the majority culture.

Following her research on libraries in the United States, Catherine Johnson (2012) concluded that interactions that take place every day between staff members and library patrons provide a human connection that results not only in instrumental help in gaining access to useful information resources, but also in emotional help that contributes to a sense of individual well-being. These interactions, therefore, may be an important source of social capital that has positive effects for both individuals and communities. Johnson (2012) found that the library is a positive place, where people can go without having to provide a reason for being there. It is a neutral place where people can come and go as they please, an inclusive place open to all, and is a comfortable, welcoming place that is separate from home or work. Audunson (2004) proposes an agenda for the future of public libraries, arguing that they are meeting-places that can promote cross-cultural contact and communication, and are physical spaces in which people belonging to different cultures are exposed to one another.

This optimistic overview of the role of libraries requires us to zoom in if we are to understand the discourses in place in the interactions between people in civic space. As we have seen, the library, or, to zoom in further, interactions between people in the library, may be viewed as a nexus of practice, where three aggregates of discourse come together: “the discourses in place, some social arrangement by which people come together in social groups (a meeting, a conversation, a chance contact, a queue) – the interaction order, and the life experiences of the individual social actors – the historical body” (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 19). Although discourse as social action emerges out of the nexus of these three forces (Blommaert 2013), and we take into consideration the interaction of all three forces (the historical body, the discourses in place, and the interaction order), for the sake of clarity it is helpful to direct our gaze to each of the points of the triad in turn. Having fixed our view on Winnie’s historical body, or habitus, we now turn to the discourses in place in the library.

The library as heteroglossic space

The complex discourses that circulate in and through the Library of Birmingham are heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1994). That is, it is a space in which different languages, codes, discourses, and voices are in circulation and, at times, in tension. Lian Malai Madsen (2014) argues that heteroglossia refers to three concepts of ‘diversity in speechness’, ‘diversity in
Language in use and in action represents “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (Bakhtin 1981: 291). That is, language points to, or ‘indexes’ a certain point of view, ideology, social class, profession, or other social position. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 23) propose that indexicality is a key principle of discourses in place, and that “all semiotic signs, whether embodied or disembodied, have as a significant part of their meaning how they are placed in the world”. Bakhtin saw that “language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strictest sense of the word, but also – and for us this is the essential point – into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, ‘professional’ and ‘generic’ languages, languages of generations and so forth” (1981: 271). We have seen in the discourse of the parochial realm (notably in the lunch room) that certain terms (‘Jasmine tea’, ‘doctor’, and so on) act as indexicals which point to certain social positions and aspirations. 

Language as social practice almost always refers to the co-existence of different competing ideological points of view, whether constituted in a single national ‘language’, or within the complex communicative repertoires in play in superdiverse, late modern societies.

Bailey (2012: 508) argues that what is distinctive about heteroglossia “is not its reference to different kinds of linguistic signs and forms, but rather its focus on social tensions inherent in language.” A central metaphor for Bakhtin in his description of the social tensions in language is that of the opposing pull of ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’ forces. Whereas the centripetal force constitutes the pull towards homogeneity, standardization and correctness, the centrifugal force pulls towards heteroglossic disunification and decentralization. These forces are rarely free of each other, however, as the centripetal forces of language operate in the midst of heteroglossia, and alongside them centrifugal forces carry on their uninterrupted work. Speakers inevitably position themselves with respect to others, making indexical associations and meta-level evaluations. Bakhtin noticed that whole utterances and individual words may repeat the words of others in a way that re-accents and changes them, “ironically, indignantly, reverently, and so forth”, and in particular “intonation is especially sensitive and always points beyond the context” (1986: 91). When we comment on the way others sound, look, or behave we often make such meta-level evaluations in discourse that is dialogic and shot through with tension. We have seen that Winnie on occasion deploys a parodic voice, subtly but definitely evaluating a client’s over-willingness to pay a fine, or her colleague’s story of fine tea as social distinction.
A further dimension of heteroglossia is multivoicedness. Bakhtin pointed to the dialogic nature of the word, which is “shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object” (1981: 279). The word is shaped not only by other words in the past and present, but also by the anticipated word of the other. Therefore language “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (1981: 293). That is, within a single utterance, and even within a single word, more than one voice may be discernible. The word responds to discourse which has preceded it, and also anticipates discourse to come. Bakhtin saw that what we talk about most are the words of others, such that our speech is overflowing with other people’s words. In doing so we weigh, evaluate, refute, repudiate, celebrate, affirm, and so on not only the words of others, but also the political / ideological position represented by those words. Bakhtin argued that the object has already been articulated, disputed, elucidated, and evaluated in various ways, and various views and trends cross, converge, and diverge within it. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 23) pointed out that there is always a dynamic among signs, “an intersemiotic, interdiscursive dialogicality”. Any utterance, in addition to its own themes, always responds in one form or another to others’ utterances that precede it, and speech inevitably becomes the arena where viewpoints, world views, trends, and theories encounter each other. As we will see, when Winnie says to a colleague, in the course of a discussion of politics, ‘I vote UKIP’ (UKIP is the United Kingdom Independence Party, a right-wing, nationalist political party), she speaks not with ‘her’ voice, but with the voice of another alongside her own, which co-exists with her voice but at the same time clashes with it. In such instances different world views come into contact and into dialogue.

In analysis of examples considered in this section we view discourses in place through a focus on indexicality, the social tensions inherent in language, and the dialogic, multivocal nature of the word.

The discursive environment of the library

In observational field notes we regularly commented on the environment of the library. This included metacommentary on space, on diversity, on regulation, and on cuts to opening hours and staffing. For example field notes described the hugely impressive second floor of the library, with its combination of space-age design and traditional book rotunda. It was a rotunda lined with ancient books as far up as the eye could see, with balconies made of black wrought-iron railings, and staircases leading from one level to another. The books were more or less for show – sets of bound volumes, some green, some red, some grey. Escalators displayed illuminated neon lights as they rose and fell. The library was characterized by space and light, with the glass and wrought iron exterior creating an impression of openness and transparency (Figure 18).
The first floor, which housed the Business section of the library, was often busy. Winnie frequently had a queue of clients at her desk, especially when she was in the ‘Business’ section. During the period we were observing it was ‘exam season’, when many students aged between sixteen and nineteen chose the library as a place for study and revision ahead of their public examinations. During this period the space was full to bursting, with intense competition for seats. There was considerable pressure on space at the peak of the examinations cycle. Adrian Blackledge made the following observation about the scarcity of available seats for the library users:

Close to me two young men sit at high-winged orange chairs. One is looking at a laptop, the other a smart phone. A young black woman takes one of the chairs from the table where I’m sitting. The library assistant immediately tells the customer that the chair has to stay where it is because the table is reserved for business users. The customers says ‘there are no more chairs though’. The assistant says ‘OK but if someone needs it you’ll have to bring it back’. In a second another two young students have brought two more chairs to the table and sit. The same assistant comes over to tell them, very politely but firmly, that the chairs have to stay at the computers, and they can’t sit here. She tells them there should be spaces on other floors. The assistant who earlier spoke to me now approaches the young men on the orange chairs: ‘Excuse me, are you waiting for an appointment?’ They do not respond. ‘Because if you haven’t you can’t sit in this area, all right?’ After a couple of minutes they stand up and move on. It seems the library is so busy that the staff are frequently engaged in the regulation of space.

In these exchanges we can see regulatory discourses in action, but regulatory discourses which are enforced with some sympathy to the needs of the library users. There is dynamic tension between the centripetal pull of institutional regulation and the centrifugal force of humanitarian sympathy. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the library was always overcrowded or under-resourced. In fact just two weeks later, with most examinations now out of the way, the environment had changed considerably, with the students melting away from the library.
Like the Reception area, the Lower Ground Floor was also spacious, with very high ceilings that could almost house an aircraft. Massive marble pillars divided the section into separate spaces. This was an area where men and women of all ages either sat by themselves, studying or reading, or chatted with their friends quietly. The area was both practical and rather grand in its scale. There was a large screen which displayed historical films, and a small auditorium for young children. This area was also known as ‘Book Browse’. People came here to find biographies, travel books, and books about DIY and arts and crafts, soft furnishings, interior design, sport, and so on. The orange seats were comfortable and fashionable, with noise-reducing high wings.

As we walked through the space we noticed that some of the library users took the opportunity to catch up on their sleep. Others read newspapers, listened to headphones, looked at computers or mobile phones, and made jottings in note-books.

The ground floor of the library was a busy and vibrant space which attracted people in from the outside as sightseers. A feature of the Reception area was a plethora of information displayed on big screens, computers, posters, and leaflets. The screens not only advertised current and forthcoming exhibitions in the library, but also listed theatre productions to be staged in The Studio theatre, which the library shared with the adjoining Birmingham Repertory Theatre. While we were conducting our observations a sliding partition was introduced to allow the public space on the ground floor of the two buildings to be separated. This was because the theatre kept different opening hours from the library.

On the Lower Ground floor was the music library. This was a circular area, adjoining but beyond the Children’s section, with glass walls in between the two areas. There were shelves groaning with music CDs and audio books, all clearly marked and labelled. Two self-service machines in a study area close to the information desk allowed people to use or book the services within the libraries. Every few metres there was a study area with desks and chairs. The physical space of the library interacted with the library users and the library staff, and played an important role in their exchanges. Some of the spaces in which we observed Winnie were ‘back stage’ rather than being accessible or visible to the public, including the book collection centre. This was a room full of books in plastic crates waiting to be processed. There was a huge scanning machine in the middle of the room, with belts underneath the machine where the books were sent through manually to be scanned and to be transported on the belt, like an assembly line. The books here had all been reserved or requested by customers. An email or mobile text message would be sent out automatically to the customer once the book has been processed.

Unlike some of the other staff at Library of Birmingham, Winnie’s role as Customer Experience Assistant was to offer support to members of the public in whichever section of the library required personnel. This meant that she was effectively a peripatetic member of staff, moving between floors and departments. It also meant that it was difficult for Winnie to build up specialist expertise and knowledge in particular areas. This accounts in some part for her dependence on assistance from colleagues. The different sections of the library offered different services and functions. In the next part of the report we focus on Winnie’s interactions in the Business section, and the Heritage and Archives floor.
We observed Winnie in the Business section on several occasions. This section of the library offered a range of business-related services, including Job Search for unemployed people. The names of the regular staff working on this floor were listed on a notice board on the glass wall, with photographs of each of them. In the corner close to the huge glass window facing Broad Street there was a round service island. Highly visible information was displayed nearby, informing library users about business-related workshops and events, such as a monthly workshops for small business set-up, CV checking, English language learning course, immigration advice, and many more. The Business section had a set of computer desks which were dedicated only to clients using Business-related resources. We saw many instances in which Winnie booked a computer carrel for a client in the Business section. This was part of the repetitive, patterned ‘script’ with which Winnie was very familiar, and which she was able to deploy with ease.

In addition to specialist Business advice, library users sometimes came to this floor looking for materials to support learning their learning of English as a Second or Other Language. In the
following example a woman (G) approaches Winnie at the customer information desk in the first-floor Business section of the library. A male colleague of Winnie, C, is also present. The client is unhappy that she has been informed by the library that the book she reserved is ready for collection, but having arrived at the library it appears that the book is not immediately available. Moreover, this has happened to her before:

1 G um-hum, it’s exactly like last time
2 W really?
3 G seriously it is
4 W au au because ESOL books are ever so popular
5 G yes but you know, I have an email from you yesterday that it’s ready for collection. let’s go then if you don’t mind
6 W ah don’t mind ah yea yea OK yea I’m go (2) so you say it happened last time?
7 G yea I came for collection it wasn’t at the point, collection point
8 W yea
9 G and eh, you know, they said they were going to send email again, the second time I came it was on the shelf
10 W on the shelf hopefully I hope it’s on the shelf, because at least you don’t waste your time isn’t it?
11 G yea today I’m off when I get the collection letter
12 W is it for yourself?
13 G yes it is because you know originally I would like to extend that, but I can only extend that two times, then I have to come back and eh two days ago, I gave it back and I couldn’t I couldn’t eh book it again
14 W ya
15 G I couldn’t get it because you know I am doing the intermediate at the moment, I have to do it again
16 W so the Cambridge exam is for the English
17 G you know I just want to improve my English I am not taking any exam at the moment but yea
18 W just keep learning yea yea yea um but your your speaking English is very good
19 G thank you
20 W very clear and articulate hehehe
21 G hehehe thank you I prepared that before
22 W hopefully help (3) so what’s your native language?
23 G my home language is Polish
24 W Polish is more harder to learn than English
25 G yes harder it’s true you don’t think but it’s true yea it’s true hehehe our grammar is really difficult and you know our pronunciation for most English people our pronunciation is very hard eh can you say dobje try dobje
26 W dobje
27 G you see it’s very hard
28 W let me check with my colleague. hi C this lady come to coming to collect one of the book the Cambridge ESOL exam but it’s not on the reservation shelf but she
At line 1 the client complains to Winnie that the problem has occurred before. Winnie appears to express surprise, although this sounds double-voiced, as if it is an institutional response, representing an argument along the lines of ‘here at the library we rarely repeat such an offence’. The client is emphatic, however (3), and Winnie offers an ‘account’ (Goffman 1971) by way of an explanation for the confusion, ‘because ESOL books are ever so popular’. The remedial move does not satisfy the woman, however, and she articulates her grievance more fully, saying ‘I have an e-mail from you yesterday that it’s ready for collection’. Her complaint thus supported, she feels able to insist that Winnie goes with her to look for the book, ‘let’s go then’. She somewhat mitigates the request, saying ‘if you don’t mind’. This is also double-voiced, however. Satisfied that she has proved that she is in the right, the client asks permission to insist that Winnie goes with her, but she does so rhetorically. This is both a request for permission and insistence that her offence be remedied. At moments of stress or confusion Winnie frequently deployed repetition to stabilise herself, and therefore to stabilise the discursive exchange. Here she does just this, repeating the client’s ‘don’t mind’ as she gathers herself. She agrees to do as the woman requests (‘I’m go’), and as they start to walk away from Winnie’s work station she seeks to reorient the interaction from oppositional exchange to shared discourse by saying ‘so you say it happened last time?’ (7). The question opens up the floor for the client to repeat her complaint of offence. This offering, which is the opposite of defensiveness, involves Winnie ‘coming close in some way to the recipient’ (Goffman 1971: 63). That is, the offer of space to repeat the complaint acts as a means for Winnie to sympathise with the plaintiff. The woman repeats her complaint (lines 8, 10, and 11), and Winnie deploys repetition again, twice repeating the client’s phrase, ‘on the shelf’. Now Winnie’s repetition, considered as lines of equivalence (Hymes 2003), introduces an act of identificatory sympathy, as Winnie speaks on behalf of the woman, saying that if the book is on the shelf ‘at least you don’t waste your time’. The woman is not so easily appeased, however, and she elaborates on the offence done to her (16-18). At 20 she
complains again, but extends her discourse to explanation of the reason she wants the language learning resource at this time (‘I am doing the intermediate at the moment’).

When the woman responds to Winnie’s further question by saying ‘I just want to improve my English’ (23) she (perhaps unwittingly) finds common ground with her protagonist. This is Winnie’s philosophy to a tee. Winnie responds with a statement we heard from her on a number of occasions: ‘just keep learning’, and adds emphasis, ‘yea yea yea’. At this point Winnie offers a compliment on the woman’s spoken English, which acts as an offer of free goods, providing a “source of social solidarity” (Goffman 1997: 198). The woman returns a small ceremony of patrimony (‘thank you’) and Winnie amplifies the compliment, ‘very clear and articulate’. Her laughter seeks to mitigate any awkwardness that goes along with her claim to be in a position to evaluate the woman’s English proficiency. The client echoes the laughter, and the potential awkwardness is avoided. The woman offers an explanation by way of accepting the compliment modestly, ‘I prepared that before’. Winnie elliptically offers further encouragement (‘hopefully, help’), before asking ‘so what’s your native language?’. This is a typical move from Winnie. She frequently asked clients where they were from, and which language they spoke, as a means of acknowledging difference, and in so doing opening up space for communication (Wessendorf 2011). Once in receipt of the information requested, Winnie would often either try to speak a few words of the named language, or make a metacomment on the named language. Here it is the latter, as (we assume) she did not know any Polish words with which to make hay. She does, however, deploy a stereotype which refers to Polish. In response to the client saying that she speaks Polish, Winnie says ‘Polish is more harder to learn than English’. The client appears to be pleased to receive Winnie’s metacommentary on Polish, three times saying ‘it’s true’, and suggesting that although most people might not think so the grammar is ‘really difficult’, and pronunciation ‘very hard’. The Polish woman appears to take pride in the complexity of the Polish language, and perhaps for her the language indexes the sophistication and refinement of Polish national culture. The woman invites Winnie to take part in a brief language learning activity (‘say dobje’). Winnie generally welcomes such opportunities, and cheerfully does so. However, the exercise appears to have been a means to prove the client’s (and originally Winnie’s) point, that Polish is ‘hard’. Instead of complimenting Winnie on her pronunciation the woman says ‘you see, it’s very hard’. Lacking the compliment, Winnie moves away from phatic communication to return to functional talk, and involves her colleague, C, in the exchange. Winnie represents the woman’s case, but hands it over to C. She wishes the woman ‘good luck’, in a convivial access ritual. However, this is not quite the end, as Winnie reverts to phatic communication and language learning activity, saying ‘is it ay?’, and asking ‘what is it mean in Polish?’”. The woman doesn’t immediately recognise the sound as an English word or a Polish word, although she does her best to respond, asking ‘is it English I?’. Despite the best efforts of both participants the linguistic game ends in miscommunication, but it is no less convivial for that, as both women laugh, and part on good terms.

In this typical, everyday interaction between Winnie and a library user we can follow the contours of social relations as they ebb and flow in the exchange. A Goffmanian analysis allows us to see the interaction as one in which supportive and remedial interchange stabilises the encounter when it threatens to capsize. The interaction of sameness and difference (Gilroy 2006a) is key here: Winnie’s acknowledgement of difference in her question ‘so what’s your native language?’ opens up a space for communication. But as important as difference is
sameness, as Winnie overlaps with the client, and aligns with her philosophy of just wanting to improve her English. Compliments oil the wheels, even if the language learning activity finally falls flat. This exchange is an example of heteroglossic talk which deploys both difference and sameness as dialogic resources.

People seeking advice about setting up or extending a business were able to make an appointment with a specialist business adviser. The specialist nature of the Business section meant that clients would return more than once, and would become known to the staff.

The Business section, called The Edward Cadbury Centre for Learning and Enterprise, was staffed by both regular staff and, at times, volunteers. The Business centre was frequently busy, with a queue of clients waiting for assistance. These ranged from smartly-dressed business people looking for a meeting with the Institute of Directors, to unemployed people seeking Job Search assistance. In addition, members of the public came to this section of the library looking for careers advice. In the following extended example a woman (H) was seeking advice from Winnie about returning to the world of education to continue her studies:

```
1  H      you know I was going through a lot of stuff, you know I wasn’t settled to carry
2  on with any course
3  W  um
4  H  cause I am now more settled than I was before. and in year eleven I got my social
5  care level two
6  W  yea
7  H  yea in level two and I got distinction for that level in year eleven at Hall Green
8  College and I think now I am more settled to carry on with it which will be level
```
three, isn’t it?

le, level three

I am still nervous you know. what am I going to do?

no no that’s so good. which which you’ve done before? Hall Green? call the
Hall Green again because after so many years they can change areas because
some colleges doing some not

yea
call the Hall Green

but I don’t want to go back to the old stuff I want to

oh oh, subject to you

somewhere else because what it is

um

I want to become a counsellor so I don’t know what to do really

come back in September maybe something like that overlap with year two

thousand fifteen?

yea

and look for the prospectus and look for the social care to see what you have

there

OK

let’s see who’s doing which centre is doing and from that

maybe (xxx) isn’t it

you see you see like two thousand and sixteen seventeen to work with children?

OK

Solihull, Sparkhill Centre

actually Sparkhill is not very far from me I am living in Stirchley

yea ah actually I don’t know where it is

I don’t know where it is as there’s no bus near where I live but it’s about working

with children and adults, that’s not what I want. I don’t know about

that, this is about my level two, I’ve done all that. I think I now need to go for

level three and that’s what I’ve been told before

Handsworth Fire Station?

no I don’t want to go there, if you know what I mean, sorry

no no, there is a choice here yea yea level two level two sewing

so (xxx) I don’t mind sewing

so level three diploma special support social and learning?

no, I don’t want to do that it’s actually counselling, working in hospitals, the

wards, I don’t know, dementia even that’s interesting

yea yea two way: one is online you go to the internet go on line to check

what’s the content what is level three what is this course yea?

is there anybody here?

because you’ve already

sit down and talk to me and help me?

for the the job?

for everything CV the job and everything

CV yea?

so all these things need to be done they need to be done. my daughter used to
help me but she’s now with exams and I don’t want to disturb her

W of course, of course you can come up to the work club, unfortunately work club has already been fill so it’s on every Wednesday if you are looking for jobs and need advice on improving your CV or fill in a job application yah yah

H I am already working at the moment for the eh I just need some help on my CV

W CV getting advice on improving your CV yah

H is there anybody that can help me with training or courses? that sort of stuff

W yea getting advice on CV or job search effectively

H OK OK

W I think for a start you can OK it doesn’t matter as you can always get advice and

H OK I see what you mean. oh so I can just come here?

W you can come here. what day is it? it’s eleventh, excuse me it’s between eleven to three thirty you can come here to see

H I don’t know about this one that would be so good

W thaa thaa that is it Tuesday to Friday careers advice?

H OK

At the beginning of the exchange the client speaks in a confessional mode, offering an account of her past life as a reason for her lack of educational progress. She emphasises her narrative in lines of equivalence: ‘I wasn’t settled to carry on’, ‘I am now more settled’, ‘I am more settled to carry’. In the woman’s account we are aware of more than one voice, as her discourse is internally dialogized. The voice of her unsettled past interacts with the voice of her more settled present and her aspirations for the future. Here is what Bakhtin (1981: 324) called a potential dialogue “as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages”. Despite feeling ‘more settled’ she professes herself ‘still nervous’ (line 11), and throws herself on Winnie’s merciful support with the question ‘what am I going to do?’. In the following line Winnie offers encouragement and positive evaluation of the woman’s story, saying ‘that’s so good’. She asks further questions and tries to give practical advice, but the woman says ‘I don’t want to go back to the old stuff’. This resonates with her initial statement that she was ‘going through a lot of stuff’. The repetition here indicates that she is looking for a way to make a fresh start. At line 21 she states the problem: ‘I want to become a counsellor so I don’t know what to do really’. She has a specific ambition but she does not have the knowledge required to pursue the ambition. Winnie casts about for a while, reading from her computer screen and typically turning the screen to allowing the client to also read the information. Winnie offers ‘Sparkhill Centre’ as a possible learning site, but concedes that she doesn’t know where it is (34).

The woman’s next utterance is intensely dialogic, as she seems to engage in rejoinders to suggestions which, in the present exchange, have not been proposed. She is looking at Winnie’s computer screen and responding to possibilities listed there – and her utterance is no less dialogic for that. At lines 35-38 the woman rejects working with children and adults: ‘that’s not what I want’. She similarly turns down a course at level two, saying ‘I’ve done all that’, and decides that she needs to go for level three because ‘that’s what I’ve been told before’. The utterance is multivoiced, and the other voices are “outside the limits of the author’s speech, but the author’s speech takes them into account and refers to them” (Bakhtin 1994: 107). The voices of the past determine the discourse of the present, despite remaining outside of it. When Winnie suggests
Handsworth Fire Station as an alternative learning venue the woman says ‘no, I don’t want to go there if you know what I mean, sorry’. This may be an innocent refusal based on distance to travel across the city. However, in Birmingham ‘Handsworth’ typically indexes the African Caribbean community, and perhaps other immigrant (or post-immigration) groups. The addition of ‘if you know what I mean’ and ‘sorry’, and the slightly abashed intonation of the addition, appear to indicate that the woman turns down this suggestion because she does not like or want to go to Handsworth. Winnie does not respond directly, but, perhaps thrown for a moment, offers ‘level two sewing’. This was in spite of the fact that the client had clearly stated that she wanted to train to be a counsellor. The woman appears to accommodate or humour this suggestion, but at line 44 she restates her interest in counselling. Now the client begins to lose confidence that Winnie is able to help her, asking ‘is there anybody here sit down and talk to me and help me?’. She repeats the question, and once again explains that her daughter is too busy with exams to help her. At line 64 Winnie seems to be anxious, saying ‘I think for a start you can OK it doesn’t matter’. However, just as the exchange appears to be about to fatally collapse the interactants agree that the client can ‘come here’. The client says this first, and then Winnie says it twice, and it appears to offer a safe route out of the darkness in which they had become obscured. ‘Here’ appears to afford a more feasible possibility than the other suggestions. The woman says ‘that would be so good’, and they are able to continue the exchange.

The interaction goes on uninterrupted, with Winnie now reading to the client from the computer screen in front of her:

```
71  W  just book a one hour appointment with the career advisor from the National
72  Career Service, provide information whilst the choices are available, in that
73  case, you can book tomorrow? eleven am to three pm?
74  H  ooh shall I? shall I come between eleven o’clock and twelve? and bring this with
75  me?
76  W  yea bring this with you
77  H  hehe ah it’s hot today
78  W  yea OK? but the thing is it says advise you to book an appointment
79  H  ah really oh yes and I need this to be able to book an appointment in Edgbaston
80  centre
81  W  so do you want the telephone call for this place? I I will write down for you
82  H  sorry? ah yea please
83  W  make an appointment that would be good isn’t it at least there would be some
84  H  I retain this as well
85  W  yea please
86  H  ah that’s good
87  W  is it called Career Advice? so you want to go back to do the urm
88  H  yea do you think that would be better for me? um
89  W  no this is how you feel. I can’t we can’t say go for it
90  H  um it depends on how I feel
91  W  it depends on how you feel of course, if you done it, give you a lot much 嘘.
92  <relaxed tone of approval or agreement > and give you confident, and you need to
93  ready for it and have interests to do it
94  H  yea um it always occurs to me and there’s always someone there keep saying
```
carry on because when they are not going on at the time

yea of course

and now I am sorting out myself you can’t study when you have problems

absolutely absolutely

and now I feel stronger maybe I can do it I don’t know hehehe

now you feel strong that’s a very good achievement to be in a very strong position isn’t it

I’ve always put myself down my daughter, she’s going to the uni at the end of the year she’s never left me and she’s go to London and she’s going to do child care policy and eh she said to me mum look I am going to do my uni, you might not be there but we are still going to see each other, but now you’ve got time to do whatever for you

absolutely

and now I am sorting out myself you can’t study when you have problems

absolutely

and now I feel stronger maybe I can do it I don’t know hehehe

now you feel strong that’s a very good achievement to be in a very strong position isn’t it

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absolutely

and she’s telling me not to worry about her so much

do you want to to eh book the career advice first and then later on if you find that you want somebody to help more CV you can come to the work club

yea

it’s open it’s no limit you can actually, every different workshop that would be nice

thank you

OK this is the career advice to tell you what do you want to do and that

OK

and this is for the CV every Thursday, this is the Friday. again, work club, you can drop in you don’t you don’t need to book OK?

OK

you can join in between the time between between between eleven to three but of course if that day is is is not busy they can see you straight away if busy you’ll have to wait OK

yes thank you very much

yea let’s starting this first OK?

can I take this one?

yea go ahead ah if you take this one can I have the e-mail address?

OK right can I write it for you

yea yea please sit down um have a rest please aww, that’s fantastic you do

that

I know I’m excited now

for me I am doing as well I’m I’m doing English

are you? aww that’s good

because I need to learn eh eh good English not just say hello how are you hehe

haha but you sound very good. what is your job here? even working here is good

I don’t know if you do voluntary or everybody work here help me to meet

people and eh

yea that’s right is that hotmail?

yea hotmail dot com [name]

[name] is that [name] one word?

yea [name] at hotmail dot com [name] one word my name [name] at hotmail

82
The client reacts positively to the possibility of returning to the library the following day for help with her curriculum vitae (74-5). Winnie offers her the telephone number of an education centre so that she can make an appointment. The woman asks Winnie for specific advice, but Winnie recites the institutional discourse, pointing out that ‘this is how you feel. I can’t, we can’t say go for it’. Here once more is the dynamic interaction of centripetal and centrifugal forces which were invariably at work in Winnie’s discourse, if at some times more visibly than at others. Winnie offers advice and suggestions, some taken up by the woman, others not. In these instances Winnie’s discourse is centrifugal: moving away from institutional discourse to engage with the individual client. However, when she is asked directly what the client should do, she is pulled back by the centripetal forces of the centre. Rules are rules, and they are confirmed in parallel lines of repetition and equivalence: ‘this is how you feel’, ‘depends on how I feel’, ‘depends on how you feel’.

Until this point the dialogic, double-voiced discourse of the client has been in the realms of what Bakhtin (1994) termed ‘hidden polemic’, in which the discourse of the other voice is not reproduced in the discourse of the first voice, but is merely implied, and has a role in shaping the discourse. We saw that the woman seemed to engage with arguments previously proposed. Here, however, her polemic becomes more open and overt, as she refers to actual voices, ‘it always occurs to me and there’s always someone there keep saying carry on’. Whether the ‘someone’ is another or herself, she listens to the voice, and carries on. Now she comes into her own, saying ‘I am sorting out myself’, ‘you can’t study when you have problems’, and ‘now I feel stronger maybe I can do it’. The woman’s voice is situated in a trajectory through the past, present, and future. Winnie picks up the cue, like a good counsellor herself, and echoes the woman’s words: ‘now you feel strong that’s a very good achievement, to be in a very strong position’. Her repetition, twice, of ‘strong’ positively evaluates the woman’s word, and continues the pattern of equivalence which structures the interaction. The dynamic tension between a troubled past and hope for a possible future is clear in the woman’s next utterance (102-106). At first the utterance is situated in the past, and is again almost confessional. Then she turns to her anxiety about the
future without her daughter, who has never left her before. Here the woman’s discourse indexes the close-knit family. The woman appears to be happy that her daughter is going away to university, and ventriloquates her daughter’s voice, which she evaluates with pride: ‘mum look I am going to do my uni you might not be there but we are still going to see each other, but now you’ve got time to do whatever for you’. The reported speech of the daughter runs in the same direction as the narrative of the mother (Volosinov 1973), and the final part of the reported speech chimes perfectly with her new resolve. The true object of inquiry here is the dynamic interrelationship between the reported speech and the reporting context (Volosinov’s 1973). The daughter’s words are quoted (or constructed) here and now because the woman needs the words of her daughter here and now. The daughter’s quoted words remind the mother that she can ‘do whatever’ for herself.

Winnie continues to propose practical support for the woman, saying she can drop in to the Business section of the library whenever she wants between eleven o’clock and three o’clock. In her discourse Winnie mitigates the potential offence (Goffman 1971) of the woman having to queue by saying ‘if busy you’ll have to wait, OK’. Winnie asks the woman for her e-mail address, and when she offers to write it down Winnie says ‘sit down um have a rest please’. She adds ‘that’s fantastic you do that’, positively evaluating the woman’s decision to pursue her neglected educational trajectory. This appears to be a genuine, heartfelt comment on Winnie’s behalf: she approves of women being active and achieving their life goals. The woman, who at line 11 had said ‘I am still nervous’, says ‘I’m excited now’. The notion that Winnie endorses the woman’s decisions is evidenced in Winnie’s next utterance, in which she says ‘for me I am doing as well. I’m I’m doing English’. It is difficult to know whether Winnie was referring to the ad hoc English literacy support she was receiving from Rachel. We had no knowledge that Winnie was taking any other regular English classes. But certainly this is a move in which Winnie aligns with the woman, sharing her determination and strength. The woman says ‘that’s good’, and Winnie expands, saying that she needs to learn ‘good English’. The woman compliments Winnie on her English proficiency (‘but you sound very good’). Winnie checks the woman’s e-mail address and wishes her ‘good luck’. The woman thanks her and says ‘I’m sure I will see you again’, and ‘I might come here to say hello’. The woman anticipates that their relationship will last beyond the service encounter, and (reading Winnie’s badge) she says ‘and your name is Winnie’. This is a far cry from the woman’s exasperated question, ‘is there anybody here who can help me?’. The interaction has been stabilized and turned round, to the point at which the woman wants to sustain a relationship with Winnie. The woman thanks Winnie gratefully, and Winnie concludes the exchange with an access ritual: ‘you are welcome! take care. good luck!’. All is well, and the woman goes on her way.

This is a typical service interaction, in which a woman seeks advice about returning to education and taking the first steps on a new career path. The exchange is characterized by multivocality, as voices from outside the interaction are engaged with, and other voices are represented in direct and indirect reported speech. It is also an exchange characterized by supportive and remedial interaction ritual, as Winnie expertly navigates a route from the client’s initial nervousness to her eventual excitement. Furthermore, it is an exchange in which both Winnie and the client draw on resources from beyond the exchange itself, as Winnie’s philosophy of life – that women should be active in learning and work – becomes a context for her steering a safe passage. The client, too, draws strength from a context outside the exchange itself, as the ventriloquated voices of her
daughter and others are brought to bear. It is a quotidian encounter of the most ordinary kind in the “slop of social life” (Goffman 1971), yet it is heteroglossic, complex, and replete with ceremonial ritual.

Archives

One of the distinctive sections of the library was the ‘Archive’ department. Here clients would come to seek information about ancestors, maps, old photographs, and so on. Winnie told us that she did not particularly enjoy being stationed in the Archive section, because she felt that it required specialist knowledge which she did not have. However, we were able to observe clients as they came to the Archive with specific enquiries which related to heritage, history, and family ancestry. In the following example an older man speaks to L, the subject specialist in this section, as recorded in field notes by Adrian Blackledge:

L is helping an older man with some information. She is very helpful and solicitous. She offers to pass the man’s details on to someone at the university who is working on the Voices of War project. He says he is a second cousin of someone who won the Victoria Cross. He tells her he has written a poem to go in the book he has just published. He also refers to the Birmingham Post and the Evening Mail. L says ‘so he survived the First World War?’ ‘Yes’ ‘Did you ever meet him?’ ‘No. My father was his nephew’. He takes out a large sheet of paper and says ‘there you are, there’s the family tree…they had one two three, six children’. ‘Where are you?’ ‘I was in the second marriage. He was in his seventies when he had me’. ‘I’m being very nosy now, but is this your birthday?’ ‘Yes, yes’. ‘So have you met family?’ ‘Yes. Mostly at the coast. A sister in Sheffield, a half sister in Solihull, and cousins and nephews and nieces.’ ‘Right I will pass your details on’. ‘So your name is?’ ‘[name]’. ‘And your address?’ ‘xxx Stratford on Avon’. ‘You’re not a Brummy then’ ‘What?’ ‘You’re not a Brummy then?’ [indignantly:] ‘Yes. I
was. I was born in Dudley Road’. [he gives her a paper] ‘That’s where my story starts’. The paper appears to reference a book.

What often characterised exchanges in the Archive section was a sense of clients’ pride in their personal or family heritage. The man here is proud of his second cousin, and of his Birmingham heritage. A woman who accompanied the client adds to the discussion:

The man’s companion, a younger woman, says ‘Everything changed in 2005’. They discuss changes to legislation which governs adopted people’s access to their personal and family histories. L asks ‘can you remember any of that?’ I can’t hear the man’s answer because someone just switched on the photocopier. L: ‘were they full, full blood or half siblings?’ ‘Full, full’. Then he explains, and says ‘So she’s my half sister’. L: ‘good things can come out of it’. She adds ‘In family history it’s slightly removed, it’s just a question of ticking boxes. But you can find answers. They might not be the answers you want, but they are answers’. The man speaks quietly. L: ‘I was talking to my son’s girlfriend the other day and she was saying why would you give up a child, why would you do that? But she didn’t understand there are economics’.

The conversation is a sensitive one, which appears to move all parties. The distinctive services offered by certain sections of the library determined the different kinds of interactions in play.

On the same day a man arrived in the Archive section hoping to meet J, one of the long-established staff:

A late middle-aged man comes to the desk and speaks to the man on the desk. ‘Hello, I think you know me.’ The assistant shows no sign that he does. ‘I wonder if [name] is in’. ‘can I ask what it’s about?’ ‘My photographic collection’. The man follows the assistant through a door into another space. They return separately. The assistant says ‘he’ll be out in a minute’. The client employs himself looking at leaflets

The staff member, J, emerged after a few minutes, and greeted the client, who sat down with him at a table:

‘In my letter I put I wanted my collection to come to the library. I was going to wait until I pass on but I thought I would do it now. I don’t know how things are here. I have a large collection of albums’. ‘We would welcome that, because we do have a large collection. There used to be eighteen archive staff, and that will be reduced. The man ‘You see the books are so heavy, black and white. ‘Are they all local history?’ ‘All Birmingham related, city centre, I didn’t go anywhere more than two miles from the centre’
‘Oh right. My suggestion would be that you do this now, because we don’t know who will be left out of the new structure. The decision when you want to do this is with you’.

‘Mid-May would be good. I was wondering whether a member of the library would be able to come out to my home, I’m in Harborne, I don’t have a car, I would have to get a taxi, a friend to help me.’

‘How many boxes?’

‘Oh about six boxes, plastic boxes’.

‘I’m thinking about the transport probably a taxi would be best and me and a colleague would make an appointment’

‘Sorry, to come to my home?’

‘Yes we could have a look and help you’

‘And you say the best time is Mid-May?’

‘Yes, or before. There will be somebody if it’s not me’

‘I think it’s better to release it now. If anything happens to me I have two friends who will sort it out it’s not that I don’t trust them but I would rather do it myself’

‘Yes and the copyright would remain with you and if you want to transfer ownership we can do that’

‘So when you say mid May you mean something like 15th’

‘Yes. All the decisions are being taken in the next few weeks’

‘I will be sorry to see them go, but rather than have a last minute panic’

‘Would you mind, if you wanted to, writing a paragraph of biography, so there is information about the photographer, because when we are looking through material it’s interesting to see’

‘I have just been to see Small Heath library and Mr [name] said they wanted some pictures of the local library. I had thought of sending to local libraries’

‘It’s up to you but I would advise keeping the collection together’

‘Right I’ve got something to work on now’

‘Now do you want my telephone number?’

‘What happens to negatives? That is a big job’

‘The thing with negatives that’s important because of the light’

‘I’ve changed my camera now’

‘Oh no that’s interesting ’cause if you’ve got any information about which camera you used you know some people are quite particular’

‘I went over to digital six years ago’

‘No that’s fine thank you’

‘So I won’t have to lift? I have problem with my back, liver problems’

‘No no’

‘They’re under the stairs in my living room. They are kept very dry’

‘I’m very pleased to hear it’

‘Well I’ve got something to work on. Bye’

‘Bye’
future generations. The man’s efforts to contact the library and bequeath his photograph collection is an example of community-produced heritage. This instance of community heritage resonates with the commitment of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) to the participation of communities, groups, and individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and involve them in its management. The interaction sits at the interstices of action and material representation, and exemplifies an important element of heritage. Rather than solely representing the static and extinct, heritage is here “a moment of action” (Smith 2006: 83). It is at the threshold of private heritage and public heritage, and the exchange constitutes a moment at which the personal overlaps with the communal. The man wants to see his photographs archived for public consumption, but at the same time he ‘will be sorry to see them go’. The member of staff, J, is considerate and generous in offering to collect the photographs from the man’s home. The man’s private sense of belonging and identity plays out in tension with his public sense of belonging and identity.

Another man in his seventies arrived at the Archive information desk and wanted to look at historical maps of the local area, which he did with the help of a large magnifying glass. In this section of the library there was a sense of studious examination of documents, photographs, maps, and other items with a heritage resonance. It was also noticeable that the clientele occupying this space tended to be a good deal older than in some of the other sections of the library. In these exchanges, whether they were community curators or consumers of heritage artefacts, the library users chose to imbue them with status and value. The man who was studying old maps with a magnifying glass wanted to photocopy some of them. He and the member of the library staff discussed impending cuts to staffing, and the city maps laid out on the desks. They also spoke about the city council’s current plan to demolish the old Central Library building to build a modern shopping mall. The library user said that he had worked in the Central Library many years ago, and knew the place very well. He was not happy that a building barely forty years old was being pulled down. He said that part of the city’s heritage – and clearly part of his personal heritage – was being reduced to rubble for no good reason. Here not only was the heritage of the city, and of the people, constituted in old maps and photographs, but also in its buildings, and memories of those buildings. For this library user, notwithstanding the popularity of the new Library of Birmingham, the Central Library was an important part of the city’s heritage, and of his personal heritage. Robinson and Silverman (2015) refer to nostalgia as an important driver behind the construction of new heritage forms. They point out that as an expression of emotional attachment it is linked to the most ordinary and popular of artifacts or practices that can thus be ascribed extraordinary value.

The discourses in place in the Library of Birmingham were heteroglossic. That is, in exchanges between Winnie and library users voices were indexically linked to certain histories, biographies, and social mobilities. This was a space in which a woman’s life trajectory was transformed from ‘nervous’ to ‘excited’ in the course of her multivoiced interaction with a Customer Experience Assistant. It was a space in which the voice of a dissatisfied customer was transformed from complaint to conviviality, also in the course of an exchange with Winnie, this time talking as they travelled through the library space. In both instances Winnie found ways to align herself with the member of the public, either by deploying what Goffman (1971) called ‘identificatory sympathy’ (‘just keep learning yea yea yea’), or by finding what Bourdieu (1990) referred to as ‘common ground’ (‘for me I am doing as well I’m I’m doing English’). Both are examples of the
negotiation of co-membership (Erickson and Schultz 1982), in which Winnie does everything she can to find grounds for alignment with the library user. Betsy Rymes (2014: 4) proposed that communication is “a careful negotiation about what those communicating share and how that common ground can build through an interaction”. This is what we see in each of the potentially precarious and unstable interactions involving first a customer complaint, and second a client who appears to initially have little faith in Winnie, but ends as her future best friend. In these instances we would concur with Rymes (2014: 4) that “arriving at co-membership was less like an exchange of information than a dance, a pas de deux in which each partner carefully negotiated with the other physically and emotionally to arrive at a shared sense of order”. There appears to be nothing disingenuous or forced about Winnie’s identification of common ground. We saw many times that she saw herself as a lifelong English learner. We also saw many times that she valued very highly women’s independence and self-motivation. To find common ground was an honest and unforced process for Winnie. It may be that this was at the root of her success.
6. Multivocal Space

In addition to the physical environment of the library, a significant feature of the library as a space was the public who came through the doors. A characteristic feature of the people using the library was that many of them were young (between 16 years and 25 years), and that a high proportion of them were ‘black’ or ‘Asian’. In their study of libraries in Norway Aabø and Audunson (2012) found that library facilities were open and accessible to all, and people from different strata of the population in the local communities and in very different circumstances of life used the library: asylum-seekers and successful professionals, researchers and authors, studious adults and students, the long-term unemployed, fork-lift truck drivers, architects and drug-addicts, immigrants and school classes, homeworkers, youth, and pensioners. They concluded that the public library appeared to be a place for everyone. All inhabitants had the same right to use it, and there was a feeling that it belonged to the public. People who used the library were equal, in the sense that they were all there in the capacity of being library visitors. From this viewpoint, the library stands out as a public realm (Lofland 1998) where strangers can form relationships with one another and still remain strangers, and where people show each other consideration, are restrained, helpful, behave with civil inattention, and act with civility toward diversity. The library stands out as an arena that exposes its users to the pluralism of today’s community.

Almost inevitably as we observed the comings and goings of people using the library, and wrote field notes about these observations, we were thrown back on social categories as we described the people we were observing. The following field note entry by Adrian Blackledge was typical of the (sometimes speculative) categorisations of social groups we made as we observed the users of the Library of Birmingham:

A studious girl in a burgundy headscarf on my table is texting (or doing something on her smart phone that looks like texting). The young women on the table next to me are gossiping. They use terms like ‘follow’ and ‘friend’ which, I am aware, have connotations which are different for them and me. A girl with deep red lipstick says ‘then you don’t know me very well’. She says ‘we’re not going to Nando’s’.

A young black man with braided hair and an Adidas tracksuit top comes to Winnie’s station. He leans his elbows on the counter. He wears multicoloured trainers and a black goatee beard. He looks at Winnie’s computer screen. He seems to be searching for something in his wallet. Winnie takes something from him (I think a coin) and puts it in the till. She points away from the counter and then leads him away. She shows him a list posted on one of the bookshelves, and he examines the books.

Throughout our time in the Library of Birmingham we struggled with the labels and categories we ascribed to those we observed. Often we used terms which referred to race, religion, and nationality, such as ‘black’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Somali’, and so on, without any certainty that the subjects would describe themselves thus. We were making assumptions based on the assemblage
of signs before our eyes. We always did our best not to be discriminatory in doing so. Writing field notes is at least partly about creating pictures with words. Some of those words, deployed in haste, are inevitably imprecise. In the example here ‘black’ perhaps indexes a certain type of appearance; ‘headscarf’ also does this. In the first of these two paragraphs Adrian self-consciously positions himself as separate and distinct from the young library users, deploying metacommentary to distance himself from their contemporary language.

Another field note from the same observation session elaborated on the previous description:

Whereas the Archive section was almost exclusively occupied by older white males, I am now sandwiched between three young women of about 16 to 18, all of Asian appearance, two of them in headscarves. The one on my table is very studious, writing notes with great industry. On the adjacent table one of the young women is on her phone, listening to music, making calls, and chatting. I am about seven metres from the desk where Winnie and two other staff/volunteers are occupied serving library users. The library users at the desk are also young women in Muslim headscarves. Winnie is serving one of them. She has turned the computer screen to face the customer and they are both peering at it. This area is busy, with people of all kinds and backgrounds walking through. A tall man in shorts and black socks and sneakers comes to Winnie’s position: ‘Hi there’, he greets her in a posh English accent. She looks something up on the computer for him. He writes something with a pencil. His shirt sleeves are rolled up and he leans his hands on the desk counter. The young woman on the table next to me is chatting about friends and marriage.

In another example Adrian Blackledge categorises library users as ‘of African Caribbean appearance’ and ‘of African appearance’:

A young woman of African Caribbean appearance comes to the counter and asks for directions. The information assistant gives her the information she needs, pointing as he does so. A man of African appearance in a brown leather jacket comes to speak to the same assistant. He quickly finds the information he needs, says ‘thank you’, and leaves. A young woman with a red bag comes to the counter and similarly takes away the information she requested. The information assistant typically writes the information on a scrap of paper for the customer and hands it to them.

The woman with a red bag is not ascribed an ethnic category, and nor is the information assistant. The self-referential, reflexive categorisations in Adrian Blackledge’s field notes index his anxiety about deploying crude typifications in this way. However, this reflexivity, or metacommentary, also points to the ways in which stereotypes are a resource to account for and navigate the city.

Typical library users during the time we were observing were young women, many of them wearing headscarves and long, fashionable coats and dresses. The dress and appearance of the
library users was not insignificant, as the library was not only a place of study, but also a meeting-place for fashionable young people:

A young woman in a beige headscarf and long black dress and leather jacket is waiting patiently for help with an enquiry. Winnie finally completes her interaction with a Somali man, who goes on his way. A very tall African Caribbean man in a tracksuit arrives and asks Winnie a question. He has braided hair. He waits while Winnie checks the computer. He looks at the computer screen himself. He chats to her and smiles. She writes something on a Post-it note for him, and continues to check the computer screen. He leaves, slinging an Adidas bag over his shoulder as he goes.

The field notes are replete with descriptions of the young library users – multi-ethnic, trendy, and happy to be seen in this palace for the people. The posture of the young library users was also worthy of comment, as they leaned elbows on information counters, crouched to peer into computer screens on the desks, and maintained a range of physical encounters with Winnie:

A tall young man who looks to me Somali (here’s me guessing again) is asking Winnie something. He looks very serious and concerned. Winnie consults the computer and the man leans at an acute angle against the counter. Perhaps he is doing this to enable him to more easily see the computer. The effect is that he also comes down to Winnie’s height.

Mobile phone use was permitted in the library, and young library users were often in communication with others by this means:

A young trendy couple walks through. He has his baseball cap turned backwards. She wears sunglasses, a leather jacket and a pink handbag. A young man beyond the escalators is on his mobile phone. A young Asian woman in a wide-brimmed hat walks by with her friend.

Often library users would make a request for information at the desk and spend a few moments on their mobile phone while waiting for the response:

Winnie’s colleague says something to her. She is dealing with a young man of Chinese appearance. Winnie takes over and shows the young man something. He is looking at his phone. Winnie is turning the pages of a document – possibly a reading list? Winnie shows him a yellow laminated text which seems to be a guide to collections. Winnie is spending a good deal of time with the young man. He looks like a student: rucksack, headphones, trendily dressed in black, rolled up jeans, sneakers without socks, short spiky haircut, glasses. The young man thanks Winnie and walks away.

Usually library users waited patiently for the attention of the Customer Experience Assistants. It was marked when they protested that they had waited too long:
A middle-aged man of Asian appearance comes to the counter. To start with he is not
tented to. He stamps his foot on the floor to let the staff know he is there. Having
gained the attention of the male assistant he first leans on the desk then sits down. The
assistant talks to him for an extended period of time. I have noticed this member of staff
before – he always seems willing to give customers plenty of time.

In this example the impatience of the customer is more than matched by the patience of the
member of staff.

In another example of an indexical deployed as an emblem of a particular social category, Adrian
Blackledge makes a metacommentary on a library user, and makes a further metacommentary on
his own metacommentary:

A young white man (a marked category) with tattoos the length of his considerable arms
is asking Winnie for help with a query. He wears sunglasses on his head and looks at his
mobile phone. Now he attends to Winnie, who is helping him with information. He walks
away, still looking at his phone.

Once again the field note makes a ‘skin colour’ / ‘ethnicity’ categorization. Adrian Blackledge
then comments that his description of the library user as a ‘young white man’ is ‘marked’. The
implication here is that young ‘white’ men were not regular users of the library. However, the
emblematic templates do not stop here, as additional evaluative indexicals come into play: the
man has ‘tattoos’, ‘considerable arms’, ‘sunglasses on his head’, and a ‘mobile phone’. These
emblems do not necessarily index a working class subject, especially at a time when tattoos have
become more universal then they were in yesteryear. However, taken together they build an
assemblage of signs which points to a description of a young, white, working-class man.
Adrian Blackledge made a further distinction between library users of different generations:

Most of the people in this section of the library appear to be students – mainly between
16 and 25, often using laptops with large headphones. There are also some people I
assume to be retired – normally men. A noticeable difference between the generations is
in terms of ‘ethnicity’. The retired library users (in this section) tend to be ‘white’ (for
want of a better categorization), while the students are very largely ‘black and Asian’ (for
want of a better categorization).

In this description ‘white’ library users tended to be an older generation, while ‘black and Asian’
library users were younger. The scare quotes and metacommentary in parentheses again index
the researcher’s awareness of the flawed utility of these categories. But they also point to the
way in which stereotypes weave through the field notes, creating a fine mesh in which it is
possible to see the superdiversity of the library space. The tapestry is undoubtedly woven from
threads of multiple types, but it is individually hand-woven, and the picture is not more or less
‘true’ for its sense of reflexivity and anxiety.
The library users were certainly diverse in appearance. The following field note, written by Adrian Blackledge, described a succession of customers arriving at Winnie’s customer information desk in just a few minutes:

An elderly white man comes to the information desk. The assistant says ‘hello, all right?’ He says something and she laughs and smiles convivially. A group of young men comes and sits in the orange chairs. A couple of young men of Somali appearance walk by. They ask for help from Winnie, and she comes out from behind her desk and points them in the right direction. A young white man (of about sixteen years) arrives at the desk, wearing a suit and trainers. Winnie answers his query. He seems to be in a hurry. The elderly man is still talking to the patient young library assistant. She smiles and nods. A white man with his coat buttoned severely up to his neck asks Winnie something. She answers and he goes on his way. A young Chinese woman comes to ask Winnie something. They speak English to each other, walking away from the desk as they do so. Three young women of Somali appearance come by, in long robes and headscarves, one wearing a niqab. Winnie has disappeared with the Chinese student. The elderly man is now engaged in conversation with the man who appears to be a supervisor / manager of the information staff.

These mini-portraits of library users create a picture of people of different appearance engaged in similar activity in the same place. Other examples gave a similar impression:

Meanwhile Winnie helps a young man who carries a canvas bag bearing the legend DZIEŃ DOBRY (I think). As he waits for Winnie’s advice he reads a book.

Later investigation revealed that ‘Dzień Dobry’ was a morning television show broadcast on TVN network in Poland. Another field note characterises something of the diversity of the library’s constituency:

Two Asian men in tracksuit tops walk by. A young couple in matching light-blue jeans inspects the display of leaflets. He has a camera around his neck and a Coca Cola bottle in his hand. They are speaking what sounds to me like Polish, but might be another East European language. The young woman looks very carefully at the leaflets. A young man of Chinese appearance walks by the counter and says something to Winnie that sounds like ‘toilet’. ‘Oh, long trek, yea?’ says she. ‘Yes’, he says, and laughs. The nearest toilet is in the Repertory Theatre next door.

It was clear that the categories ‘white’ and ‘black’, so anxiously but frequently deployed in the field notes, were inadequate means of describing or understanding the diversity of the people in the library.
With our focus on Winnie there were inevitably a number of references to ‘Chinese’ library users. In this example from field notes Rachel Hu reports a conversation with Z, a member of the library staff:

Z told me that he could definitely see an increased number of Chinese music students these past five years coming to the section. Because of the increase they even started to introduce a whole series of popular songs from Hong Kong which had turned out to be good. Z seemed to be very interested in languages and asked me if Cantonese is spoken more among working class Chinese while Mandarin is more middle class. I can see the reason why Z has this perception as the early Chinese immigrants coming to the UK were mainly from Hong Kong. Most of them were fishermen or seamen and went straight into Chinese catering after arriving in the UK as an easy option to make ends meet. They didn’t speak much English, and tended to do manual labour jobs so maybe this is why Z thought Cantonese was only spoken by working class Chinese. This is a very interesting conversation and I told Z a lot about Mandarin, Putonghua, and the new immigrants from mainland China since the 1980s.

Metacommentary on appearance runs throughout the field notes, as they try to paint, however inadequately, the diversity of the library users and the library staff who meet together in the civic institution. As we have seen, often metacommentary on metacommentary reveals the researchers’ anxiety about the utility of the categories deployed. However, deployed they are, and the interwoven stereotypes begin to create an expansive mural which testifies to the diversity of trajectories in play as people engage with each other in the Library of Birmingham.

Stereotypical indexicals were deployed not only by researchers seeking to describe what was before their eyes and ears, but also by those they observed. In the following example a man of African Caribbean appearance (Y) came to Winnie’s work station on the Knowledge Floor:

1 Y um-hum, where are you from?
2 W ah I from, originally I’m from Hong Kong
3 Y I’ve I’ve been to Hong Kong the (xxxx)
4 W how long ago?
5 Y it was eh eh when it was before the Chinese government took back its control
6 W oh au so it’s before the hand-over
7 Y yea before the (xxx)
8 W so you go to for fun or
9 Y it was eh for holiday
10 W holiday au au that’s nice
11 Y the people are very, very humble
12 W like me
13 Y yes and very good cooks
14 W very good cooks eh not sure
15 Y they can cook very good
16 W hehehe but they ah where are you from?
17 Y Jamaica
In the discourse of the library user the indexicals ‘very humble’ and ‘good cooks’ are deployed as stereotypes which contribute to the conviviality of the exchange. Reyes (2009) argues that stereotypes are not necessarily or always discriminatory and prejudicial. Nor is it crucial to determine whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’. Rather, they are typical features, approximate descriptors that individuals need to move about the world. Without stereotypes people would be unable to draw on prior understandings of objects or people (Reyes 2006: 6). Stereotypes are often constituted through metapragmatic evaluations (Silverstein1993). That is, sometimes stereotypes are stated explicitly by interactants and sometimes they are accomplished implicitly (Reyes 2005). Rymes (2014) refers to comment about language as ‘metacommentary’. In any interaction, metacommentary signals an understanding of what a sign means by pointing to that sign’s situated communicative value. Comments about how language is functioning are ‘metapragmatic’ because they call attention to how utterances are functioning in a particular context. However, metacommentary is not always explicit, but signals the function of a communicative act through implicit metapragmatic activity. Rymes proposes that every utterance is saturated with metapragmatic function.

‘Metapragmatic stereotypes’ is a technical term for talking about typifications of the pragmatics of language use and associated signs (Agha 1998). They are essentializations or reifications which are not only based on what others do; they also help us to deal with others, to do whatever we do with them or to them. They are observable social regularities of metapragmatic typification, typical features of a kind, with which speakers position themselves and others in socially meaningful ways (Reyes 2009: 53). They are not ideas in the head, but “observable behaviours that evaluate the pragmatic properties of linguistic expressions” (Agha 2007: 154). Typifications include the relation of some aspects of behaviour (predication) to a certain category of persons (reference). Speakers may locate themselves as members of both a typical behaviour (including linguistic behaviour) and a particular person-type. For typifications to develop into stereotypes they must be shared at the level of groups or societies (Reyes 2006). Typifications “constitute stereotypes insofar as they recur in the reflexive evaluations of many language users” (Agha 2007:279). That is, for evaluation of a register to be a stereotype it is necessary for it to recur in the metapragmatic discourse of the many. This raises the question how many similar utterances constitute ‘recurrence’, and how many language users uttering similar metapragmatic evaluations constitutes ‘enough’ for an evaluation to become a stereotype (Blackledge and Creese 2016). The answer lies in the context: a family unit may recurrently invoke metapragmatic typifications as a means of identifying the family as a group, reproducing social identification across generations; in other cases stereotypes make possible “the large-scale replication of register stereotypes across social populations” (Agha 2004:27). Reyes (2009) suggests that metapragmatic stereotypes are circulating resources that can be creatively recontextualised in interaction. Metapragmatic stereotypes are not only constituted in explicit commentary on typifications, but also in the stylized representation of typifications (Rampton 1995, 1999, 2006, 2014). That is, one of the ways in which speakers comment on how others speak, and therefore on how types of persons are, is by representing their speech in a way that
sets it apart from the ongoing interaction. In setting speech apart from the ongoing interaction it may be evaluated, either implicitly or explicitly.

The circulation of stereotypes precipitates certain beliefs among individuals, but these are experienced “with varying degrees of intensity, durational constancy and force over a life span” (Agha 2007:154). Agha (2003) and Reyes (2006) propose that the circulation of stereotypes occurs in speech chains, and “the existence of a stereotype relies on continuous streams of speech chains” (Reyes 2006: 6). The ‘speech chain’ metaphor, derived from Bakhtin, may need more nuanced elaboration to describe the emergence of stereotypical discourses in trajectories which can be circular, tangential, centrifugal, centripetal, convergent, dispersed, and so on (Blackledge and Creese 2016). However, the notion of speech chains takes us some way at least towards an understanding of the transmission of stereotypes over time and across space. Reyes acknowledges that stereotypes can be fragile as well as stable, and circulated in media discourses with national and global reach as well as in local discourses. In her ethnographic study of Asian American young people in the United States Reyes found that although stereotypes were sometimes seen as oppressive, at other times they were appropriated as sources of power, good humor, and in-group cohesiveness. These various understandings of stereotypes made her aware of their “slippery and elusive” nature (2006: 16). She found that Asian Americans often stereotype themselves, and in doing so “stereotypes became intricate and flexible tools with which to fashion their identities and relationships with others” (Reyes 2006: 28). Reyes concludes that stereotypes “can be incorporated into people’s lives to various effects, and sought out as a means of identifying and imagining oneself, others, and connections between individuals and groups” (2009:58). Investigation of the ways in which people interactionally define and deploy stereotypes in everyday speech contributes to an understanding of how participants perceive and construct their identities. In the examples in this section stereotypes are invoked as a resource not only by a library user engaged in everyday conviviality, but also by researchers making the best use they can of the resources available to represent the superdiverse environment of the library.

Disabilities

An additional dimension of the diversity of users of the library was the presence of, and provision for, clients with disabilities. The library was an inclusive space which provided access to people with disabilities:

An elderly woman with a three-wheeled mobility support device comes to Winnie’s counter. She is with a tall young couple with a pram. All three wear hats.

It was common for people with mobility difficulties to arrive at the information desks on the different floors. In the following example we are in the Archive section on Level Four:

A man has brought another enquiry. With two customers the desk now looks busier. A man in an electric wheelchair moves around the floor. A member of staff asks ‘do you
have access to the internet at home?’. The man doesn’t seem sure. The man chats to the member of staff for more than fifteen minutes. This is a clear distinction from the markets – interactions are more extended

On several occasions in the field notes we commented on our observations that the library staff took time and trouble to meet the needs of the clients. In a more extended example a man in a wheelchair comes to the Reception desk on the ground floor. Rachel Hu recorded the event as a field note:

“Hello, do you have the library opening time and some general information?” A man in a wheelchair slid to a stop in front of the reception counter. His eyes looked unfocused, so even when he’s talking to me I can’t be sure who he’s talking to. I stepped back a bit so Winnie can move a bit closer to the man. He was a bit scruffy, wearing a worn out woollen hat and a stained old jacket. His grey curly hair squeezed from underneath his broken hat, draping down his face, blocking his eyes.

Winnie passed on to the man a little leaflet containing the newly changed opening hours. “Do you have anything in large print so I can read it? You see I can’t really see very much”. The man put the leaflet very close to his eyes but couldn’t see a word. “Do you have any information in large print that I can read?” Winnie rummaged through the documents displayed at the reception desk but couldn’t find anything in large print. She then picked up the brochure telling the customers about the construction of the library and gave it to the man. “This will guide you through the building so you know where all the sections are.”

The man was very pleased and thanked Winnie for her help. But after trying to read through the booklet he put it down in disappointment. “Excuse me, do you call this in large print? Really it’s not as I still can’t see a thing”. “Sorry, we don’t have anything in large print but I can make the leaflet bigger so you can read the opening times” “That would be wonderful. Thank you very much. Can you please”. Winnie ran away to get the print done before the man finished his sentence. “So how big do you think you will need the print to be?” I tried to be helpful seeing the man lost for words. “Thirty. You know the font size, thirty will be fine. Many years ago when I still could see on the computer I knew this stuff.” So I rushed to Winnie who’s nearly finished the printing. “The man said he will need the font size of the printing to be thirty.” “No, I can’t do that. This is the biggest the machine could do.” Winnie finished and walked back towards the counter where the man was waiting. So I followed her. She gave the man the leaflet without asking him to check to see if he could read it. “I want somebody to help me to use the computer here, only for a few minutes though, just tell me what to do and how to do it.” The man looked at Winnie hopefully. “Go to the second floor and ask the staff there. If they are free I’m sure they will be happy to help you out on the computer.” “That’s right. Many years ago when I still could see I could use the computer in the old library. The staff were always very nice and helpful.”
Winnie stopped talking and sat in front of her screen typing something. Seeing the man trying very hard to read the enlarged print Winnie just did for him, I asked him if he could read it. He shook his head and said it was still way too small for him. “Do you want me to write it down in bigger letters for you?” “Oh, yes, that would be fantastic!” he took out two pens and tried them out one by one on the back of a piece of paper “Here, here it is, use this one.” I took his pen and started to write down in very big letters the opening and closing times of the library on the back of the printing Winnie just gave him. “And the telephone number for the library please.” He added while I was writing things down. “Chinese or Korean?” He looked at me and asked. “You know, I am a doctor myself and I like reading. It’s a shame that people don’t know to appreciate the civilization of ancient China and Korea, and countries of Asia, such as the Great Wall. We don’t have these things and history like that!” “You have Stonehenge, right? Every nation has its own culture and history so we should learn from each other.” I quickly finished my writing and handed the piece of paper to the man. He thanked me and started to put the information in a bag hanging in front of his chest. It was then I noticed that half of his left arm had been amputated, so he was struggling with one hand to put the stuff in his bag. I bent down my head to tidy up the desk, though I wished I could do more for him. God bless him! I wondered what happened to this man and was quite impressed by his being optimistic, outgoing and mobile, when he was in such a condition.

In this interaction it becomes clear that Winnie does not have to hand the resource to enable the man to read the information he wants. The man has a visual impairment, and requests information in large print. In the absence of such a resource Winnie attempts to create an ad hoc version, enlarging the existing leaflet with the photocopy machine. When this still fails to satisfy the man’s needs Rachel intervenes, again using the available resources and improvisation. The client is satisfied with this, and asks Rachel a supportive question which sits outside the business of the transaction. The library user’s acknowledgement of difference allows him to compliment the ‘civilization of ancient China and Korea’, deploying a stereotype as a resource to show his appreciation of Rachel’s efforts.

We saw on a number of occasions that members of staff at the library would support disabled library users as far as they could. The discourse of the library was one that encouraged disabled members of the public into the building. However, the resources required to facilitate full access were not always easily to hand.

Tourism discourse

Another type of discourse in circulation in the library was discourse which referred to tourism. At the time of our observation the Library of Birmingham was a striking new beacon on the city skyline. It was an attraction not only for local city dwellers, but also for tourists and sightseers who were passing through the city. In the following typical, everyday interaction the discourse in
place constitutes the space of the library as a tourist attraction. W is Winnie, and AA is a female client. The encounter takes place at the Reception desk on the ground floor of the library:

1. W are you OK? can I help?
2. AA yea, we just want to see the old view of Birmingham
3. W hh the old view old view of Birmingham, you can go up there you go further up
4. AA you can go to the seventh floor
5. W OK
6. W and then go through the glass door you can see people there, go take the lift there
7. AA OK
8. W and then you can go to the seventh floor again there’s a balcony, higher and
9. AA then if you go higher you can go to the ninth floor the sky view OK
10. AA OK
11. W again you can use the lift to go
12. AA OK we can go there thank you
13. W OK go this way you are welcome (2) that way OK
14. AA OK thank you

Tourism discourses were of course not always salient in Winnie’s service encounters, but in this small, quotidian exchange there is evidence that tourism was a dimension of interactions in the library. Winnie initiates the interaction as two library users approach the front desk. In order to initiate an interaction the participants must enter what Goffman (1967: 34) calls a “state of talk”, which they achieve by declaring themselves officially open to one another for purposes of spoken communication, and guarantee to maintain a flow of words. The opening of an encounter marks the beginning of a period of heightened access among the participants. Such an initiation is often marked by a greeting. Here Winnie’s questions act as an access ritual. FC’s request, at line 2, appears to be ambiguous. It is not clear whether she wants to view historical maps and photographs of the city, or to visit the viewing platform on the top floor of the library. On many occasions Winnie would repeat words or phrases uttered by library users or colleagues, a strategy she seemed to use in order to buy time before responding. It may well be that here she is working out exactly what the client is requesting. At the same time the repetition may be a form of “communicative overlap” (Rymes 2014:6), as she aligns with the client by echoing her words. Winnie appears to correctly assume that the two visitors are interested in the view of the city from the ‘Sky View’ platform on the ninth floor. She is used to this request, and confidently slips into an institutional ‘script’ in which she provides directions. She refers to the outside garden on the seventh floor, and the Sky View on the ninth. The interaction is concluded with thanks. This encounter is structured in terms of the discourse of tourism circulating in the city centre library. Most libraries are not visitor attractions for tourists. However, this library was launched in 2013 in a fanfare of publicity. It was officially opened by Nobel Peace Laureate Malala Yousafzai (Figure 22). The library includes, on the ground floor, a souvenir gift shop, a trademark of major visitor attractions, but not of most libraries. Items available for purchase in the gift shop include a cut-and-glue model of the library itself (Figure 23).
The gift shop also sold earrings inscribed with text from Romeo and Juliet, and Library of Birmingham clotted cream biscuits. The gift shop was set up facing the information counter. Tailor-made cupboards with glass windows contained beautifully produced tourism presents and souvenirs. The shop represented the library as a tourist attraction. For many people the Library of Birmingham was precisely an attraction on the tourist trail for visitors. This discourse co-existed with others at the library: information, leisure, coffee, and heritage.

The complex aggregate of discourses in circulation in, around, and through the Library of Birmingham included discourses of tourism (Thurlow and Jaworski 2010). In the constitution of the Library of Birmingham as a visitor attraction tourism discourses are both global and local. In the first year after opening, visitor numbers massively surpassed expectations, with visitors from the city of Birmingham, from other parts of the nation, and from other nations. In addition to discourses which constituted the library itself as a visitor attraction, tourism discourses were a feature of the production of space, particularly at the ground floor Reception desk. International visitors regarded it as a tourism site. Field notes recorded the investment of the library staff in the maintenance of tourism discourse:

Two young women, perhaps students, are at the shop asking for information about the building. The shop assistant gives them directions and information about which parts of the building they should visit. He extends his information and advice to the local area: ‘if you go through the Symphony Hall’. He goes across the Reception area to collect some leaflets for her, including a transport map. The customers appear to be strangers to the city. The assistant has spent at least fifteen minutes helping the young women, who have European accents. As they leave he calls to them and gives them a map of the city centre.

The library staff were invariably patient and willing to help when visitors were new to the city. Tourism was a key dimension of the complex aggregate of discourses circulating in the library.
We have seen that the Library of Birmingham is a multivocal space, in which the discourse of the business world rubs alongside discourse of tourism, just as the discourse of heritage and archives stands hand-in-hand with discourses of English language learning. These are not separate discourses, but they interweave in the warp and weft of everyday encounters. As we follow Winnie through her working day we see that there is as much to unite these different spaces of the library as to divide them. Characteristic of each section are service encounters between library users and the Customer Experience Assistant. These are encounters in which the protagonists have the potential to trip on what Goffman calls the “vast filigree of trip wires” (1971) awaiting strangers when they come into contact. Certainly miscommunication comes into play, and we saw a number of instances of interactions becoming unstable or threatening to capsize. But on almost every occasion the encounter is resolved through remedial action, as small ceremonial rituals rescue an exchange which might otherwise have come to grief. In fact on many occasions interactions ended convivially, despite unpromising beginnings, and this was often due to Winnie’s engagement with difference, and its deployment as a resource for communication.

The Library of Birmingham was a multivocal space in other respects. As we have suggested, the research team’s field notes offer a striking example of the limitations, but also the value, of stereotypes as resource for navigating the city. The field notes did what they could to paint a picture of the diversification of diversity in the library. But these were descriptions of strangers, so inevitably they fell back on stereotypes. Terms were deployed which indexed social categories, including (but certainly not limited to): ‘Somali’, ‘black’, ‘Asian’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Chinese’. Often these terms were either in scare quotes, or were more explicitly the subject of metacommentary. As such they were double-voiced: I am using these terms, said the field notes, but I acknowledge their descriptive inadequacy. Many other stereotypes found their home in the field notes, including, for example, ‘braided hair’, ‘Adidas tracksuit’, ‘deep red lipstick’, ‘texting’, ‘short spiky haircut’, ‘sunglasses on his head’, and ‘baseball cap turned backwards’. Each of these descriptive phrases was a stereotype, an indexical which pointed to a social type, and positioned an individual in the social world. The stereotypes became a resource with which to weave a multivoiced picture of the users of the library.
7. Terms and Conditions

In the exchanges we observed in the Library of Birmingham there was a constant dynamic between regulatory discourses invoked by the institution and the ownership of the space by the public. Discourses circulating in and through the library included the regulation of space, and the regulation of loans through a system of fines. The regulation of space by library staff included the movement or accessibility of seating, social behaviour of young people, access to certain sections of the building, and, occasionally, more serious incidents. At busy times library users were told ‘you can’t sit in this area’, or ‘you can’t move that chair’. During such periods some of the library staff appeared to spend a good deal of their time engaged in this kind of regulation.

In their study of libraries in Norway, Aabø and Audunson (2012) found that library policies and codes of conduct are developed to govern acceptable use of facilities and services, to ensure fair, equitable access for all, and encourage an environment that is respectful to all present. Their study of libraries concluded that the majority of library users follow the posted rules of conduct, but they also observed many incidents of rule-breaking or bending. The threshold between liberalism and insistence on the rules became a carefully constructed dance, involving both library users and staff. Public libraries were found to function as places governed by shared normative assumptions of public order. The library emerged as a complex public place, where the behaviours of library patrons and staff served to claim and reconstruct that space to suit their purposes.

In the Music section of the Library of Birmingham, located at the far reaches of the Lower Ground floor, there was a regime which held in dynamic equilibrium regulation and liberalism. This was an area which attracted British (Birmingham) Asian young people, particularly (it seemed to us) those who were of Muslim appearance. Here young people hung out in comfortable ball-shaped chairs which allowed them to remain more or less hidden from view. Most of the customers were young people in their teens, many of them Muslim girls in headscarves and heavy make-up. They were often to be found sitting in the laps of their boyfriends, flirting and giggling.

Rachel Hu’s field notes provide a vivid description of the Music section as a space less for study than for socializing, as young couples find a quiet area hidden away from prying eyes:

I walked around the circle shaped area with the Information Desk unguarded. Quite a few teenagers were bundled together here and there in the study areas. At least four or five young lovers were sitting on top of each other in quiet corners. Almost all of them were Asian boys and girls, some of the girls in headscarves. Some boys and girls were sitting by themselves, with earphones plugged in, looking outside and enjoying themselves. A Muslim girl was sitting by a study desk alone, with heavy and delicate make up, eating from a bag of crisps torn open and laid on the desk. She watched me while I was walking through the aisle looking curiously at her.
In this example we see the observation of the observer by the observed. This was not a unique instance of library users noticing that we were conducting observations in a space that was more theirs than ours. If the young people became noisy or disruptive, however, their behaviour could be regulated. In the following instance Winnie is anxious about a group of young people in this section of the library, and speaks to her colleague BB:

“Excuse me,” Winnie came back again and walked over to her colleagues and said to BB, “A group of youngsters is sitting around on a table one of the reading area, they are laughing and chatting, very noisy.” Winnie told BB what she saw. “Ooh, that’s a bit cheeky,”, said BB. But basically if they are not messing about so loudly that they interrupt others we’ll leave them alone. It’s the kind of area where we tend to leave them alone. Well, I mean, if sometimes they are a bit noisy we will have to go and check up on them.”

Although Winnie was concerned about the noise levels of the young people as they laughed and chatted, BB proposed a permissive path between ‘not messing about too loudly’ and ‘a bit noisy’. Her criterion was whether or not they were interrupting other library users. BB sets out her position by saying the Music section was ‘the kind of area where we tend to leave them alone’. It was perhaps BB’s relatively permissive attitude to regulation that attracted the young people to the Music section.

However, there were occasions when BB found that she was required to regulate the behaviour of the young people in her section of the library:

“Excuse me, please don’t draw on the chairs, they are brand new ones.” BB stopped and told the youngsters off when walking past two chairs with a boy and a girl sitting there for the whole afternoon. There are three white ball-shaped chairs lining the glass wall of the rotunda. People can lie back in the curve of the ball-shaped chair very comfortably and from outside you can’t really tell if there’s anyone sitting there or not, apart from their feet dangling out of the edge of the chairs. The boy and girl swirled their chairs at BB to see who’s talking to them and I then saw their faces. They looked at BB and swivelled back to their old position so they disappeared again.

When library equipment or resources were damaged or defaced BB was more than willing to step in and speak to the perpetrators. On occasions there were more serious incidents in the library which led to individuals being banned from the building. We noticed that in the kitchen where staff made their cups of tea and coffee there was a set of small posters with the images of people who were not allowed to enter the library. Library users had been banned from the building as a result of transgressions including ‘threw a full bottle of water from the third floor’, ‘persistently abusive and disruptive’, ‘tried to jump from the seventh floor terrace’, and so on. Despite the stipulation that these individuals were not permitted to enter the library, there was no visible security presence.
Regulatory discourses were particularly noticeable, and in regular circulation, in relation to booking the use of computer rooms, and in relation to fines for the late return of library resources. Scollon and Scollon (2003) argue that cities are regulated by municipal governments through universal procedures of law-making, posting and signalling, and law enforcement. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 190) point to “an entire regulatory apparatus” of street signs, painted lines on the road, traffic signals, and so on. They argue that there is a dynamic tension between the centrifugal spread of regulatory and commercial discourses and the centripetal convergence of discourses in semiotic aggregates where people live and act. Regulatory discourses are clearly evident in street signs. However, we suggest that they also circulate in spaces where people come into contact in civic life. In what follows we identify what Scollon and Scollon, following Bakhtin, term the centripetal convergence of discourses of regulation, together with examples of the centrifugal discourses of liberal interpretation and action.

In the following audio-recorded interaction a British Muslim Asian young woman (DD) wants to book access to a room with a computer for herself and her friend from 2 pm until 5 pm on the forthcoming Friday. Winnie has explained that the young woman needs to be a member of the library in order to do so. The young woman presents her library card:

1 W basically if you are not coming in say for about we keep it for twenty
2 minutes. If you don’t come in for twenty minutes we give it to somebody else
3 because we have a full waiting list, and you can’t eat in, you can’t eat in inside
4 DD OK
5 W no drink can be taken in the room because it may spill on the carpet. you can take
6 in a refreshment and um if you if you away for twenty minutes and not coming
7 back your things will be moved away by the security, because we don’t know
8 some people don’t say they are not coming back
9 DD OK
10 W and something like that yeah and um
11 DD [impatiently:] that’s all right can I just book a room for two please?

Winnie takes the library card from the young woman and immediately narrates the regulatory institutional script relating to the computer rooms. In line 1 she states that if the room is left empty for twenty minutes ‘we give it to somebody else’. In line 5 Winnie repeats and elaborates upon the action which will follow transgression of the regulation: ‘your things will be moved away by the security’. Winnie offers a rationale for the punitive act, or at least two rationales (‘because we have a full waiting list’, and ‘because we don’t know, some people don’t say they are not coming back’). In Goffman’s (1971: 114) terms the rationale is a ‘request’, which “consists of asking license of a potentially offended person to engage in what could be considered a violation of their rights”. That is, Winnie speaks for the institution in requesting that the young woman and her friend agree to have their belongings removed if they transgress the twenty-minute regulation. Goffman points out that “for every territory of the self there will be a means of requesting permission to intrude” (1971: 115). In the example here the young women are in no position to argue. If they refuse to abide by the regulations they will not be permitted to book the computer room. There are further regulations which must be agreed to – ‘you can’t eat inside’, ‘no drink can be taken in the room’. Again the request is accompanied by a rationale:
because it may spill on the carpet’. The powerlessness of the young women to speak against the regulations (and, perhaps, Winnie’s repetition of them) may be responsible for their impatience articulated at line 11.

The invocation of regulatory discourse in this interaction does not end here, however. Winnie is unsure of the booking process, as it is a ‘new system’. As was typical for her when she was uncertain of the established protocol, Winnie sought assistance from a colleague (EE):

12  W  because it’s a new system. wai [name] do you know if you book two
13  EE  person, do I have two name, two to five
14  W  you just double it yeah, put two names down. what happened to the other?
15  EE  and then what is it called? they um they if they don’t come for twenty minutes
16  W  you lose it. if you are twenty minutes late you lose it. so definitely be on time
17  DD  so how long would you like to book?
18  EE  can I book till two then?
19  W  so eleven to two then just put the name on top of the other
20  DD  yea, I’ve read that, clear
21  W  ah ya you haven’t read this because hehe seventeen condition
22  DD  yeah

Winnie asks her colleague, ‘they um they if they don’t come for twenty minutes?’. Winnie’s colleague responds, ‘you lose it. if you are twenty minutes late you lose it, so definitely be on time’. Winnie’s colleague also addresses the young women, and the institutional discourses appear to be united. The young woman, looking at the computer screen where Winnie is completing the booking, recognises that she is required to state that she has read the ‘terms and conditions’ associated with booking a study carrel. This amuses Winnie, and she comments ‘ah, ya, you haven’t read this, because hehe seventeen condition’. The list of terms and conditions presented to the young woman was comprehensive. We will not reproduce all of them here, but item number sixteen of the seventeen conditions was worded as follows:

Failure to comply with the terms & conditions or the use of a study carrel in any way that library staff believe is unreasonable and likely to interfere with the comfort, safety or fair use of the facilities will result in the termination of your booking. Termination of your booking may involve the removal of your personal belongings by our security team who will place them in ‘lost property’ which can be retrieved from the ground level foyer Customer Reception Desk. Repeated failure to comply with Terms & Conditions or to act unreasonably will result in you losing the benefit of study carrel use

Winnie’s amusement was no doubt precipitated by the notion that the young woman had read such a comprehensive list of terms and conditions in a few seconds. The young woman, less amused than Winnie, insists that she has read them. At this point in the interaction the young women spell out their names for Winnie, who types them into the computer system. In what
follows there is further discussion of the terms and conditions, as another member of staff, a male colleague (FF) also joins the group:

24  DD  I don’t have the pass on me for the moment (xxxx)
25  W  so if you say ah you’ve lost it or before you come next time replace the card so
26  you must
27  DD  yea I’ve got the card
28  W  have the card yea ah
29  EE  and then we have to put a note on this name to say they’ve read this. so we
30  have to do it now
31  W  wai ah, are you serious, are you read the seven seventeen regulations hehehe
32  DD  yea I do read it I do read it all
33  EE  so then let’s add on this card then
34  W  just this card
35  EE  go into messages and add [to EE:] what’s the messages
36  what’s the exact message that it needs to be?
37  FF  oh yea it’s going to be I’ve read T and Cs (xxxx)
38  W  I’ve what?
39  EE  just put I’ve read T and Cs, just put T and Cs
40  W  read read T and
41  EE  T and C
42  W  where’s and? (3) and C oh terms and conditions
43  EE  for the study room [W typing:] C I double E I S C I double E I S and it’s just
44  for today’s date today twenty second. and that’s on your card and then you’ll
45  have to read the terms and conditions, OK?
46  W  and eh, what else?
47  EE  OK
48  W  that’s it?
49  EE  that’s it it’s done now. [to DD:] and when you bring your card
50  W  wait, wait, we booked for you two to five, two person, in a double room, a as I say
51  if you don’t come in twenty minutes
52  EE  then the room is gone
53  W  then it’s gone because lots of people are waiting, OK? all right OK [laughs:] [to
54  EE:] would you remember this? I can’t I I think
55  EE  and you can read this on your card
56  DD  yeah (xxxx)
57  W  also when you in between if you go out to buy something or go for lunch or
58  something still it will be twenty minutes
59  EE  oh yea we still don’t recommend that we don’t leave your stuff there
60  W  and um
61  EE  you can lock it we’ll give you one of these and you can lock it when you go out
62  we still recommend you don’t leave anything valuable there
63  EE  OK all right
64  W  OK yea OK
65  EE  (xxxx)
66  W  yea, you learn from the actual booking, isn’t it? yea
The young woman tells Winnie that she does not have her library membership card with her at the moment. Winnie misunderstands at first, and informs the woman what she must do if she has lost the card. The mistake is rectified, and at line 29 Winnie’s colleague informs her that she should ‘put a note on this name to say they’ve read this’. Perhaps noting a hesitation on Winnie’s part (we saw earlier Winnie’s scepticism about the possibility of the woman having read the set of Terms and Conditions), she adds ‘so we have to do it now’. Winnie is still amused by this notion, and says, in a laughing voice, ‘wai, ah, are you serious, are you read the seven, seventeen, regulations, hehehe’. Neither the young woman nor Winnie’s colleague express a view about the practicality of reading the terms and conditions, the former saying ‘yea, I do read it. I do read it all’, and the latter ‘so then, let’s add on this card then’. Both seek to move the interaction forward pragmatically, in spite of Winnie’s amusement.

Winnie’s colleagues (EE and FF) instruct her in how to notify the computer system that the young woman has read the terms and conditions. The male colleague says ‘it’s going to be I’ve read T and Cs’. Winnie does not understand, so he reiterates the instruction twice. It is only at line 42, perhaps prompted by the computer system, that Winnie understands what the phrase ‘T and Cs’ represents. Winnie’s female colleague speaks to the library user, saying ‘and that’s on your card, and then you’ll have to read the terms and conditions, OK?’ She has allowed some flexibility in relation to the regulatory discourse, ticking the box which says the young woman has read the terms and conditions, and then instructing her to do so. Winnie’s colleague says ‘and you can read this on your card’, once again asking the client to agree to read the terms and conditions. The young woman, by now no doubt willing to agree to anything, says ‘yea’. Still unwilling to buy into the façade that the terms and conditions are read by every library user who books a study carrel, Winnie asks her female colleague, in a laughing voice, ‘would you remember this? I can’t I I think’. Her colleague, perhaps not wanting to confront the question of the plausibility of the regulatory discourse, ignores Winnie’s question and continues to speak to the young woman, saying ‘and you can read this on your card’. After Winnie has on two more occasions insisted on the twenty-minute regulation, her female colleague reiterates that ‘you just add that they’ve read the terms and conditions. And put a note on the card to say that they’ve read the messages’.

In this brief and almost unnoticeable interaction about booking a study carrel in the Library of Birmingham we can bring into view the dynamic tension between the centripetal forces of regulatory, unifying, centralizing, institutional forces, and the contrasting centrifugal forces which pay attention to the everyday needs of library users and library staff. Winnie and her female colleague are committed to the regulatory discourse of the institution. They recite the ‘twenty minute rule’ repeatedly, and insist on regulations related to eating and drinking in the computer rooms. However, the requirement that the library user should evidentially have read the complex and elaborate terms and conditions, set out as seventeen paragraphs, becomes a fault line in the interaction. Of course, in the age of digital technology, it is almost impossible to buy a theatre ticket online, book a seat on a train, or submit a paper to an academic journal, without ticking a box to agree that we have read a very long set of terms and conditions, usually in small print and in legalistic language. We have become used to stating that we have read the Terms & Conditions, and in truth most of us have not. The everyday discourse of the Library of
Birmingham is not very different. The regulatory discourse constituted in the Terms & Conditions circulates through the space of action, but can be more-or-less ignored, as long as all collude in doing so. On this occasion, however, whether out of amusement or bemusement, Winnie asks the difficult question: ‘are you serious - you read the seven seventeen regulations?’. From here forward there is a delicate negotiation to be had. Winnie’s colleague suggests that on the computer system she should ‘just put I’ve read T and Cs’.

However, perhaps feeling a little uneasy about this, the colleague tells the library user, ‘you’ll have to read the terms and conditions, OK?’. Winnie, however, asks her work mate, ‘would you remember this? I can’t I I think’. The question sits at the very heart of the dynamic tension between centripetal, institutional discourse which insists on regulation, and centrifugal forces which open out away from a centralised system of regulation. Both sets of discourses are in play, and they are held in dynamic tension in the interaction related to the booking of a study carrel. The discourses in place, straightforward at first, are found to be complex indeed. Winnie’s apparently innocent, perhaps playful, common-sense approach exposes the regulatory discourse as double-voiced. The voice of regulation co-exists with the voice which regularly, in effect, waives the regulation. This arrangement is unproblematic in the library, as in so many other domains, until another voice insists on speaking the truth. Only then is remedial action required.

The dynamic tension between regulatory forces which insisted on the institutional discourse, and forces which allowed a more permissive approach to regulation were also frequently visible in relation to the return of books and other resources to the library. In the exchange that follows a young woman with a pronounced non-English accent (GG) arrives at Winnie’s work station, and wants to return two resources. Winnie introduces an access ritual:

1 W hello are you OK?
2 GG yea, I want to return books. Can I do it here?
3 W yea, yea, sure.
4 GG I have a card and I take it out
5 W um um (5) are you taking out or return?
6 HH [strongly accented:] I want to return
7 W ah return, I thought you want to take it out. no problem, yes, my pleasure
8 HH this, um
9 W let me look first, let let me do it on the computer, I will just return it anyway
10 HH yes of course
11 W um, two items or one?
12 HH two items please
13 W that one was for CDs, that one
14 HH and that one there was no CDs
15 W ah no CDs anyway
16 HH yes
17 W apparently, this one, somebody you know
18 HH it wasn’t me hehe
19 W hehe, no no no no, because what happens is easily get lost isn’t it? and also you
20 W know not you hehe keep it. well it do happen anyway, yea (5) sorry keep
21 W you, yea [W typing]
In this interaction remedial work is required when Winnie implicitly refers to the possibility that the library user has failed to return the CDs that are associated with one of the books she wants to return. The “virtual offence” (Goffman 1971: 109) may or may not have occurred – that is, the woman may or may not have retained the CDs, and if so may or may not have done so on purpose – but either way it appears that remedial work is needed to put the interaction on an even keel. Initially Winnie is confused by the young woman, who says ‘I want to return books’ (line 2) and ‘I have a card and I take it out’ (4). However, Winnie asks a clarification question (5) and in receipt of the reply offers a small ceremonial, seeming to lay the blame on herself for the misunderstanding (‘I thought you want to take it out’), and offering interpersonal ritual discourse (‘no problem. yes, my pleasure’) to oil the wheels of the exchange. These seven lines might be viewed as a microcosm of what is to follow: apparent misunderstanding is resolved through remedial interaction ritual.

At line 9 Winnie tells the young woman that she is looking on the computer, and that she ‘will just return it anyway’. At line 13, however, a further trip wire presents itself: Winnie points out to the customer that one of the books should be accompanied by CDs. The young woman echoes Winnie almost precisely in her denial that she has done wrong: ‘that one there was no CDs’. Winnie in her turn echoes the young woman, ‘no CDs anyway’, offering what appears to be a neutral position. However, at line 17 Winnie raises the possibility that ‘somebody’ may have retained or stolen the CDs: ‘apparently, this one, somebody, you know’. The young woman offers an immediate rejoinder (Goffman 1971), denying that she is responsible, ‘it wasn’t me’. Goffman points out (1971) that when a virtual offender performs remedial work in reference to a virtual offence, the virtually offended replies, and this reply is directed to the offence and the remedial work done in connection with it. That is, each party has a chance at ritual work, and an
exchange results. Now the young woman laughs to mitigate the tension involved in the apparent accusation and denial. Winnie’s reply (19-21) includes a number of remedial moves in connection with the woman’s virtual offence (Goffman 1971: 120). First she joins in with the young woman’s remediating laughter, and in doing so says ‘no no no no’, emphatically indicating that the woman is not guilty of the offence. However, she immediately offers to the young woman an explanation of the crime: ‘because what happens is, easily get lost, isn’t it?’.

This apparent explanation is double-voiced: on the one hand it offers the young woman a way out, arguing that CDs are easily lost, and it isn’t anyway such a heinous crime. On the other hand, she offers the young woman a means of admitting her guilt. Goffman (1971: 119) points out that remedial dialogue of this sort has interesting properties, as

Stands are being taken, moves are being made, displays are being provided, alignments are being established. Where utterances are involved, they are ‘performative’

Winnie walks a fine line, apparently able to perform both institutional discourse and permissive discourse. She takes a stand on the regulations, but she acknowledges the innocence of the accused. She makes a further move to remedy the apparent accusation, saying ‘And also, you know, not you, hehe, keep it’. We might interpret ‘not you keep it’ as ‘it is not as if you have kept [the CD]’. Again this is double-voiced, allowing for the possibility that the woman has indeed kept the CD for herself, while explicitly acknowledging that this is not the case. Winnie offers a further remedial move, ‘well it do happen anyway, yea’, a version of the standard mitigation, ‘these things happen’. Winnie types at the computer keyboard, and apologises for taking the young woman’s time. The young woman says ‘it’s OK’.

All seems to be well as Winnie moves to a different subject position, asking the library user, ‘do you find it useful?’. The woman is caught off guard, so Winnie repeats the question. This move from Winnie seems to imply that the troublesome matter of the CDs is forgotten, as she engages in phatic communication, keeping the interaction going as she finishes her check on the computer. The young woman responds by saying that she would like to borrow further resources. Now Winnie finds the original book on the computer system, reads the name of the book, and also reads ‘particularly use it with CDs’. The CDs rear their heads again, potentially destabilising the exchange. The young woman is now for the first time ready with an explanation. Whereas previously she had merely argued ‘it wasn’t me’, now she says ‘I actually don’t use it with CDs. I prefer to read’. She adds ‘slow’, and Winnie repeats ‘slow, sure’. Winnie attends to the computer again, and notices that ‘there’s another message saying that there are three CDs’. This might mean that the apparent offence is greater than first imagined. However, without waiting for the young woman to reply, Winnie offers the remedial ‘but never mind’. She clearly decides not to pursue the matter, and adds ‘That’s fine, yea. That’s fine. Thank you.’

Goffman (1971: 120) notes that in many cases the termination of a dialogue will mark “a state of moral pacification of the parties involved, allowing the troublesome matter at hand to be dropped”. This appears to be what happens here, as the young woman thanks Winnie, Winnie thanks the young woman, the young woman says ‘take care’, and Winnie reciprocates. The troublesome matter appears to have been left behind. In this exchange, and in others we saw, Winnie walks a tightrope between institutional discourse and convivial interaction with the users of the library. She is both invested in, and (at times) permissive with, the regulatory discourse of the institution. Not the least of the semiotic means by which she achieves this is through remedial interaction.
In another example of Winnie’s approach to regulatory discourse in the library, she engaged in the following exchange with a female library user (JJ) who was also returning a book:

1. W oh, no no, yea, it’s OK. let me see if somebody, no I can do it for you here. oh
2. that’s a bi this is my handwriting at the top some time ago
3. JJ is it? hehehe
4. W hehehe
5. JJ it could be from the old library
6. W yea, the old library. ah issued within I think what happened is never
7. mind [whispering:] I will let you renew it
8. JJ are you sure as I don’t mind if I have to
9. W because the thing is nobody reserve it and um in theory
10. JJ OK that’s right
11. W in in theory after renew three times it needs to stay in the library for twenty four
12. hours that’s all [whispering:] but it’s OK I will let you have it
13. JJ all right but I haven’t renewed it before I just picked it up and I came back three
14. weeks ago
15. W never mind now you have three books now
16. JJ that’s fine that’s all right thank you thank you very much
17. W ah yea ah eh yea yea.

It seems Winnie assumes that the customer has reserved the book three times already, and this should trigger a regulation which requires the book to be returned. She is willing to issue the book to the woman again, and in so doing (as she thinks) to transgress the regulations. In order to do so she assumes a theatrical whisper (line 7), in Goffman’s (1971: 120) terms making a display of aligning with the customer by performing her permissive approach to the transgression. Winnie repeats the performative whisper at line 12, before she learns that in fact the customer has not previously renewed the book. At times Winnie was at pains to ensure that library users knew that she was doing them a favour, and treating them to what Goffman (1969) called ‘free goods’.

Throughout these interactions Winnie moves in a liminal space between regulation and permissive practice. In order to do so she deploys discourse which is double-voiced, and dialogic, as voices of interdiction and liberalism subsist alongside each other.

Fines

A further dimension of the regulatory discourse of the library was the traditional system of charging fines for overdue loans. In most cases the fines were paid by the library users with courtesy and good grace. However, in this first example, from Rachel’s field notes, a man comes to the counter aware that he would have a relatively large fine to pay:

A tall man, well-built, came to Winnie and asked:
“Can I pay a fine here or shall I go somewhere else?’
“Oh here, here, you can pay here. A big fine? Overdue books?’
“Fifteen pounds and I want the change.” The man placed two ten pound notes on the desk.
“Oh, you want to pay cash.”
“Can I have a receipt, please?”
“Of course. I will write it down for you as this computer is not connected to the receipt machine.” Winnie pointed at a small device sitting next to another computer next to hers and started to write something on a piece of paper.
“Here’s your receipt and I will give you the change before you go I will give you the receipt please. Thank you, thank you.” Winnie opened the till and took out some coins to give to the man.

The library user is direct and assertive in his approach. Initially he asks whether he should go somewhere else to pay his fine. He states the value of the fine, standing on its head the usual structure of a service encounter, in which the norm is for the server to specify the price or cost of goods. Furthermore, the man says ‘I want the change’, in what is almost certainly a redundant and therefore over-assertive demand. He goes on to ask for a receipt. In this brief interaction it appears that the library user, perhaps put out at having to pay a large fine, is determined to be seen to be controlling the exchange, making demands of his own. He will pay his fine, but on his own terms. In double-voiced discourse he on the one hand explicitly insists on serving his punishment, and on the other hand makes it clear that he is not in the wrong, and is not happy to be subject to sanction.

Another example is rather different, as a young Chinese woman arrives at Winnie’s information counter and jokes with her:

A young woman of Chinese appearance comes to the desk and Winnie speaks to her. They share a joke together. A young man of Chinese appearance joins her. Winnie looks at the computer and continues to speak to the young woman. She says ‘I will check for you’. It sounds as though the young woman has had three Chinese books out since 2014. She giggles with embarrassment. She pays her fines, and checks out more items. This is all done with good humour.

The young woman articulates her embarrassment, but resolves her fines, and the exchange proceeds with conviviality.

Charging fines for overdue books appeared to be a system of regulation which was acceptable for library users. In the following example, which was audio-recorded, the male library user (KK) is only too willing to pay his fines:

1   KK    hi
2   W     hello hi hi
3   KK    can I eh I just ask you I just don’t want my books to be overdue I have got two
books I haven’t got them with me today can I just
may I have have a look at it
you want my card
yea yea
I don’t like to
to be charged with overdue fine, oh no
it should be OK it should be OK til the end of the month but I just wanted to
check
how how many times have you renew your books?
how many times?
you can renew your books up to three times
OK yea right
so let’s see the date if eh if nobody waiting for that you can eh
you can renew it
yea yea
hold on a second darling
yea yea
thank you I’m sure they are two at the moment
you have two books two items yea
yea yea that’s it
one is return eleventh of May the other (xxx)
yea yea right
is eh one day late
so do I need to pay on it yea?
fifteen pence
OK can I give you twenty pence
and um do you want to renew it for you?
if you will if you will yea please and um then um I’ve got another four weeks
or something like that
yea absolutely let me renew it first yea
thank you very much
no problem urrr now the two books extend to second of June yea
yea yea the second of June the second of June
and um the two books luckily no one’s waiting for them
can you just write down for me so I know it’s the second of June
yea yea
they are eh in my eh diary so I won’t forget them thank you darling
items return to second of June
yea, yea
and you got big fine, fifteen pence
yea yea, big fines
happy to pay hehehe
yea yea I will pay you up front here you go never to be overdue I know I just
secretly thought maybe there’s one book that is overdue maybe only by a couple
of days or so
um um OK thank you
In this interaction the library user seems to be anxious that he should have no fines outstanding on borrowed items. The exchange begins with an access ritual, and the library user deploys a ceremonial request to establish a state of talk: ‘can I eh, I just ask you’. The question is effectively redundant in a functional sense, as Winnie is by definition there to answer library users’ questions, but as a ceremonial ritual it calls her into talk (Goffman 1983). Winnie is at her “service post”, and her responsiveness to members of the public comes from “an institutionalized service arrangement and the probable transactions that will be engineered in its terms” (Goffman 1997: 178). Goffman points out that in some communities to preface a question in such conditions by establishing a state of talk may elicit a sarcastic rejoinder, so inappropriate would it be. Not here though. The introductory request may not be required, but nor is it inappropriate. Indeed, as we will see, Winnie particularly valued politeness in service interactions. The library user is firm in his stated wish not to have his library books overdue (line 3). ‘It should be OK’, he says, partly to reassure himself, partly to help Winnie, and adds, ‘I just wanted to check’. However, it turns out that one of the man’s books is overdue for return by one day, so he has a fine of fifteen pence to pay. This appears to be dealt with seriously and with business-like solemnity (lines 26-32), as the customer asks ‘can I give you twenty pence’. In play here are the “moral norms of considerateness…delicacy, courtesy, modesty, politeness” (Goffman 1997: 171), the sort of attributes that bind individuals in interaction. The library user’s fastidious concern to avoid further fines is evidenced as he asks Winnie for a note of his next due date for return: ‘write down for me so I know it’s the second of June’. At line 43 Winnie makes light of the man’s fine, saying ‘and you got big fine, fifteen pence’. The library user picks up her joke, at which point Winnie ventriloquates the voice of the man, ‘happy to pay’, and laughs. Winnie is perhaps slightly, and good-naturedly, parodying the man’s seriousness about such a small fine. In response he makes a point of ensuring that he has paid his fine, and reaffirms his desire, or principle, ‘never to be overdue’. In this instance the regulatory discourse appears to come from the library user more than from the Customer Experience Assistant. She is more willing to joke about the fine than he is. For his part, he insists that he must never again transgress the regulations. Regulatory discourse was not all one-way traffic. In this instance, and in a number of others, library users articulated their own self-regulation.

Although some customers gave accounts to explain why charges had accrued, we did not hear arguments that the system of charging fines was in itself unjust. In the following example a young woman establishes a ‘state of talk’ (Goffman 1969) with Winnie through a cheery greeting, and the young woman pays her fines, apparently without complaint, and even thanks the library staff as she goes on her way:

A young woman arrives at the desk, saying ‘hello, how you doing?’ She explains that she has lost her library card. Winnie deals with her request for a new one. Winnie asks when the card was lost. The young woman provides the necessary identification. There also appears to be a fine of twelve pounds ninety-nine for overdue books. Winnie asks her colleague for advice about the charges, and they both get involved in helping the young woman, who leans her elbows on the counter. Winnie and her colleague laugh together as they work. The young woman leaves, taking her drink in a plastic cup, a green rucksack, and a paper shopping bag. ‘Thank you’, she says.
The reported laughter of the library staff during this interaction seems to indicate that there is little tension involved in collecting quite a substantial fine.

However, it was not inevitable that all fines were levied and collected. In this example a young girl has lost her library books and is liable for both overdue charges and the replacement cost of the books. Winnie and her colleague LL deal with the client:

“Your card definitely lost?” with LL’s help the young girl’s query was finally solved. She will have to pay for those books she thought she’d returned as they haven’t been checked in the system. But to make things more bearable for her LL wrote off the overdue charges of those books so the young girl only needed to pay for the original price of those books. “Unfortunately it’s one pound charge to replace your lost card.” Winnie helped the girl to get her new card and directed her to the section where she can pay for the lost books. The woman left thanking Winnie and LL.

The library staff were prepared to exercise discretion to write off charges for overdue loans. However, the girl was required to pay one pound for the replacement of her lost library card. It seemed to be common for library users to lose their card, and to have to pay one pound to replace it. We saw many instances of this, and Winnie was able to meet such requests simply and straightforwardly, as the loss of a card was almost a daily occurrence.

In a final example relating to library fines, a man (MM) came to Winnie’s counter to report that he had lost a book. Winnie told the man that she would find out how much he owed to the library for the lost book, and he left the counter. As we join the interaction Winnie locates the customer and informs him how much he owes. Also present is a male colleague (C).

1 W he’s here. Mr [name] we we checked the book how much it will twenty eight pound
2 MM uh twenty eight pounds?
3 W yea twenty eight pounds. it’s a thick book, isn’t it
4 MM OK. it’s not, not a big book. give me until July I will um I will see what I can do
5 MM OK. it’s not, not a big book. give me until July I will um I will see what I can do
6 W yea yea yea yea I think [footsteps as man leaves the counter]
7 C [to colleague:] wai, is it hardback or paperback?
8 W it’s paperback
9 MM [lowered voice:] he he said oh twenty pounds give lea, lea he said let see till
10 C because the book haven’t returned um it’s not overdue it’s the second of July
11 W it’s seventh of July he said let’s see what I can do
12 C um
13 W it’s seventh of July he said let’s see what I can do
14 C yea strange is that
15 W ummm I am a little bit suspicious because
16 C I mean, the hardback’s twenty nine but the paper back is twenty eight. because it’s twenty five years old so possibly that’s [xxxx] why he said that
When the man returns to the counter to have some items issued for loan, Winnie reminds him of his obligation:

18  W  so he’s coming back again, this guy
19  C  [to Winnie:] it’s your customer
20  W  no no he’s not my customer [to customer:] so are you OK, Mr [name]? en yea so
21  you took these two yea?
22  MM  yea
23  W  tenth of July fifteen um (10) this is these two books tenth of July, OK? (10)
24  um OK. try try your best to it’s valuable
25  MM  yea yea I know

Whereas in an earlier example Winnie implied to a customer that she may be guilty of the ‘virtual offence’ of losing or stealing CDs, on this occasion Winnie articulates her accusation, but only to her colleague rather than to the virtual offender. Winnie is suspicious that the customer has kept the book rather than lost it. She makes a ‘request’ (Goffman 1971: 114) to the customer to accept that the fine is reasonable, saying ‘it’s a thick book, isn’t it?’. This appears to be a strategy to remediate the potential offence caused by the relatively high charge for the book. However, the library user is not willing to concede the point, saying ‘it’s not, not a big book’. In an interdiscursive move the customer immediately attempts to haggle not so much over the cost as requesting more time to pay, and deploying the discourse of negotiation, ‘give me until July, I will um, I will see what I can do’. The man is prepared to pay for the book, but on his own terms. When the man leaves the counter Winnie lowers her voice and (meta)comments to her colleague about his response, ‘he said let’s see what I can do’. Winnie’s repetition of the customer’s response appears to be evaluative, particularly as she follows it up with ‘I am a little bit suspicious’. Her colleague agrees that it is ‘strange’ that the man negotiates a new date for payment. Evaluative metacommentary on library users was a common feature of discourse between colleagues. When Winnie sees the customer returning to the counter her colleague teasingly says ‘it’s your customer’. When she speaks to the customer she not only issues his additional books, but also reminds him to pay for the lost book: ‘try, try your best to, it’s valuable’. Although she was at times willing to take a relatively permissive line in relation to the regulatory discourses of the institution, on the whole Winnie invoked and insisted on the regulations. That is, she was able to manage the dynamic tension between the centripetal forces of regulation and the centrifugal forces of permissive understanding.

Centripetal forces co-existed with centrifugal forces in the complex aggregate of discourses (Scollon and Scollon 2004) circulating in and through the Library of Birmingham. For Winnie this was normally a happy co-existence, as she managed potential tensions and instabilities through small ceremonies and rituals in interaction. The dynamic tension between institutional regulation and a permissive, humanitarian engagement with members of the public in this civic space was constantly in evidence. On the whole the dynamic tension was not problematic for Winnie as Customer Experience Assistant, nor for the library users. The system of regulation was generally endorsed by members of the library as much as it was invoked by library staff. But
things were not quite this straightforward, and discourse of regulation was at times overruled by
common sense, as common ground was arrived at and shared. Exchanges with reference to
regulatory discourse provided a window into the push-and-pull of the everyday management of
social relations in a public space.
8. The Parochial Realm

As we have seen, interactions between people in the Library of Birmingham were not confined to those between library users and library staff. Many of the exchanges we recorded were interactions between colleagues, in the parochial realm. Relationships between staff on the whole seemed to be convivial and friendly. We observed this in both ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ interactions. Here we are taking ‘front stage’ to refer to public-facing spaces of the library, and ‘back stage’ to be those spaces to which the public did not have access. However, there were also many occasions when the staff spoke to each other in the ‘parochial realm’ (Lofland 1998) of encounters between staff in public spaces where there were no members of the public in earshot.

Perhaps the most highly visible site at which staff encountered the public was the ground floor Reception desk. In the typical example here a member of staff greets NN, the Customer Experience Assistant on the information counter:

A staff member walking past the reception counter greeted NN and tilted his head, speaking without stopping:
“You all right, NN? You got your glasses on today?”
NN looked at him and smiled “I can do whatever I like and don’t question me about that. I can’t see you if without me glasses. Hahaha.” The man walked away, giving NN a wave.

The banter is reminiscent of the interactions we frequently saw in Birmingham Bull Ring indoor market as market traders walked past each others’ stalls and offered a joking comment, question, or greeting (Blackledge, Creese, and Hu 2015). The function of this in the market, as in the library, was good humour and conviviality rather than information.

Another sense in which convivial banter was similar to the market was that it was sometimes linked to staff going on tea breaks, as in the following example:

“I am going for tea now”, Winnie said to a female staff who had just arrived.
“Oh, go on then, I need the chair!” The woman gave Winnie a shove on her arms.
“Rachel is going to stay here as you are a very naughty person!” Winnie winked at me and quickly disappeared into the back door leading to the office.

The purpose of the interaction is not to tell Winnie that she has outstayed her welcome in her occupation of the chair, but it is a means of maintaining a light-hearted and cheerful working environment. The departure from the floor for a tea break became a regular occasion for peer teasing and humour, to the extent that it was almost an unofficial feature of Winnie’s ‘script’:
Winnie is helping a young man who wears a red tracksuit top, and has sunglasses on top of his head. The bearded man leaves the desk for his break, with a high-spirited ‘yea’!. Winnie calls after him: ‘don’t be late, three thirty’, pointing after him.

In another ‘tea break’ example Winnie teased her colleague BA, who was about to leave the desk with the permission of her manager, PP:

“So Winnie is here and who else. OK, you can go”, PP talked in a managerial tone and checked the staff rota laid out on the counter.
“For how long, one minute? OK come back in one minute!” Winnie looked at her wrist watch and said to BA, pulling a straight face.
“I will take thirty minutes then, instead of twenty minutes.” BA gave a quick smack at Winnie’s arm and rushed away.
“Oi, don’t forget to get one piece of heart for me please!” Winnie persisted in winding up BA.

The women tease each other in a mocking but friendly way. BA offers a metacomment on Winnie’s lively sense of humour.

This joking metacommentary on Winnie’s personality was a regular occurrence. Here her colleague BA makes a comment, and Rachel Hu’s field notes endorse her view:

We started chatting like old friends and B smiled at me “Winnie’s funny. She makes you laugh!” She looked into my eyes and I nodded my head to show my approval. We smiled at each other and I think I know what B was talking about. Although Winnie does behave a bit oddly or abruptly sometimes she’s a nice person. She can be a lovely colleague and she knows how to crack a joke to lighten the air.

Another example contributes to the sense that Winnie’s sense of fun was appreciated by her colleagues:

With less than fifteen minutes to go before the library closed the counter staff got together and chatted among themselves. Winnie was joking with a male customer who’s just arrived to get some information on the REP theatre and What’s On magazine. “So we can sing for you or put on a show if it makes you happy!” All the staff laughed together with the man. “Winnie’s so funny!” A young girl giggled at Winnie’s joke. “Yeah, I don’t like to look serious!” Winnie was delighted at the comment. “Oh no, we will all be worried if you are serious one day, Winnie.” The girl winked at me. I said good bye to them and joined the crowds streaming through the revolving door to get out.

Winnie did not appear to mind the comments from her peers, but rather welcomed them. She appeared to see her herself as an outgoing, entertaining colleague.
In the back-stage environment colleagues frequently made remarks in which they acknowledged differences between them, and in doing so deployed this acknowledgement of difference as a resource. Here Winnie and Rachel chat to Winnie’s (Indian-heritage) colleague, A, in an interaction which was audio-recorded:

1. A  are you from Malaysia?
2. RH  eh China
3. A  China
4. W  she look like a Malaysia
5. A  she look like Malaysia. you look like from China, Hong Kong
6. W  ah?
7. A  Hong Kong
8. W  ah funny as that in Hong Kong when I first come here ever everybody thought I
9.  was Filipina I I don’t know why, everybody said are you from Philippines I
10.  said no, maybe because I am darker?
11. A  you are not darker
12. W  but now I think it’s it’s OK. because in Hong Kong it’s ever so hot so when I
13.  came here an and everybody said are you Indonesian, Malaysian nobody said I
14.  am Chinese, I just why I am Chinese. they said are you Filipina? I said why I
15.  don’t know I just eh um
16. A  you just tell me where I came from?
17. W  ah?
18. A  you tell me where I come from?
19. W  India
20. A  ahh it is correct
21. W  the thing is you have distinctive character you always wear scarf
22. A  yea
23. W  if you put on a scarf people will think you are Malaysian, Indonesian yea if I put a
24.  scarf people immediately think I am Vietnamese
25. A  yea, yea
26. RH  but for me you don’t look typically Indian, you are more like Malaysian
27. A  oh yea something like that
28. W  yea could be it could be
29. A  yea when someone look at me my face
30. W  the feature
31. A  um the feature yea they will think I came from Malaysia
32. W  um
33. A  because my grandma is from (xxx) all my grandma
34. W  ohh
35. RH  so your skin is not very dark, very light
36. A  like my grandma
37. W  but me and Rachel don’t have typical Chinese eyes though
38. A  um
39. W  you know the Chinese oval eyes
40. A  no you don’t have those eyes that eyes are small um
Individuals communicate across difference by negotiating or seeking out common ground and then creating new shared terrain (Rymes 2014). People form alignments when they find some kind of common ground. Rymes points out that as our repertoire gradually shifts to overlap with that of others (including common ways of greeting, joking, gesturing or dressing, for example) we develop a sense of shared belonging. Through metacommentary participants give a local order and relevance to the proliferation of communicative means. This means that we comment not only on the way people sound, but also on the way they behave, and the way they look. In the exchange here A asks Rachel ‘are you from Malaysia?’, and in so doing indexes a difference between the two women. Winnie and her colleague agree that Rachel ‘look like a Malaysia’, invoking a stereotype as a resource about which to agree. A continues to tell Winnie that she looks ‘like from China, Hong Kong’. It is probable that A, who had worked with Winnie for some years, knew that Winnie was from Hong Kong, and may have been making this metacomment for Rachel’s benefit.

As the conversation progresses the women comment on differences in countries of origin, relative shades of skin colour, appearance through clothing and accessories, and facial features (in particular, shape of eyes). In addition Winnie introduces narratives which relate generalized others’ metacommentary on her appearance when she first arrived in the UK. In these examples the protagonists comment on inheritance as difference: skin colour, eye-shape, country of origin, all are taken to be inherited. From lines 8 to 15 Winnie tells a story that when she arrived in the UK ‘everybody’ (three times) thought she was from The Philippines, Indonesia, or Malaysia, and ‘nobody’ said she was Chinese. In relating her narrative Winnie ventriloquates the generalized other, giving ‘everybody’ a voice reported as direct speech: ‘are you from Philippines?’, ‘are you Indonesian, Malaysian?’, ‘are you Filipina?’. She also reports the voice of her own narrated character from twenty-five years ago: ‘why, I am Chinese’, ‘why, I don’t know’. She finds a rationale for everybody’s error, although A does not agree that the misunderstanding occurred because Winnie was ‘darker’. A asks Winnie whether she knows where she ‘came from’, but the theme does not generate much discussion. Instead Winnie makes a metacomment on A’s dress sense, again linking the remark to what appear to be national stereotypes: ‘if you put on a scarf people will think you are Malaysian, Indonesian’. On the other hand Winnie says that if she puts on a scarf people ‘think I am Vietnamese’. Again difference unites as much as divides in the voice of Winnie: donning a scarf will not bring the women together in terms of stereotypes of national / ethnic origin – the difference between them will merely shift from an India / Hong Kong fracture to a Malaysia-Indonesia / Vietnam separation. However, the game is not all about difference. Rather, it is also about sameness: they will both (putatively) don the scarf, and will both be mistaken for what they are not. This unites them as much as divides them.

In line 5 A had agreed that Rachel looks like a Malaysian. Now Rachel turns this back to A, echoing her almost exactly, saying she doesn’t look ‘typically Indian’, but ‘more like Malaysian’. A accommodates Rachel, agreeing and linking her appearance to her ‘grandma’. 
Rachel comments on A’s skin colour, and A confirms ‘like my grandma’. Now Winnie makes a further metacomment on her own and Rachel’s appearance, saying ‘but me and Rachel don’t have typical Chinese eyes’ (37). As we saw earlier, stereotypes are observable social regularities of metapragmatic typification, typical features of a kind, with which speakers position themselves and others in socially meaningful ways (Reyes 2009: 53). Here ‘typically Indian’, ‘typical Chinese eyes’ (and less explicit typifications) become resources with which to talk about difference in a shared space. Here the process of metacommentary turns inheritance into heritage. If we give local order to difference through our commentary on that difference, and if turning inheritance into heritage involves a process of appropriation and delineation, as only certain resources from the past are claimed, taken up, safeguarded, preserved, and transmitted (Deumert forthcoming), then the three women’s stance as they comment on differences between them constitute a heritage of their choosing. Moreover, it is a heritage which may be divided by difference, but is also a heritage united by difference.

Wessendorf (2010) points out that difference is something that people live with, and “diversity can have a unifying effect” (2010: 60) when many people have come from elsewhere. This does not indicate an indifference to difference, rather difference is acknowledged and people are aware of the manifold cultural differences around them, but they do not see them as unusual. Wessendorf (2010) suggests that in the parochial realm differences of origin, language, religion, and so on are rarely talked about, although they are acknowledged. We previously saw this group of three women speaking about marriage practices in different countries. Here they unite around a discussion of other differences. Rymes (2014: 11) notes that metacommentary signals an understanding of what a sign means without arbitrarily systematizing communicative elements, but by pointing to that sign’s communicative value. Through their metacommentary on themselves (sometimes through historical voices) and each other the women choose their heritage. All of the connotations of all the indexical signs in play here may not be immediately available to us (and may not have been immediately available to the interactants at the time), but it is clear that metacommentary points to difference and sameness, as inheritance becomes heritage. Heritage here is suffused with complexity, as indexicals of origin weave through quotidian life. Rymes (2014: 14) reminds us that an individual’s ‘roots’ lie not only in some pre-ordained heritage language or culture, but also in the much more random life elements that an individual encounters and absorbs, and that “the meaning of those experiences is often made visible to self and others through metacommentary”. In this exchange precisely what unites the group is their metacommentary on difference. Their heritage is both this difference and this unity.

We recorded other instances of Winnie making reference to difference and sameness. In one example she introduced Rachel to a female colleague. The colleague joked ‘your daughter?’ . The age difference between the two women would allow this to be a feasible proposition. However, whether as a joke or as a genuine question it deploys a stereotype of ‘Chineseness’ as a resource. A genuine question would be based on a stereotype that proposes that all people of Chinese appearance are potentially related. If the question was double-voiced, and humorous banter, it is nevertheless based on a similar stereotype. Winnie’s response picked up the stereotype, and also made a joke about age, saying ‘my elder sister’. Winnie persisted with the joke, saying ‘I’m the youngest, she’s the oldest!’. Now double-voiced metacommentary on appearance includes a joke about the relative age of the two women.
In the following example, recorded in Rachel Hu’s field notes, a young member of staff asks whether she can sit with Winnie, Rachel, and others:

“Can I sit here?” a pretty girl in her early twenties sat down between me and SS without waiting for the answer. She has a very typical Chinese face and her slightly Cantonese accented but very fluent English showed that she must have grown up in the UK. She told me although her parents immigrated to the UK from Vietnam they were originally from South East China and her parents both speak Cantonese and Vietnamese.

“So Rachel, do Chinese people still greet each other by asking ‘have you eaten?’” the girl turned to me and asked.

“What? Why do Chinese greet each other by saying that?” a male colleague, SS, seemed shocked and couldn’t stop laughing.

“I don’t. I never. You know when I see my friends here I never ask them have you eaten. Never. But I guess I’m quite western.” Winnie shrugged a very Western shrug. I started to tell the girl what I know about traditional but apparently out-of-date greetings in China, especially among younger generations living in big cities. “OK, I see, you see, it’s so funny each time my mum says this to me, no matter if it was two o’clock in the afternoon or eleven o’clock in the evening, the first thing she always asked me was ‘你吃了吗？’, which means ‘have you eaten?’” The girl turned to SS again, explaining the meaning of the Chinese sentence she just said in Cantonese. Though she said she can’t speak Cantonese I can tell from her tone and pronunciation that her Cantonese is way better than mine. We laughed together. “So you see, I can speak very bad Cantonese, very bad French, German, and very bad English.” The girl giggled when I complimented her Cantonese sincerely.

Questions about, and discussion of, countries of origin, family history, languages spoken, and cultural practices were not uncommon in the lunch room. Here Rachel Hu distances herself from a practice (or, at least, a stereotype) associated with traditional China, while Winnie merely dismisses it with a shrug. Rachel deploys stereotypes as a resource in writing her field notes, referring to ’a very typical Chinese face’, and Winnie’s ‘very Western shrug’.

During the period of our observations a General Election was held in the UK, to elect a new government. This national event elicited a good deal of political discussion between colleagues in the library. In the following example Winnie is talking to a male colleague, UU, during the week of the election:

1  W  have you vote? do you vote?
2  UU  I will vote on urm Thursday
3  W  oh who you vote to? which party?
4  UU  I will vote Labour as it is hehe what about you?
5  W  I don’t talk to you any more [laughter] you vote Labour
6  UU  haha. are you Tory?
7  W  hehe. no no no no I have nobody but I don’t like Ed Miliband he’s not sharp
8  W  enough
he’s not sharp but the only problem is I like the party but I don’t, I I I agree that
Ed Miliband is not very sharp but
well all all the UK politics nobody good anyway, isn’t it
yeah yeah one thing really is the thing is I don’t like the idea of not voting
I have to vote
en en yeah you vote yeah yeah
and and it’s just about (2) you know
be you are part of it isn’t it
that’s right. the both parties are the both debate parties are pretty much it’s a big
decision
I vote UKIP
you vote UKIP?
yeah! to stop the immigrant. stop (xxx) maybe I have to go everybody have to go
but no no, I am just joking
I don’t like UKIP, they are just trying to cause cause like a theory is not there
the thing is funny is that UKIP is no good but it’s a good job to have UKIP there
you know why to ah constrain the two party otherwise they can say anything
because no opposition party you know
(xxxx)
yeah but UKIP may be too too racist you know yeah isn’t it

In this ordinary encounter between colleagues during a quiet moment at the information desk, there is social contact. The gathering of three people, Winnie, her colleague UU, and researcher Rachel, exemplifies a social order normative of their work situation in the library and their collegial relationship. Their co-presence behind the information desk means they are in a spatial environment which brings them close enough that they must experience others (Goffman, 1963: 17). This interaction is bounded in regard to place and time, structured by their social context, including the fixed equipment of the desk, as well as the timetabling of a staff rota which brings them randomly together, and a history of the public library predicated on civic service, equity and fairness in the public realm. The Library of Birmingham’s policy is to always put two information assistants on its desks so they will not be left unmanned. The library information desk therefore is a place for ‘social gatherings’ through copresence. ‘Copresence’ according to Goffman (1963: 22) “renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another”. In other words, dialogue between people is not easily ignored and social engagement is expected.

Ironically, the highly visible library information desk provides these three participants a private place for a non-work, non-routine exchange about politics, current at the time due to the run-up to the national election, but also relevant to UU and Winnie because of the drastic cuts being made at the library in the same period. The information desk is a physical place which provides social space for different kinds of relationships. Lofland (1998) studied cities and urban life, and categorised space in terms of the public realm, where the dominating relational form is that between strangers, the parochial realm, where the dominating relational form is communal, and the private realm, where the dominating relational form is between people who know each other.
well. Different norms and standards of interaction correspond to these different realms. In the example here the information desk allows colleagues to step outside the conventionalised ‘Customer Experience Assistant’ role to gossip, inform, debate, joke, disagree and agree. As Goffman points out, ‘Every social establishment, in fact, has some crevices that provide this kind of shelter’ (Goffman, 1963: 39) for ‘role-release’ or ‘breaking role’. Indeed, the information desk is a contested space in terms of its social function, on the one hand conducive to meetings and communication and on the other hand installing physical boundaries between staff and the public. The physical space of the information desk does not define the kinds of social relations and engagements that happen there but it does serve as an important context for a range of social relationships to deal with and comment on social difference. In particular, we look at several instances of interactions which happen at the information desk. We can classify these as engagements between strangers or acquaintances in the public realm, as staff deal publicly with clients’ enquiries but also as exchanges between colleagues in the parochial realm, as they talk about a range of topics.

Winnie and her colleague use the shelter of the information desk to talk about politics. In Goffman’s terms (1963:91) the two colleagues constitute a ‘fully-focused gathering’ being ‘officially’ present to one another in the situation. When other persons may be present but disengaged or excluded from the encounter Goffman describes this as a ‘partly-focused’ or ‘multifocused’ gathering. Our interest in this particular encounter is in how difference is managed in the parochial space between colleagues. We consider how these everyday encounters in the workplace provide opportunities to manage social difference (Gilroy 2006a: 40) not in ways which ‘banish it’ but which equip people to deal with difference convivially. Different spaces of the library are full of relationships playing out across the different realms, and draw productively on institutional and interpersonal dynamics for trying out difference.

The three participants, Winnie, her male colleague (UU), and Rachel, are ethnically different from one another. Winnie’s colleague is ‘Asian British’, Winnie is originally from Hong Kong, and married to a British national, while Rachel is also a settled immigrant from mainland China who moved to Britain when her husband was awarded a place on a doctoral programme. However, in this interaction none of them remarks directly on these ethnic differences. Ethnicity does not attract their metacommentary, whereas immigration does. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) set out its election platform as one committed to opposition to immigration. The discussion is therefore essentially (if implicitly) about immigration, and the national debate taking place about it at the time. Also at stake are long-held allegiances to political parties as well as indifference to the political landscape. The interaction is a good example of the social complexity of British life in Birmingham. None of the participants is from a “sealed community” representing the cultural habits of whole groups in fixed hierarchies and predictable “mechanical electoral mobilisations” (Gilroy 2006a: 40). We might view this as what Gilroy describes as “an example of exhilarating cultural interaction in our cities” (28), or as “unruly conviviality” (139). John Urry described such intense and dynamic conversational interactions as “rich social goods” (2003: 162). We view this conversation as exemplifying differences which “have to be negotiated in real time” (Gilroy 2006a: 39) and which illustrate dynamic commonalities and variations in social connectedness and separation (Arundale, 2010).
What might a linguistic analysis add to this discussion? We could focus on accent and varieties of English. Winnie’s colleague, UU, can be said to speak with a British Asian Birmingham accent and Winnie broadly with a Cantonese inflected English accent. Moreover, Winnie’s English is non-standard throughout. However, such linguistic variation is commonplace and ordinary in linguistically and socially diverse Birmingham and appears irrelevant to communication in this particular extract. From an emic perspective none of the participants appears interested in the standardness or not of Winnie’s English. The message is very much about content. There is little interest in the linguistic code. ‘Bad English’ doesn’t cause anyone difficulties, here at least. Nobody comments on features of Winnie’s linguistic repertoire, and certainly everyone seems to be clear about what she says. It is not her English which potentially diminishes solidarity between UU and herself, but differences in their political views. However, her English does signpost a history beyond the immediate speech event about which UU appears to make assumptions within the event. In line 21 when she says, ‘I vote UKIP’ and UU repeats incredulously, ‘you vote UKIP!’, we might assume that UU finds it hard to believe that Winnie’s history, and her ethnicity, would lead to a UKIP vote. UU and Winnie of course know one another as colleagues and have prior experience of interacting – an “established biography of prior dealings” (Goffman 1983). However, as the interaction indicates, any assumptions about the other must be balanced between what is known and what is not by the individuals within the relationship, especially, perhaps, in regard to a conversation about politics.

In line 1, after having introduced the topic of politics in a seemingly serious way, Winnie goes on in line 3 to ask a direct question about which party her colleague will vote for. The apparently direct and straightforward question may be double-voiced. Winnie is aware that many people are not willing to divulge their voting intentions, and her voice is suffused with a second, ironic voice which seeks to stir up interest and conversation. The direct question doesn’t seem to unsettle UU, as he answers in the simple present tense to say he is Labour. It is possible that he does this with confidence because he assumes Winnie will be a Labour voter too. However, in line 5 she changes the footing by seemingly joking. She declares ‘I don’t talk to you any more’, a double-voiced statement which is surrounded by laughter, but which nonetheless is not easy for UU to interpret. When UU assumes she must therefore be Tory (Conservative), she indicates that she has ‘nobody’ but she doesn’t like Ed Miliband (the leader of the Labour Party until after the General Election). From here the conversation moves into a range of views about leadership, voting behaviour, democracy and party politics until Winnie wrong-foots her colleague again in line 21. Winnie’s announcement that she is a UKIP voter really unsettles her colleague. He appears to be unable to interpret the key or tone of Winnie’s declaration. In line 23 this leads Winnie to explicitly pronounce it as a joke. But this declaration is attached to the statement, ‘I will have to go, everybody have to go’ which appears to reference extreme political right wing views, associated with UKIP, that immigrants will need to ‘go back to where they have come from’. UU’s next turn at talk shows an unwillingness to deal with any ambiguity here. In line 25 and 26 he provides a clear statement about his political views: ‘I don’t like UKIP’. Lines 27 -31 appear to show Winnie returning to a serious footing again as she expresses views about UKIP having a role in constraining the two major parties, before ending with the comment in line 31, ‘yeah, but UKIP may be too, too racist’.

Winnie’s ‘constraining’ comment in line 28 led researcher Rachel Hu in her field notes to comment, ‘Winnie was talking with excitement though some of the words didn’t sound like her
own, one of her feet was tapping on the floor without stopping.’ According to Rachel, Winnie appeared to be using the words of others here. As Bakhtin argues, utterances have always had a former life, and are imbued with the social histories of previous users. It is very likely that Winnie was trying out the voices of others in the relative safety of the parochial realm where difference can be dealt with convivially. The copresence and close proximity of others requires a social contact predicated on future collegial relations. In the parochial realm of these communal relations, in the superdiverse neighbourhoods which make up Birmingham, there are countless zones of encounter where difference can be voiced, played around with and managed.

In his work on ‘footing’ Goffman (1981) provides a useful frame, which he describes as possessing several interactional qualities. Following the five qualities Goffman describes (1981: 128) we can see that Winnie’s ‘projected self’ (Goffman, 1981: 128) becomes an ‘issue’ during the conversation. That is, her stance towards both the Tory party and UKIP surprises her colleague.UU expects her to have other views, and bases this on his previous experiences with Winnie, and what he can deduce about her biographical history as a migrant woman. In other words, she wrong-foots her colleague more than once. She holds this projected stance over the course of the conversation, cultivating the sense of surprise throughout, although the unsureness of the footing requires Winnie to add a pragmatic metacomment to indicate that she is ‘joking’. Winnie ‘code-switches’ using sound markers throughout in terms of rhythm, stress and tonal qualities. She pauses, interrupts, back-channels, repeats, and overlaps, which has the social effect of not only surprising her colleague, but of making all three participants laugh. It is perhaps these markers more than what she says which provides the most evidence of the speech event’s ‘key’ (Hymes, 1972). Goffman pointed out that talk is not nicely bounded, and that encounters are so “intertwined with other encounters so as to weaken the claim of any of them to autonomy” (1981: 131). In other words, as this conversation takes place, the country is less than one week away from the General Election. The print, visual and social media are awash with politics and the General Election in particular, all political parties are canvassing voters, and everywhere people are discussing politics. Winnie’s colleague appears to be the author of his words, and is committed to the sentiments he expresses. However, Winnie’s footing suggests she is not. Rather she appears to animate the voices of others, so that we hear directly from the right wing media (‘to stop the immigrant’. ‘Maybe I have to go, everyone have to go’), but also from the ‘reasoned’ media (‘to constrain the two party’) and the cynical and tired populous (‘UK politics’, ‘nobody good anyway’). In many of these utterances Winnie goes beyond animation of these ‘higher level’ voices, appearing to enjoy playing the principal actor who speaks the words as a true believer, committed to the words she says within the drama of the frame. In other words, she ‘embeds’ external discourses and voices in her interaction with her colleague, while simultaneously managing alignments with him (and he with her) in the real world, so they can continue to be colleagues. So for example, there are several accommodations made by them both in relation to the other’s discourse. UU takes up the word ‘sharp’ and agrees with Winnie about The Labour Party’s (soon-to-be-ex-) leader, Ed Miliband. Goffman (1981:155) pointed out that:

> often it seems that when we change voice – whether to speak for another aspect of ourselves or for someone else, or to lighten our discourse with a darted enactment of some alien interaction arrangement – we are not so much terminating the prior alignment
as holding it in abeyance with the understanding that it will also immediately be re-engaged.

For both interactants the words of others are embedded in their own, available for use in the negotiation of difference in real time.

We recorded another example of talk about national politics, this time as Winnie engaged in conversation with another male colleague, VV, on the day after the General Election, when the Labour Party had been defeated, and the leader, Ed Miliband, had resigned:

1 W yea cos Ed Miliband has been five, four five years, and once people has criticise,
2 not criticise, people are saying there is no charisma, he’s no plan, so bored
3 VV the thing with Ed Miliband is his speech
4 W um um he’s not strong enough
5 VV his hair cutting I know it’s but it’s all about his voice really you need to be a
6 presenter, you don’t want somebody who puts you off before he’s even spoken
7 yet you know what I mean that’s tha that’s the harsh reality of the world
8 W yea, the image that’s why why um I said his brother is good his brother David
9 Miliband
10 VV yea, he won’t come back
11 W too late au
12 VV Yvette Cooper will make a good leader, but who’s us to say we are not
13 W wha whatever happens it’s another four years
14 VV five
15 W five years it’s long years five years
16 VV five long years
17 W an and David Cameron said he won’t pay again after five years he’s he’s he’s
18 already officially said it
19 VV yes you will see Boris Johnson take over
20 W really? I don’t really like him he’s eh
21 VV he’s an eejit well sometimes my mates studied England said he’s like some comic
22 eejit it’s evil underneath
23 W hehe really
24 VV I don’t I don’t I don’t like
25 W be fair if between David Cameron and mai Johnson Boris Johnson I think I like
26 Cameron more between this two whatever he is, he’s slimy or what, he’s firm he
27 tell you what message was he play very well politics, yea I must say
28 VV um um Ed Miliband comes across not firm enough
29 W that’s it that’s the problem, image, be firm and cruel
30 VV what I want is a firm woman in charge, really
31 W Yvette
32 VV they want a woman in charge, they attract women voters door to door (3) but you
33 recognise who I talk about
34 W yea yea
35 VV Yvette
36 W Cooper yea she’s very sharp fit intelligent au fit tick all the boxes, au?
In this interaction, like the previous one, the discourses in place refer to matters of national interest, and perhaps international interest. Again the exchange is characterised by metacommentary. Rymes (2014: 39) proposes that the more widely circulated a communicatively relevant sound is, the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be. Rymes points out that small distinctions in sound function in highly variable ways. She proposes that in order to understand these distinctions we should focus on metacommentary on the sounds of language. When people comment on how language sounds they are identifying those features that have a communicative impact. In the conversation between Winnie and VV both participants comment on the way the defeated Labour Party leader sounds, and, to a lesser extent, to the way that he looks. Rymes notes that we make judgements about each other on the basis of very small sound distinctions. Language discrimination (or valorization) often happens on the level of emblematic patches of talk, encoded and understood as languages or dialects or registers. Winnie does not immediately refer explicitly to Ed Miliband’s voice, but she reports what ‘people are saying’ about him following his defeat in the polls the previous night: ‘there is no charisma, he’s no plan, so bored’. Taking ‘bored’ to mean ‘boring’, Winnie’s reporting of what ‘people’ say about the politician picks up and recontextualises public discourses circulating at this time.

It is Winnie’s colleague who focuses on Miliband’s ‘speech’ as ‘the thing’ that defines his limitations as a politician (line 2). Winnie replies with another recontextualisation of generally circulating discourse, ‘he’s not strong enough’. VV then weaves together metacommentary on the departing leader’s appearance (‘hair cutting’, ‘put you off before he even spoken yet’) and on the sound of his voice (‘it’s all about his voice’, ‘really you need to be a presenter’). Here VV seems to privilege the sound of the politician’s voice above his appearance. However, in her next turn at talk Winnie refers to ‘the image’. The colleagues then engage in evaluative commentary on a number of high-profile politicians (David Miliband: former candidate for the leadership of the Labour Party; Yvette Cooper: member of the Labour shadow cabinet; David Cameron: Conservative Prime Minister; Boris Johnson: Conservative Mayor of London, widely tipped as a future candidate for leader of the Conservative Party). David Miliband ‘won’t come back’, Boris Johnson is ‘a comic eejit [idiot], evil underneath’; David Cameron is ‘slimy’ and ‘firm’; Yvette Cooper is ‘sharp, fit, intelligent’ (if ‘quite short’). Running through the exchange is metacommentary on appearance, and, particularly, on sound. Winnie says ‘the problem’ is
‘image’. But she concludes (line 39) that what sets Yvette Cooper apart as a politician of the future is that ‘people hear the voice’. VV agrees, saying ‘it’s all about voices’. Winnie says ‘the voice and the policy comes out spot on’, and VV returns to Ed Miliband, saying ‘he puts you off when his voice starts, doesn’t it’. Winnie and VV acknowledge that ‘it’s not fair’ that politicians are judged by the sound of their voice. Nevertheless, they appear to judge politicians on the way they sound. Rymes (2014) suggests that we pay attention to the sound of people’s speech as much as, and perhaps more than, the content of what they say. This is crucial for politicians, but also tells us a great deal about the sound of speech as an evaluative indexical as we make sense of our world.

Protean heritage in heteroglossic space

The aggregate of discourses that circulate in and through the Library of Birmingham is complex and heterogeneous, testifying to the mobility and superdiversity of the library space. This is heteroglossic space, characterized by ‘diversity in speechness’, ‘diversity in languageness’, and ‘diversity in voicedness’. In the public realm of exchanges between library staff and their clients, and in the parochial realm of interactions between colleagues in the lunch room or in quiet moments on the information desk, the library is a place in which language in use reflects the mobility and flux characteristic of superdiversity.

The myriad exchanges we saw in the Library of Birmingham, and their interaction with the physical space in which they occurred, constituted discourses in place. These discourses were regulatory and they were permissive; they pointed to social positions and professions; they were multivoiced and dialogic; they bore the traces of discourses they succeeded, and discourses they anticipated. What we saw was a heteroglossic space where difference was something that people live with. Diversity has become commonplace, and rather than inevitably dividing people it can have “a unifying effect” (Wessendorf 2014: 60). This does not indicate an indifference to difference, rather difference is acknowledged and people are aware of the differences around them, but they do not see them as unusual. In order to navigate a public space characterized by a variety of languages and backgrounds, people need to master a code of practice and certain social skills. In the Library of Birmingham people often encounter each other as strangers, ‘difference’ is acknowledged and deployed as a resource to bring people together and open up communicative spaces. The code of practice and social skills required to navigate the superdiverse space of the library in many ways corresponds to the code of practice and social skills required to navigate the superdiverse city. But the library is perhaps a safer space. Regulatory discourses are in play, albeit that they subsist in dynamic tension with a relatively liberal, humane orientation to their invocation in practice. The Library of Birmingham is a space in which people may encounter difference and diversity as normative, and everyday. This is a heteroglossic space where we can learn civility towards people who look, speak or behave differently, through everyday contact and interaction (Wessendorf 2014). Suzanne Hall (2012: 18) argues that individuals need to socially acquire repertoires to traverse and participate in different spaces of the city. Crossing boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar demands particular social and cultural skills in the social spaces in which individuals regularly come into contact (Hall 2012: 6). These are not simply spaces of encounter, but of participation,
requiring a level of investment in learning to sustain membership. There is a point at which, or there are points at which, learning becomes heritage. Learning the repertoires required to navigate and participate in the superdiverse city is a dynamic process. It is a combination of choosing elements of inheritance and transforming them into heritage, and learning new ways of being based on the changing social arena. In Europe (and perhaps elsewhere) cities are changing, as people become more mobile, either through desire or necessity, or both. Established residents and new arrivals need to draw on their historical, biographical, and social repertoires and resources to enable them to become part of the new space, and to belong in the new space. We all need to access our heritage, to dredge our existing resources; and we need to learn new repertoires.

However, this learning is never complete. Wise and Velayutham (2009: 6) point out that even where cross-cultural contact is civil and courteous, this does not necessarily translate to a respect for difference or signal any shift in private attitudes to otherness. Wise suggests the term “quotidian transversality” (2009: 22) to describe how individuals in everyday spaces “use particular modes of sociality to produce or smooth interrelations across cultural difference, whether or not this difference is a cultural one” (23). This is what we saw time and again in exchanges in the library, whether in the public or the parochial realm. In quotidian transversality ‘cultural difference’ can be the basis for commonsensality and exchange; where identities are not left behind, but can be shifted and opened up in moments of non-hierarchical reciprocity, and are sometimes reconfigured in the process. In the heteroglossic space of the Library of Birmingham we often saw interactions which were convivial. Gilroy (2006b) points out that institutional, generational, educational, legal, and political commonalities intersect with dimensions of difference. These commonalities complicate the simple notion of ‘cultural groups’, or ‘communities’, which might otherwise be held to be united by their apparent difference from others. He suggests that conviviality acknowledges this complexity and, although it cannot banish conflict, “can be shown to have equipped people with means of managing it in their own interests and in the interests of others” (2006a:40). What we see in the Library of Birmingham is ‘conviviality’ as “a particular local ideology” (Rampton 2014). It is a local ideology which is evident in Winnie’s encounters with library users in the public realm as she offers information and support, and in her exchanges with colleagues as she trades narratives, histories, and gossip in the lunch room. It is an ideology which leads a woman seeking advice on returning to a neglected career path to a trajectory from ‘nervous’ to ‘excited’ in the course of an exchange with Winnie. It is an ideology in which metapragmatic stereotypes are deployed as resources with which to acknowledge and learn from difference. It is an ideology in which local order is given to difference through commentary on that difference. And, we argue, it is a heritage which Winnie chooses to safeguard in the present for the future.

In the heteroglossic space of the Library of Birmingham heritage is suffused with complexity, as indexicals of origin, belonging, and affiliation weave through everyday interaction. Heritage here is not found only in a fixed, essential ‘culture’, but also in the much more unpredictable life elements that an individual encounters and absorbs in everyday life. One of the ways in which the meanings of such complex and unpredictable heritages become evident is through the comments that people make about themselves and each other. Often we found that for library staff and library users their heritage was both difference and unity. Heritage was divided by difference, but also heritage was united by difference. We have seen that the process of
metacommentary may be a means to turn inheritance into heritage. If certain resources from the past are claimed, taken up, safeguarded, preserved, and transmitted, then people’s stance as they comment on differences between them constitutes a heritage of their choosing. In a superdiverse environment it may be that ‘choosing’ heritage becomes a more significant means of bringing the past into the present and future. In a superdiverse city heritage, subject to conditions of mobility, complexity, and unpredictability, is as much about local ideologies and practices of sameness and difference as about safeguarding the past.
9. The Interaction Order

Together with the historical body and discourses in place, the third element of the nexus triad is the ‘interaction order’. Our analysis of the interaction order is based on Goffman’s formulations, but is a reformulation of them to suit a superdiverse context. The interaction order is an effect of the dialectics between the historical body and historical space. It is the actual order of communicative conduct that ensues from enskilled bodies in a space inscribed with particular conditions for communication. It has very little existence outside of that space, and the three elements of the triad form one ethnographic object of inquiry (Blommaert and Huang 2009). The interaction order includes the many possible arrangements by which we form relationships in social interactions. In the Library of Birmingham these include interactions between library users and Customer Experience Assistants, and between colleagues at work and at leisure.

Goffman (1983) proposed that when people come into contact, or into interaction, each participant enters a social situation carrying an already established biography of prior dealings with the other participants – or at least with participants of their kind, and enters also with a vast array of cultural assumptions presumed to be shared. In service interactions, for example, two principles generally obtain, that all candidates for service will be treated equally, and that anyone seeking service will be treated with courtesy. However, Goffman points out that what in fact goes on while the client sustains this sense of normal treatment is a complex and precarious matter. If parties in a service interaction jump the queue, physically abuse the other party, swear coarsely, or behave in a range of other unpredictable or offensive ways, they may forego their right to equal treatment and courtesy. At the same time, an interaction between two individuals may be subject to the interaction order of the institutionalized service arrangement. That is, the parties involved in the transaction may have a highly developed knowledge, based on experience, of the type of transactions that may be conducted in that particular setting.

Rampton notes that interaction ritual actions are evasive or redressive, and are aimed at the restoration or preservation of normal relations. Interaction ritual offers a defence against the vulnerabilities of the ordinary world, and is oriented to the maintenance and recovery of stability. Ritual is a form of action which may be deployed to re-establish the flow of everyday life. Interaction ritual draws both analysts and participants into the unfolding moment, “into all the pressures and promise of situated, contingent, cultural and corporeal experience where people search for some semiotic rendering of the stance in social relations they can sense and assess, but where there can be problems in the coding” (Rampton 2014: 295). In analyzing communication we might ask what kinds of change, tension or uncertainty are particular types of action orienting to, how are the interactants dealing with them, and what rituals are invoked in this cause (Rampton 2006). In reviewing his own analysis of his previous empirical material, Rampton proposes that “in their apprehensions of social stratification and efforts to develop new solidarities from ethnolinguistic difference, it looks as though people draw on interaction ritual practices that may well be fundamental to human society in general” (2014: 297).

Goffman defines ritual as “a perfunctory, conventionalized act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value to that object of ultimate value
or its stand-in” (1971: 62). Drawing on Durkheim, Goffman distinguishes between ‘positive ritual’ and ‘negative ritual’. Positive ritual includes small acts of kindness or generosity, or at least civility, which speak of the performer’s good will. Such an act provides a sign of an individual’s involvement in and connection to another, and offers the recipient the opportunity to affirm the relationship (however fleeting it may be) through a show of gratitude, and “both moves, taken together, form a little ceremony – a ‘supportive interchange’” (Goffman 1971: 63). Negative ritual is characterised by interdictions, avoidance, and staying away. Nevertheless, it may also lead to dialogue, particularly when the offender is required to account or apologise for an action. Such a transaction involves a “remedial interchange” (Goffman 1971: 64). Goffman suggests that these two basic interchanges, the supportive and the remedial, “are among the most conventionalized and perfunctory doings we engage in”, and yet they are crucial to our understanding of interaction.

Goffman (1983) notes that in contemporary society almost everyone is involved in service transactions almost every day, and concludes that “whatever the ultimate significance of these dealings for recipients, it is clear that how they are treated in these contexts is likely to flavour their sense of place in the wider community”. We would argue that this is the case for both the server and the recipient, and that people’s sense of place in the wider community is ever more crucial to the social fabric of superdiverse neighbourhoods and societies. Goffman (1967: 43) suggested that underneath their differences, people everywhere are the same. Thus societies everywhere must mobilise their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters, and “one way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual”. By learning how to behave in a social encounter, we maintain a kind of ritual equilibrium, and adhere to the ritual organization of social encounters.

Goffman (1983) proposed that “forms of face-to-face life are worn smooth by constant repetition on the part of participants who are heterogeneous in many ways and yet must quickly reach a working understanding”. In our observations we repeatedly saw encounters between Winnie and library users. As we have already seen, these encounters were not all of identical structure, but on the whole there would be a greeting from Winnie, a request from the library user, a response from Winnie, perhaps further interaction, and a leave-taking. Encounters between Winnie and library users were characterized by ritual. Goffman saw that social interaction is suffused with brief rituals one individual performs for another, attesting to civility and good will on the performer’s part and to the recipient’s possession of “a small patrimony of sacredness” (63). What remains in exchanges between people are interpersonal rituals, little pieties which, said Goffman, were worth examining.

Goffman (1967: 19) refers to ‘ritual’ acts “through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it”. Goffman points to ‘little ceremonies’ which structure social interaction. In the exchanges between Winnie and the library users approaching her information desk we saw that interactions were supported through small rituals and ceremonies including greetings and leave-takings, gratitude, offers of free goods, interested questions, compliments, jokes, and smiles. This is not to say that all progressed smoothly at all times in exchanges between library staff and library users. Goffman (1971: 106) points out that when persons are present together, many contingencies arise that could reflect discreditably on them, and “when individuals come into one another’s immediate presence,
territories of the self bring to the scene a vast filigree of trip wires which individuals are uniquely equipped to trip over”. We observed library users and library staff not only catch their feet on the trip wires of social encounter, but also step gingerly around them, and, perhaps having activated an alarm, step back and restore order. We observed interactants offering apologies and explanations, making light of problems, and appreciating efforts at reconciliation. Ritual and ceremony offered a defence against the collapse of social interaction in the service encounter.

**Supportive interchanges**

Goffman (1971:66) argues that positive ritual consists of the ways in which homage can be paid through offerings of various kinds, such as “when inquiries are made into another’s health”. Rachel Hu’s field notes record an exchange in which a woman approaches the information desk in the Reception area of the library. As we recall, Winnie had recently been the victim of an attack and robbery:

We stopped chatting when a woman in her late thirties came to the counter. She wanted to find out if she could have a stand here to promote her project in relation to compassion and soothing people’s emotions. “You need to send an email asking for the stand”. Winnie quickly found the telephone number and e-mail address for the woman. She thanked Winnie but didn’t seem to want to leave.

The woman: oh, what happened to your finger?
Winnie: Oh, I got mugged and pushed to the floor.
The woman: oh my, did it happen in the library? Or did you hurt your finger? Or did you break it?
Winnie: No no, it happened after I finished my shift late in an evening. Somebody slashed my handbag and pushed me to the floor. I didn’t notice the finger was injured until two days later
The woman: Did it happen here in Birmingham?
Winnie: Yea, it’s near where I live but it could be anywhere
The woman: Sorry it happened
Winnie: Thank you. So what’s your project about?
The woman: it’s a brilliant project to make people feel more connected and find their personal centre of peace again
Winnie: Oh, let me read it. It sounds interesting.
She gave Winnie some leaflets and flyers about her project.

The woman’s enquiry is of an everyday sort: she wants permission to set up a display stand, and Winnie gives her the contact details so that she can pursue her request. However, the interaction is transformed when the woman asks Winnie ‘what happened to your finger?’. This question acts as a ceremonial courtesy, a ritual gesture of concern that takes the interaction beyond the business of bureaucratic permission-seeking, to identificatory sympathy. Winnie’s story, told dramatically and directly, leads to four more questions which indicate the woman’s concern. In turn, Winnie asks the woman about her project, and Winnie offers her support: ‘It sounds interesting’.
Interchanges between Winnie and library users could be supportive acts, characterised by positive ritual, even when they were unsuccessful in achieving their practical goals. In one example, recorded in Rachel Hu’s field notes, a student came to Winnie’s information desk for advice about how to find a particular resource:

“Hello, I am here to find a book” A young black girl wearing a head scarf and black skirt stopped in front of Winnie.

“Oh, use this machine if you know the name of the book.” Winnie showed her to the self-service machine.

“OK.” The girl looked a bit reluctant but started trying anyway. In a few minutes’ time, she came back to Winnie: “Excuse me, you see I can see the books here but how I can.” Winnie went to the machine with the girl and took over the machine to choose the book for her.

It looks like a lot of the books the girl wanted were on loan to somebody else.

“I need it for tomorrow, for an assignment.” The girl looked worried and impatient.

“Tomorrow, hehe, assignment? So any one of these, right?” Winnie asked as if talking to her own daughter.

“I am not good at this.” The girl shook her head.

“So you’ve done title search already. Ah, this is no good. Let me do it here.” Winnie said encouragingly. She moved back to her seat with the girl sitting down in front of her, outside the counter, looking at the screen.

“There are copies from the other libraries. You can reserve one for you. … Let me have a look again. Small Heath, right? Because you can call them so they can hold it for you. See, one reserve, on loan, on loan, on loan. So popular, something to do with school work, right?” Winnie went through the details with the girl.

“Ah, Small Heath, you see, 29th May would be the earliest you could have the book.” Winnie checked through all the copies of the book and still could not get one there and then for the girl. “All right, thank you anyway, I will see if I can find it out myself.”

“Sorry about that urm…” Winnie sighed and saw the girl leave her counter.
Supportive ritual in this exchange goes beyond the mere provision of information. Winnie supports the 'young black girl' by first pointing her to the technology available to help her with her enquiry, then when she returns without success Winnie invests in her, going with her physically and talking her through the process of searching for the book. Winnie works out that the book is not available because other students at the girl’s school have loaned or reserved it. Small ceremonial thanks and apology bring the interaction to an end. But these are not the only means by which Winnie attempts to support the interaction. Goffman (1971: 64) refers to “the ritualization of identificatory sympathy”, in which small ceremonial acts are “similar to what a parent exhibits in regard to a child” (66). We learn from Rachel’s field notes that Winnie speaks to the girl ‘as if talking to her own daughter’. The girl offers up her own vulnerability and “reduced competence” (Goffman 1971: 111), attesting to Winnie’s sympathetic tone. Winnie speaks ‘encouragingly’, and does her best to meet her needs. She is unsuccessful on this occasion, but the exchange is a supportive one.

In other examples of supportive interaction the defining characteristic of the exchange appeared to be the patience and calm of the library staff. An example of the patience of the library staff occurred when a girl arrived at the information desk feeling frustrated that she was unable to make the library’s sophisticated technology work:

A teenage girl came to ask a question to WW, one of Winnie’s male colleagues, who I’d seen several times working at the Reception in the lobby.
“I can’t do any reservations I don’t understand why.” The girl didn’t sound happy.
“All right, how long have you been working on the computer for?”
“About an hour”
“OK, take a seat, let me check it out for you.” WW was very calm and patient. The girl sat down on the chair outside the service counter while WW’s fingers were flying on the keyboard to find the girl’s details on the library system. He soon made another booking for the girl.

WW’s patient and reassuring manner (‘all right’, ‘take a seat’, ‘let me check’) offers a small ceremony of civility and calm.

In addition to patience, persistence was sometimes a feature of supportive interchange. In the next example a teenage couple arrives at Winnie’s information desk. The young man is in the process of registering to become a member of the library:

“Done? Ah, fantastic!” The young girl went up to Winnie with her boyfriend leaning against her. Winnie asked them for proof of ID and the boy couldn’t get the ID out quick enough from its plastic cover. They giggled together and the girl took over the small pocket to help out.
“Ah, sorry, are you seventeen?”
“Sixteen”
“I will choose ‘young person’. And you remember your PIN number, right? Ah, sorry, you have the ID but do you have an address proof? It’s all right, to gain full membership we’ll need your proof of address. For full member you can borrow ten books.” Winnie started to explain the difference between a full membership and a temporary one. The boy told Winnie he can bring in his bank statement next time as a proof of address. “You sure you have a bank statement?”

Winnie started to repeat herself again by telling them what she had just said. A simple issue seemed to become not very clear and the young man and the young girl kept glancing at each other, holding back their laughter.

Soon Winnie finished the application of the boy and asked the girl “Do you want to join?”

“I don’t have an ID.” The girl looked a bit impatient and looked right into Winnie’s eyes, pulling a straight face.

“Bank card?” Winnie seemed persistent.

“Yeah, I’ve got a bank card but”

“Bank card is OK. So can you write down your address and your mobile phone number here for me”. The girl wrote it down and handed the piece of paper back to Winnie “So, you are fifteen?”

“Sixteen”

“April, just this year? And you, October, last year?” Winnie turned to the boy who quickly glanced at his girlfriend and they laughed at each other.

Winnie started to type quickly on her keyboard and soon finished the girl’s application.

“And I will write down this for your PIN number.”

“Uhm” the girl looked at Winnie without emotion.

Winnie’s fingers were flying on the keyboard and she soon finished. “Here. Your card is only temporary.” Winnie started again to tell them what they need to do to change their temporary card into full membership.

“Thank you” They sounded relieved when they finally got their cards.

“Don’t go yet.” Winnie stopped them and handed over a slip of paper with the library’s new opening hours printed on it. She repeated what was on the paper which the young couple had already understood. Finally they were allowed to go and they left holding hands.

Goffman (1983) points out that “servers of all kinds have the right to ask those they serve for their pertinent biographical information”, and to seek a service is to expose oneself to questioning. In order to be availed of the service sought, the seeker must comply with requests for information which she or he may not otherwise be willing to part with. In Goffman’s terms, we are all information storage drums, and for every possible interrogator there will be an access sequence that allows entrée to the files. In the example here the young couple appear less than willing to comply with Winnie’s requests for information. But she is persistent, determined, and committed to the institutional values of the library. Winnie seems to size up the couple and decide that she can be forthright and direct with them. The interaction is permeated with potential for de-stabilisation: the young people giggle together and laugh at Winnie; Winnie forgets the girl’s age; she repeats herself endlessly, and creates opacity from clarity. However, her persistence and good humour carry the day, and the young woman becomes a library member.
when she might easily not have done so. The interaction is concluded with an expression of gratitude, and the young couple go happily on their way.

Access rituals

As we have seen, in order to initiate an interaction the participants must enter what Goffman (1967: 34) calls a “state of talk”, which they achieve by declaring themselves officially open to one another for purposes of spoken communication, and guarantee to maintain a flow of words. The initiation of an encounter marks the beginning of a period of heightened access among the participants. Such an initiation is likely to be marked by a greeting. When an interaction is to be terminated a supportive ritual will again occur, namely, some form of farewell display performed during leave-taking (Goffman 1971: 79). Taken together, greetings and farewells provide ritual brackets around a spate of joint activity, and are both ritual displays that mark a change in degree of access — what Goffman refers to as “access rituals” (1971: 79). In the settings where we observed Winnie at work she was positioned such that there was an expectation of interaction. She stood at the information desk and waited to be asked questions by library users. She was in “an institutionalized service arrangement” (Goffman 1997: 178), and thus the access ritual to initiate talk was probably unnecessary. However, in most cases greetings were deployed, as in the following example from Rachel Hu’s field notes, in which a young woman who has lost her library card arrives at the desk:

“Morning! How are you doing? I, um, lost my library card,” a young girl smiled apologetically at Winnie and laid out her bag on the counter.
“OK, let’s have a check.” Winnie greeted her and asked for her name and address to identify her in the computer database. “You’ve lost your books, you see,” Winnie showed the girl the computer screen.
“Have I done that?” The girl looked puzzled.
“When was that? If only recently you will have to wait for up to seven days before someone can pick up your returned books and enter them in our system.” Winnie explained patiently.
“I returned those books and just shoved them through the hole in the black box, you know.” The young woman looked annoyed. She told Winnie she returned the books ages ago but it seemed that they were just not on the system. Winnie went to her colleague for help and he walked over to Winnie’s computer and stood behind her to check all the details. “If you go into the boxes, they needed to tick the box to stop the overdue charge.” Winnie’s colleague pointed at the boxes she should tick, and Winnie followed.
“Yeah, I was thinking that I did return them but you see it was years ago.” The young girl started to sound unsure

The girl initiates the interaction with two greetings: ‘Morning!’ and ‘How are you doing?’ It may be that the somewhat exaggerated cheeriness of the greetings is a strategy to mitigate the embarrassment associated with the more hesitant, apologetic confession which follows. ‘How are you doing?’ does not require a literal reply, as it is rhetorical, and “a question is not being asked, a greeting is being extended” (Goffman 1971: 81). As it turns out there is another issue linked to
the girl’s history as a member of the library. There is a contested point about whether the girl has
lost or returned some books. When confronted with the matter she initially asks a question, ‘have
I done that?’, and then seems uncertain whether she has returned them. Once more Winnie’s
colleague advises her how to proceed with processing the matter on the computer.

Greetings often set the tone of an interaction, frequently initiating a convivial engagement, as in
the following example:

A middle-aged man comes to the counter and asks, cheerily: ‘hello, can you tell me how
to take a book out, I’ve only just joined and I don’t know how to do it’. Winnie says ‘oh
you’ve only just joined, you need a PIN number’. Winnie talks to him for a minute or so,
and he says ‘but how do I do it, what do I do?’ She takes him over to the computers
where customers can issue books themselves, and shows him how to do it, taking him
through the process

Here the greeting establishes a friendly atmosphere, with no threat to either party. Winnie
typically moves away from the information desk with the client to show him how to operate the
computer system.

At times greetings did more work than merely initiating an interaction. Here a client who is
known to Winnie, but who she has not seen for some time, greets her with ‘Happy new year!’.

A man who seemed to have known Winnie well saw her so stopped by the counter and
said “Happy new year!” Winnie looked up, recognised his face and smiled: “Oh, happy
new year to you! What time are we into the year? I mean, nearly three months have gone
past! Haha”. The man laughed as well and said something before heading towards the
Rep Theatre.

As it was 24th March, and neither Chinese New Year nor new year in the West, the greeting is
somewhat double-voiced, and comments on the fact that the pair have not been in contact for
some months. Winnie reciprocates with the same greeting, and picks up the point of the man’s
metacomment, explicitly acknowledging that nearly three months have passed since they have
seen each other. The man and Winnie share a convivial moment and laugh together before
he moves on. In a similar example, observed a day later, an older man comes to the information
desk and offers an enthusiastic greeting:

An older man comes to the desk and says enthusiastically to Winnie “Hello, I haven’t
seen you for ages”. Winnie responds in kind. The man asks for a certain publication, and
as he takes his leave says “nice to see you”. This is the kind of moment that can be
important in someone’s day, however insignificant it may seem.
The greetings made by some of the library clients made it clear that Winnie was much liked by her ‘regulars’. Another greeting ushered in an effusive compliment from a library customer who said he had not seen Winnie for a while:

“Good morning, I haven’t seen you for a long time!” A man in his sixties, tall and cheery, interrupted the chatting of the two girls. Winnie looked up, saw him and beamed: “Yeah, long time no see! How are you?!” They seemed to know each other quite well and the man asked Winnie something.

“Yeah, first and second floor! Go there and you will find them!” Winnie told the man with great confidence.

“Don’t you think she’s brilliant?” the man said to [name], smiling and looking at [name]. “Yeah, yeah” [name] laughed. The man soon left.

The man’s strategy for giving Winnie a compliment is to direct his remark to one of Winnie’s colleagues. The man’s question is of course more or less rhetorical, but it potentially puts the female colleague in a position of having to ratify (or deny) the compliment to Winnie. There is no evidence of embarrassment or awkwardness as Winnie’s colleague concurs.

Again and again this pattern was repeated, as customers initiated engagement with Winnie, treating her as a long-lost friend. Goffman (1971) refers to the conduct of long-separated, closely related friends who newly come together again, when there will be an expansive initial greeting. In all of these instances (even when Winnie may not clearly remember the customer) expansive greetings are the order of the day. Winnie was also greeted with enthusiasm when a former colleague visited the library:

A black woman with curly grey hair stood by the counter, staring at Winnie and shouted with excitement: “Hello, where have you been, stranger!” She opened her arms to Winnie and they hugged each other warmly.

“Sometimes first floor, sometimes second floor. You know they let us cover everywhere.” Winnie looked excited as well. She and the woman seemed to have known each other for quite a long time.

“Yes, it’s nice to see you anyway! I see some others but not you! And good luck with the restructure. My god, even in the music section, everything is new and you don’t know a single soul!” The woman talked loudly.

“They don’t want people to get settled so move them around. They should make a smaller library so to keep the best people to serve more customers! I mean it’s lovely inside, I love the inside of the building. You just don’t get the best service from people, you know, the tension”. The woman sounded very excited and carried on talking, and asking about some of her old colleagues. In a few minutes they hugged each other again and the woman left.

The greeting here goes beyond the spoken, as the two women hug each other warmly. In this interaction the former colleague moves between complaining about the restructuring of library staff roles and complimenting the library as a building. The former colleague and Winnie appear
to be in alignment, both in opposition to the reorganization of staffing. Access rituals open and close interactions, but beyond this they are a means by which participants may set the tone for the exchange.

*Free goods*

Goffman (1983) found that in public places strangers have the right to request certain ‘free goods’ of each other, among which is information about directions and places, the time, change for a note of currency, and so on. Goffman suggested that there is a contrast here with people who are in an institutionalized position to offer information, such as police officers or staff in a tourist information booth. When the most straightforward requests are made (e.g. when someone in a pub orders a pint of beer) there is little need for ritual to precede the request. However, when the request is outside of the norm, or requires dredging or bringing to mind, it may be reinforced with ceremony. Many requests made to Customer Experience Assistants in the Library of Birmingham are mundane, and adhere to an established script. However, others are less normative, and may be prefaced by a small ritual to usher in a state of talk.

Positive ritual, constituted as supportive interchange, may include a transaction in which goods are exchanged. This is the case when a customer arrives at the Customer Experience Assistant’s desk to request information. In these transactions semiotic repertoires may be deployed in a supportive way to ensure that the exchange of goods is accomplished without loss of face on either side. Police officers, staff at the information office, and customer experience assistants in a city library may all be required to give information as part of their official duties. In a less official capacity, dog-walkers and newsagents may be called upon to give directions, hotel receptionists may be asked to recommend a restaurant, anyone may be asked the time, and so on. Indeed we have found that library staff are asked for directions to sports centres, theatres, bus stops, museums, and other institutions which are not directly related to the library’s core service. The less predictable the request for free goods, the more likely it is that a ritual is performed to establish a state of talk: for example, ‘excuse me, may I ask you…’, or ‘you wouldn’t by any chance know…’. Such small ceremonies create the conditions in which the transaction of free goods may progress smoothly.

Goffman (1983) further points out that interactions in which free goods are requested do not necessarily operate as one-way traffic. Servers who offer free goods may themselves ask questions of the questioner. Customer experience assistants in the library present a good example: interactions are invariably initiated by a library user’s request for information, whether it be ‘can you help me trace my great-grandparents?’, ‘how do I use the scanner?’, or ‘where are the toilets please?’. However, it is common for the library staff to respond by asking the questioner whether she or he is a member of the library, whether she or he has brought her or his membership card, and, if necessary, identification details such as date of birth, address, and so on.

There were occasions when Winnie’s offer of free goods extended to sympathy, or empathy. Here she feels for a woman of about her age who has been given a task by a family member:
“I came to Birmingham for sight-seeing and my daughter-in-law give me a list to do”. An Indian lady in her sixties told Winnie as if she’s complaining about her daughter-in-law. “Here, she wanted to borrow the books and here is her library card.” She presented Winnie with a slip of paper full of book names and details. Winnie smiled at her sympathetically and started to search for the books.

In this example Winnie offers both her professional service of searching for the books and her sympathetic smile. Both are significant, supportive features of the brief interaction.

A more tangible form of ‘free goods’ provided by Winnie was in what Goffman terms ‘lending possessions’. In the library of closure lending is an institutional practice. However, beyond borrowing and lending books other requests came into play:

“Sorry, do you have any Sellotape here?” A man stopped at the counter and asked me for help. “Sellotape?! Here you go!” Winnie overheard and walked over to the other side. She tore a piece of Sellotape and stuck it on the man’s hand back who was amused by Winnie and thanked her. He soon left, tearing the tape off his hand.

“Stapler” A tall man was the next to be served. He’s holding a few pieces of paper in one hand and making a gesture of stapling things together by leaving the paper in between the other hand’s thumb and four fingers, pressing the fingers together repeatedly. “Sure!” Winnie turned to reach over for the stapler in the shelves under the counter. “It’s just a bit…” she handed over the stapler to the man who started to bind the papers together.

In these instances we see that the customer information desk becomes an all-purpose stationery provider. Winnie performs this role with humour and good will.

**Appreciation**

Goffman (1971: 63) pointed out that “when one individual provides a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another, the recipient should show that the message has been received, that its import has been appreciated, that the implied relationship is agreed to exist, that the performer has worth as a person, and that the recipient has an appreciative, grateful nature”. In this section we consider some examples in which “the giving statement tends to be followed immediately by a show of gratitude” (64). Goffman argues that both moves (the giving and the grateful receipt) form a little ceremony – a ‘supportive interchange’.

The majority of cases in which such little ceremonies occur are quotidian exchanges which seem to be of little importance:

For around five minutes Winnie has been dealing with an enquiry from an older man with a white beard and flat cap. She appears to be telling him the opening hours of Kings
Heath Library. They are both peering at Winnie’s computer screen. The man thanks her, and she says ‘no, no, no trouble at all’, before reiterating the information she has given him. ‘Thank you’, he says again. ‘You’re welcome’.

In this case the ceremony continues for several turns, as the client thanks Winnie more than once, and she finds alternative means of showing her appreciation of his appreciation. Such mundane interactions are almost unnoticeable, but they oil the wheels of social exchange. There were many similar examples in interactions between Winnie and her clients. Another example of everyday gratitude and appreciation occurs when a woman arrives to collect a book.

“Hello, I am here to collect a book” a black woman stopped in front of the service counter, speaking to Winnie nicely with her eyes and mouth smiling.
Winnie typed on the keyboard quickly and told the woman that she’s going to get the book for her. “Yea, sure, thank you.”
“I will be back in a minute” Winnie said and went away towards the downstairs to get the reservation for the woman. She soon got back holding a huge book in one hand.
“Thank you, thank you”

In another example a man of Chinese appearance arrives at Winnie’s counter and asks to join the library:

“You OK?” Winnie greeted a man of Chinese appearance who stopped in front of the counter.
“I want to join the library, how I can do that?”
“Where are you from? How long are you staying in the UK?”
“For two years. My wife’s working here and I am from Malaysia.”
The young man gave Winnie his passport and some other ID. Winnie soon applied for a temporary card for him.
“This card lasts for three months, yeah, you will need to bring us your address proof next time so we can extend your card for you.”
“So how can I access a computer here?”
“Do you need the computer for very long time?”
“No, I just need to look at some documents and print them out.”
“In that case you don’t need to book at all. Go to the first or second floor and use the computer there. Through the glass door, press two, or go to the escalator.”
The man thanked Winnie and walked towards the lift.

Again this is an everyday, quite mundane interaction. Winnie deals quickly and efficiently with the man’s first request, and answers his second. The man is appreciative of Winnie’s efforts. It is typical of Winnie that she asks ‘where are you from?’. This supportive question, potentially opening up a space for communication, was common when Winnie read the ‘sign vehicles’ (including accent and appearance) which led her to believe that the client before her was from
another country. The question does not lead to further dialogue on this occasion, but the interaction proceeds without tension.

At times gratitude and appreciation were born of interactions which had made unpromising beginnings:

“My card just expired.” A young girl in her early twenties came to Winnie, looking worried and agitated. Her black curly hair swept down to her waist. 
“How come?”
“I don’t know, do I?”
“OK, let’s find out” Winnie started to look for the girl’s registration on the computer. “Proper card will expire in four years while the temporary is for three months. Ahh, I see, you are on a consecutive card which means you are requested to renew your card on a yearly basis. So have you brought any letters to prove your status? You still on ARC?” Winnie asked the girl, giving her a quick look. “Still living at 14 Lxxx Tower?”
“Ah, I see. Good thing I came today. Yes, I have just got the letter. Yes, I am still on an asylum seekers’ visa.” The girl looked at Winnie blankly. Winnie quickly renewed her card and the girl left thanking Winnie.

The young woman appears to change her tone when Winnie notices that she holds an asylum seekers’ visa. The ‘ARC’ (Application Registration Card) is a document issued to asylum applicants after screening to show that they have applied for asylum. It is also used as evidence of identity, immigration status and entitlements in the UK. It seems that the client is prompted to recognize that her library card has expired because she is on a temporary visa. She expresses her gratitude to Winnie, despite her initial irritation. The interaction is scaled up as the vicissitudes of national and international immigration politics play out in the quotidian exchange of library membership.

Compliments

Compliments attest to the civility and good will on the part of the performer of the compliment. They are interpersonal rituals through which one individual provides a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another (Goffman 1971: 63). In the examples to follow Winnie is both performer and recipient of compliments. In each case, we argue, the compliment acts as an interpersonal ritual to support the exchange. In the first example, from Rachel Hu’s field notes as she shadowed Winnie, a client asks for assistance to find out when his library books are due for return:

A man wearing a pair of yellow tinted glasses came to Winnie for help. 
“I borrowed some books but can’t remember their dates. I don’t want them overdue and I don’t want to pay any fine either. Please can you check the books for me?”
“Do you have your card? Let me check it out for you!”
“Thank you darling” the man handed over his card.
“How many times have you renewed the books? You could renew them four times if there is no one else waiting for the books, you know.” With the man cooing at her Winnie explained with extra patience. “You have two books. Do you want me to renew both of them?”

“Yes, please, thank you, darling” The man sounded very grateful and soon was ready to leave the counter when Winnie renewed his books. “You know these ones, do you have one for Hungary?” He stopped on his way out and pointed at a square book shelf the four sides of which were fully loaded with travel guides to different countries all over the world.

“Let me find out for you” Winnie quickly typed on her keyboard.

“Yes, please, you just need to do a bit research and find out.”

“H, U, N, gary, right? Budapest, Hungary, right?”

“Yes, yeah, that’s the capital.” The man sounded excited.

“919191” Winnie soon found something and read out the code of the book for the man.

“Is it on this floor?”

“I am looking for it for you. Yeah, it’s on this floor, further down this aisle.” Winnie looked at the man and showed him the rough direction where he can find the book. “Nice glasses, are they sunglasses or normal glasses?”

“I don’t want too dark sunglasses!” The man was glad Winnie noticed his unusual colour of sun glasses. “I like travelling and this pair is fun.”

“OK, I will show you where the book is.” Winnie took the man to the other side of the floor.

The man is anxious not to pay any fines on his library loans. He deploys the relatively familiar ‘darling’ on two occasions as he addresses Winnie. She in her turn offers the client more information than he had requested. She goes beyond checking and renewing the books to tell him how many times he is permitted to renew them. The man expresses his gratitude, and when he is about to leave he makes a further request. We know from the audio-recording of this interaction that Winnie initially found difficulty with the request for travel books about Hungary. However, she eventually found them, and followed up this success with a compliment on the man’s sunglasses. Her compliment has (in Goffman’s terms) a dialogistic character, as she includes a question, which prompts the client to say ‘I like travelling and this pair is fun’. Outside of the business at hand, the interpersonal ritual ensures that the interaction ends not on Winnie’s hesitation in responding to the man’s second request, but on a convivial note.

**Conviviality**

Winnie regularly deployed joking and convivial good humour as a means of supporting her interactions with library users. Here ‘conviviality’ describes a set of practices performed by Winnie which constitute positive values about welcoming visitors to the library and offering them whatever assistance is possible in an atmosphere of good humour.

Here Winnie teases a young library user when she seems a little anxious about whether she has appropriate ID:
A young girl came to Winnie saying her card got suspended so she can’t do anything about it at all. “Let me check first.” Winnie took the card the girl gave her and soon found her information from the database. “It’s a temporary card. Yeah, when you registered, it’s a temporary card. So it expired on (xxxx). Are you still in 31 Pxxx Road? Do you have any address proof?” “How about my student card? Does this work?” The girl asked hesitantly. “Yes, it’s all right, it’s not like the bank, you know, we are not that strict.” Winnie started to type on her keyboard. “So you see, here it said (xxxx). So it’s temporary again until you have the full address proof. The next expiry date is the 17th July so any time before that day you can come to change it to the full membership. Here you go, your new card. I hope you will come again!” Winnie laughed and waved goodbye at the girl.

In saying, in a voice both jovial and mock-stern, ‘it’s not like the bank, you know, we are not that strict’ Winnie makes light of any potential problem, and opens up the border between herself as an institutional authority figure and the young client.

In another example the library user rather than Winnie deploys convivial humour as a metacomment:

A lady brought a book to Winnie. She tried to borrow the book through the self-service machine but failed. “You can’t trust the technology nowadays, can you?” Winnie served her and moaned about the machine before the woman started. “No, it just printed out this receipt saying the book hasn’t been processed properly and asked me to bring it to a member of staff” The woman shrugged helplessly. “It’s done now. Second of June” “Oh, thank you, it’s not gonna set off an alarm or anything like that, is it?” She joked with Winnie who reassured her that the book was now properly processed.

The joke (‘it’s not gonna set off an alarm or anything like that, is it?’) both lightens the moment once the initial problem is resolved, and comments on the regulatory systems of the library. We can approach the study of supportive interchange by identifying ritual acts of identificatory sympathy which indicate respect for an interactant. Exchanges between strangers are relatively fleeting and short-lived. As such they rely on small ceremonial acts of supportive interchange to ensure the ‘connectedness’ of the interaction. They may instead (or also) rely on remedial interchange.

Remedial interaction

Goffman (1971: 109) argues that the function of remedial work “is to change the meaning that otherwise might have been given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into
what can be seen as acceptable”. In this section we consider how the negative ritual of remedial work enables interactions to proceed under pressure. Ceremonial acts which may remedy possible offence between the unacquainted include apologies and accounts.

**Apologies**

Goffman (1971: 113) describes an apology as “a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended role”. A well-dressed black woman stopped in front of the Reception desk where Rachel Hu was shadowing Winnie:

> “Sorry for your waiting, sorry. Hello, is this woman in front of you?” Winnie pointed towards the woman dismissively, and spoke to another woman who was actually standing further away from the counter.
> “No, it was me. I am the first here in the queue.” The woman raised her voice, looking offended.
> “Sorry for that”. Winnie apologised in a forthright tone.
> “Why would I push in if I knew there’s another lady?” The woman lowered her voice a bit.
> “Yeah, can you write down your name and event dates, I will check with the venue team”. Winnie asked for more details from the woman after she told Winnie what she wanted.
> “The venue team, urm, I need to talk to a suitable person to ask some questions about an event I booked here already”
> “Oh, sorry, sorry, in that case, please take a seat over there. I will ring the event team and they will send somebody to talk to you” Winnie finally understood the woman and started to dial on the telephone at her desk. The woman left the counter and sat down on the bench in the middle of the aisle, waiting

As we have seen, Goffman (1983) points out that in almost all contemporary service transactions a basic understanding seems to prevail: that all candidates for service will be treated ‘the same’ or ‘equally’. One implication of this is that in order to deal with more than one candidate for service at a time in what can be perceived as an orderly and fair manner, a queuing arrangement is likely to be employed, this often involving a first-come-first-served rule. Goffman suggests that this rule produces a temporal ordering that blocks the influence of such differential social statuses and relationships as the candidates bring with them to the service situation – attributes which are of massive significance outside the situation. And if one’s place in a queue is to be respected, fellow queuers will have to sustain queuing discipline amongst themselves, apart from relations to the server. Also, the server is accorded the responsibility of knowing who is next in the queue. If there is any doubt the server may ask members of the queue who is next. However, such a question is laid with trip wires. In the example here Winnie initially apologises in a conventionalized way, ‘Sorry for your waiting, sorry’. However, she then causes offence by asking ‘is this woman in front of you?’ perhaps implying that one client is trying to push herself ahead of another. The woman who
believes herself to be next in the queue articulates her offence, loudly protesting: ‘No, it was me. I am the first here in the queue’. Winnie apologises, but ‘in a forthright tone’. Winnie’s apology does not seem to appease the client, as she continues, ‘Why would I push in if I knew there’s another lady?’ Rather than repeat her apology Winnie falls back on her institutional script, saying ‘can you write down your name and event dates’. The interaction is somewhat remedied by these means rather than by the apology Winnie subsequently delivers, which appears to be an apology for her misunderstanding rather than for the offence she caused.

In another example a young library user comes to the information desk to rejoin the library, and Rachel Hu again made a record in her field notes:

A young man (YY) in his early twenties came to tell Winnie that he wanted to rejoin the library. Winnie asked for his full name and typed it into the computer, but the database couldn’t bring up his information. So she pushed a piece of paper in front of the man asking him to write down his name and started searching again.

Winnie: Have you changed your address recently? Yes? Good, have you brought a copy of address proof? Oh, it looks like you still have something overdue. Do you have them with you now?

YY: I am not sure, I was in prison and all my stuff got chucked away somewhere else.

Winnie: No problem with that. It’s a talking book so you can go back to have a good search for it.

YY: No I wouldn’t find it, because I have not moved to a new place and I can’t go back.

Winnie: In that case you will need to go to the fifth floor to sort out the music items overdue first. Then they will tell you how to get a new card.

YY: So they will give my PIN number as well. Can I have my PIN as well?

Winnie: Yes, you will. Go to the fifth floor and explain to the staff there first to sort out your lost books.

The young man looked at Winnie and thanked her, walking away towards the lift.

The client has items overdue. His apology for this takes the form of an explanation: ‘I was in prison and all my stuff got chucked away’. Despite the library user’s apparent “expression of embarrassment and chagrin” (Goffman 1971: 113), Winnie treats the explanation as if it is what she hears a hundred times a day. She makes no evaluative comment, and remedies any potential awkwardness or embarrassment on the part of the library user by saying ‘no problem with that’, and taking it in her stride.

On another occasion Winnie apologises to a young library user on behalf of the library service:

“If it’s the yellow sticker on the book then you can borrow but you can’t take the white ones out.” Winnie explained to a young girl who gave Winnie a book asking for help.

Winnie scanned the book to see what she needs to do about it. “Is it your community library that you borrowed the book from? Unfortunately they forgot to put the reference number on the system. OK, I have now done it. It’s done.” Winnie handed the book back to the girl who left with satisfaction.
One of the local libraries had not followed the correct protocol, leaving Winnie to sort out the problem. She accounts for the difficulty and makes sure that the problem is resolved. Winnie apologises on behalf of the library service, but distances herself from the offence. In a move similar to what Goffman (1971: 109) called an ‘account’, she accepts that the offence occurred, but it was beyond her control, and it is not a reflection on herself or her character.

**Accounts**

‘Accounts’ constitute the means by which offenders or accused argue that they were not fully responsible for their crime because they couldn’t help it, or they were not in fact responsible, or it was out of their hands, or that it could not have been predicted, or that the offender had not understood the consequences of the action. Goffman (1971: 112) points out that “the more an actor can argue mitigating circumstances successfully, the more he can establish that the act is not to be taken as an expression of his moral character”.

Accounts in the encounters we observed were made both on the part of the library staff and on the part of library users. In this example the library staff attempt to explain the source of a problem to a client:

A middle aged black woman had been waiting in a chair for a while. Seeing nobody was talking to her she stood up and went to the counter saying she is here for a CV appointment at 2:30 pm. But it seemed there was a breakdown in communication between the staff who booked her in and the three staff who are working on the counter now.

“We don’t have an appointment on the list.” A male staff member walked over to solve the problem. It seemed that he was in charge of the CV workshop.

“She said she had booked for two thirty, so here I am.” The woman wasn’t happy.

“So what is your appointment about? I can’t speak on behalf of the member of staff who booked you in.” The man looked confused as well.

“I don’t know what that’s about. I just came back today as I was asked. I came yesterday to check today’s appointment and got confirmation”. The woman was not satisfied as it looked as if she would have to leave empty-handed.

“We stop seeing people after two thirty”. The member of staff didn’t want to give in. “Is this about your CV or something?”

“I said CV. I don’t know what it’s about. I came here because I need help with my CV. The woman working here the other day just…” She stopped without finishing her sentence and became silent, looking away. The man then said something and checked the appointment booking record, trying his best to calm down the woman.

The client is frustrated that she made an appointment and it appears that there is no-one to see her. In a similar example to Winnie’s apology on behalf of a community library, the staff explain
that they are not personally responsible because they did not make the booking, and ‘We stop seeing people after 2:30’. The male staff member distances himself from ‘the member of staff who booked you in’, and there is no satisfaction to be gained from the account that the offence was caused by an anonymous other. The breakdown does not appear to be remedied by the account from the library staff, and the woman’s frustration continues.

On another occasion a young girl was frustrated that she was not able to access the Shakespeare Memorial Room:

A young woman stopped in front of Winnie and asked why she can’t go to the Shakespeare Museum on the ninth floor. When Winnie told her it’s closed because there’s a wedding she looked quite disappointed and kept asking “Why? Why has it to be closed today? I just wanted to show my mum there and it’s closed!”

“You can come back on Tuesday when we are open again as it will be closed tomorrow”, said Winnie.

“My mum will be long gone by then”. She stomped on the floor and rushed away without saying a word. Winnie looked at me as if to comment on the young woman’s lack of manners and shrugged her shoulders.

In her account of the offence (‘it’s closed because there’s a wedding’) Winnie distances herself from the decision to close the Shakespeare room, but this does not appease the young woman. Here we also see Goffman’s third type of remedial interchange, the ‘request’, in which the victim is asked to agree in advance to the offence. Winnie tells the client that the library will be ‘closed tomorrow’, so she would not be able to gain access to the room then either. As is common in requests, the victim has no recourse. The closure of the library on Sundays at this time was a highly charged political issue – the library had only very recently moved from a seven days a week facility to closing one day at the weekend due to limitations on funding.

Winnie makes another ‘request’ of a library user who wants to book use of a scanner but is disappointed:

A man wearing a purple hat wanted to book a scanner. “We don’t have any scanners here on this floor. And we don’t have any scanners available.” The man wasn’t happy but had to go as Winnie asked him to come back in about half an hour’s time.

Winnie’s explanation that there are currently no scanners available, and that the man should come back in half an hour, seeks absolution for the offence about to be committed to the man, whose requirements will not immediately be met.

In other instances library users offered accounts of their misdemeanors or transgressions. In the following example a young man arrives at Winnie’s counter having lost his library card, and without the resources to pay for a new card:
Winnie was serving a young man of Indian appearance. He looked shy and unfamiliar with the ways of the library. He had also lost his card and didn’t have any money on him now so Winnie asked him to come back some other time for a new card. “I change the address for you today. Look,” she pushed the screen towards the young man, “it tells that you joined the library several years ago.” “Oh, I think my aunty registered me for the library a long time ago but I haven’t used it since then.” The young man scratched his head in embarrassment. “So which area do you live in now?” Winnie asked him. “Handsworth.” And he started to tell Winnie his other details while Winnie updated his information on the screen. Finally Winnie finished her updating for the man and handed him a piece of paper containing his card number and PIN number. “So where do I go now?” The man looked confused as Winnie didn’t tell him what the numbers are for. “Where do you go? This is the library, I don’t know where you want to go, either you want to stay here, or go outside”, Winnie laughed. “I want to learn, there’s a book called, um, sorry I can’t remember the name, but I want to borrow it for my GCSE study.” The young man looked at Winnie eagerly. “Second floor, the knowledge section. Law, and something else.” Winnie pointed at her left hand side to direct the man towards the escalator going upstairs. He left thanking Winnie. “Aw, sometime you are right, you came across the person, gentle and nice and that’s nice”. Winnie laughed as she said this to her colleague who sat at her side.

The young man ‘scratches his head in embarrassment’, having revealed that his aunt had previously joined the library on his behalf, but he had never used his membership. Goffman (1967: 105) argues that embarrassment is about unfulfilled expectations. The embarrassed individual can see what sort of conduct ought to be maintained during an encounter, but it is out of reach. The young man, described in Rachel Hu’s field notes as ‘shy’, appears (in Goffman’s terms) flustered and discomfited. Winnie responds to the young man’s embarrassment by firstly maintaining the established script of the interaction, asking for simple and known answers to factual questions. Then she tries to put him at his ease by making a joke: ‘I don’t know where you want to go, either you want to stay here, or go outside’. Goffman (1967: 112n) suggests that it is natural to find embarrassment and joking together, as the joke may release the tension and mitigate the seriousness of the moment. On this occasion there is no evidence that Winnie’s attempt at humour created a more convivial exchange. However, once the young man leaves the desk Winnie’s metacommentary to her colleague is affectionate and maternal, describing the client as ‘gentle and nice’. In her metacommentary she points to her philosophy, and her values.

In another example a girl was embarrassed that she was not able to understand what a ‘PIN’ was:

A young couple came to Winnie wanting to join the library. Winnie directed them to the self-service machine. The girl came back after a few minutes trying to understand the screen, asking Winnie “What’s PIN?” She looks no older than eighteen and looked a bit embarrassed at her own question. “You can choose any four digits you like.” Winnie told her without really answering the girl’s question: “one two three four, or two three four five, or anything you like.”
“OK, all right. Hehe” the girl seemed to understand what Winnie meant. “She’s funny. She really is.” The girl laughed and said to her boyfriend when going back to the machine. They continued.

Once again embarrassment and joking go hand in hand, but this time the library user seeks to cover up her embarrassment by making an evaluative metacommentary about Winnie.

In a more unusual example a library user is being helped with a job application, but deploys inappropriate language in doing so. Adrian Blackledge described the interaction in his field notes:

Winnie is on the desk with two other staff. One of them is engaged in supporting a middle-aged man with a job application. The man wears large industrial boots, a black coat, and has his hair firmly combed forward over his eyes. He speaks in a deep and broad Brummie accent, and includes in his discourse much that appears to be beyond the norms of the genre – something about belonging to a death cult, references to Ronnie Wood. The member of staff is endlessly patient with him. When she moves away to her position on the counter he says loudly, ‘you’re not gonna call the men in white coats are you?’

The man’s behaviour lay outside of normal orders of discourse, as he used language inappropriate to the service encounter in which he was engaged. Goffman (1963: 3) makes the point that in diagnosing mental disorder psychiatrists typically cite aspects of the patient’s behaviour that are “inappropriate to the situation”. Of course we can say very little about this library user in a single observed interaction recorded in field notes. However, through noticing the inappropriateness of one side of an interaction we can see in bolder relief the structures and norms of ‘appropriate’ interaction at the customer information desk. The library user himself appears to be quite aware of the inappropriateness of his conduct, asking a question of the library staff which acts as both metacommentary and account. It is metacommentary on imagined (or remembered) responses of institutional authority. It is also an account, implying that he is unable to avoid his transgressive behaviour because he is not competent to do so.

Another example of the library’s institutional tolerance of transgression of social norms in certain circumstances occurred in the ‘Book Browse’ area:

“Someone stole my chair” A young lad was talking very loudly while walking into the section, so almost every customer nearby looked at him to see what was going on. The boy looked twelve or thirteen years old, thin and very grumpy. A young man in his late twenties stood behind him trying to talk to him in a low voice. He looked like a social worker mentoring or supervising the boy. “Don’t talk to me, don’t follow me!” The boy shouted at the young man, apparently enjoying the attention he got from the staring customers. “I am not playing a game!” The boy walked away from the section and headed towards the outside of the library. He kept shouting to himself when standing on the escalator, and the youth worker followed him.
about ten metres behind, making sure the teenager was within his sight. He seemed to be used to the boy’s behaviour and talked to him with great patience whenever he was allowed to get close to him. In about five minutes the teenager came back again, wandering about between the shelves on the first floor. The youth worker just followed him, although he kept a certain distance. The boy kept on talking loudly and angrily. “Apologies for this” the man said to Winnie when walking past their counter. “We know! That’s all right”. Winnie nodded at the man with understanding. The teenager now was talking loudly on his mobile, walking quickly to get away from the youth worker who continued to follow him “Yeah, I am going that way! Don’t follow me man!” he turned back to shout at the youth worker while talking loudly on the phone: “Say again”. He put his headphones on and walked towards to the library entrance once again.

In this instance the boy’s behaviour, which would be regarded as inappropriate in many institutional contexts, is tolerated by the library staff with patience. The library is a place that support, encourages and tolerates superdiversity in all its forms. It is a place where people are treated equally, whether they are queuing for information, confessing their crimes, articulating their frustration, or catching upon their sleep. Here heritage is about the performance and negotiation of a shifting range of intangible cultural values, and those values include tolerance of others.

Goffman points out that in social interaction, rituals and rites performed by individuals for and to one another attest to the “civility and good will on the performer’s part and to the recipient’s possession of a small patrimony of sacredness” (1971: 63). We have learned civility and good will, and appropriate responses to civility and good will, by living in the world. That is, civility and good will structures and supports interaction between people because civility and good will has been handed down to us by our forebears. But there is always a dynamic between choosing a heritage from the resource of inheritance, and learning how to act in a changing environment. Bendix (2009) reminds us that cultural heritage does not exist, it is made. From patterns of habitual practices and everyday experience we choose privileged instances of inheritance and imbue them with status and value. In a homogenous cultural setting, if there is such, we may be able to say that habitual practices and everyday experience are inculcated over generations, a habitus that is relatively fixed and stable, and need only be activated in a field of social action. However, in the superdiverse city heritage may not be so linear. Indeed Bourdieu (2000: 151) pointed out that whilst habitus is the product of historical acquisition, and enables the legacy of history to be appropriated, it “never has a mechanical or inevitable character”. The habitual practices and everyday experiences which we learn, and from which we learn civility and good will, may be learned through engagement with and in the superdiverse city as well as being constituted in the dispositions inherited from former generations. Heritage in the superdiverse city appears to be a dynamic interaction of values and meanings chosen from the inheritance of ancestors, and those learned from the lived experience of the changing world.
10. Translation and Translanguaging

In dealing with heritage we engage with a set of values and meanings. Smith and Waterton (2009) argue that heritage includes the performance and negotiation of identity, values, and meanings. Smith (2006) proposes that all heritage is ‘intangible’, whether values and meanings are symbolized by a physical site, place, landscape or physical representation, or are represented within the performances of languages, dance, oral histories or other forms of ‘intangible heritage’. If languages symbolize meanings and values, then so does the practice and process of ‘languaging’, and the practices of translation and translanguaging. This becomes evident as we continue to observe Winnie in interaction with library users with a diverse range of linguistic and historical trajectories. Winnie was at her most comfortable, and her most confident, when she was translanguaging – that is, when she was making the best use of the semiotic resources available to her. Her values and philosophies were constituted in her linguistic practices as members of the public came to her information desk in all their complexity, mobility, and unpredictability.

Lofland (1998) introduces the notion of civility towards diversity as a means of understanding how people peacefully co-exist in increasingly diverse cities. Civility towards diversity does not necessarily imply a specific appreciation of diversity, but it means treating people universally the same, and it can emerge from indifference to diversity rather than from a specific appreciation of it. Wessendorf (2014) takes up the notion of civility towards diversity, stating that “in a super-diverse context, civility towards people who look, speak or behave differently is learned through everyday contact and interaction in a multiplicity of day-to-day, social situations” (Wessendorf 2014: 64). She refers to “cosmopolitan pragmatism” (2010: 20), in which, in order to get around, buy things, get help to get on a bus, carry a buggy up the stairs, and so on, we cannot afford not to be interculturally competent. Wessendorf (2010) points out that the demographic nature of a superdiverse context also brings with it the emergence of numerous ‘zones of encounter’. In the examples which follow, each of them audio-recorded service interactions between Winnie and users of the library, we can see cosmopolitan pragmatism in use and in action.

In the first example a young woman (ZZ) approaches Winnie’s counter for help to become a member of the library. Also present is Winnie’s male colleague, CA:

Listen to Audio

1 W are you ok? hello
2 ZZ I need I need code
3 W ah?
4 ZZ temporary code
5 W temporary card?
6 ZZ temporary card yes yes
7 ZZ what’s the number?
8 W ah number?
number here yea
oh
six six seven
one seven six
no no no no no
one seven si
no no no six seven
yeah
one seven six
one seven six yea?
so you speak Spanish? (xxx) Spanish?
I am Brazilian
but you speak Spanish still oui oui sí sí ah
but I still understand Spanish but English no
[laughter] so in Spanish very good good (xxx) hola not hola ok
si hola
but I said very good
very good muito bem < very good >
ah?
muy bueno
muy bueno muy bueno yes very good muy bueno yeah
[to colleague:] so can I have this side?
yeah hang on can I just quickly take this security off?
yea yea of course for you! [laughter]
thanks very much
ok ok so this is your PIN number. ah the are you staying here
long or just temporary? are you stay in England long?
for four months
four months yea temporary card you can eh teach Spanish here
yeah?
hmm a lot a lot of people want to learn eh Spanish I want Spanish
um no not OK au hola hola [laughs]
muy bueno [laughs]
so muy buen yeah muy buen
um-hum
muy buen is good muy buen eh what’s the name? [spells out name]
[confirms name]
[name checked]
[name confirmed]
ok, yeah? ah th [address stated] and then this is the temporary
address?
[address confirmed]
sí you you the card is only temporary only last until twen end July
sorry I don’t understand
this card is only temporary card ok?
ok
49  W  only last until 29 of July
50  ZZ  ok válido
51  W  voila?
52  ZZ  um?
53  W  not voila after 29th July finish, no more
54  ZZ  ok ok
55  W  unless you bring a full address address like this one (xxxx) yea?
56  ZZ  um hum
57  W  you bring bring bring the one then you can change to full member
58  otherwise you’ll be finished on the the eh
59  ZZ  ok
60  W  eh yea can you sign here please? you can sign sign signature
61  ZZ  ah ok firma
62  W  firma la firma?
63  ZZ  yes
64  W  firma firma muy buen muy buen muy buen good ok? so you
65  you still can use our computer
66  ZZ  um hum
67  W  use our computer if you want to take our books out you can only two
68  two books ok?
69  ZZ  um hum two books for a week?
70  W  for twenty eight days
71  ZZ  um hum ah ok
72  W  ah you can only two but you can use our facilities, you need but um
73  most people come here use the computer, (xxx) mobile phone you can
74  ok?
75  ZZ  um yea. ah? I don’t believe I understand, right! [laughs]
76  W  um hola muy buen muy buen adios
77  ZZ  adios querida [laughs] gracias
78  W  gracias ahh no gracias [both laugh] ciao ciao
79  ZZ  ok thank you

This is routine interaction in the everyday discourse of the civic institution. A young woman approaches the desk seeking to become a temporary member of the library. An access ritual begins the interaction with Winnie’s greeting ‘hello’ in line one, and closes with ‘gracias’, ‘ciao’, and ‘thank you’ in lines 78/9. In between there is a functional request for temporary membership and a list of rules and requirements which such a status demands. The client is treated to the same information as all other clients requesting facts about library membership. However, in the exchange there is also room for the social construction of difference.

The interaction does not start well. At lines 1-17 Winnie and the library user seem to be at odds, miscommunicating and apparently disagreeing. However, at line 18 things change. Winnie departs from the institutional script to ask a question which is typical of her, but is not of immediate relevance to the matter in hand: ‘so you speak Spanish?’. As we have seen, Winnie was always eager to embrace any opportunity to acknowledge linguistic, cultural, and national
difference. Here her question is not answered in the affirmative – in fact the young woman answers by saying ‘I am Brazilian’. Nevertheless, Winnie more or less contradicts her, and says ‘but you speak Spanish still’, and goes on to deploy linguistic tokens associated with French and Spanish: ‘oui, oui, sí, sí’. Winnie constructs differences between herself and her client through drawing on a set of linguistic signs outside her typical range or ‘habitual repertoire’ (Rampton, 2009: 149). She introduces Spanish and other Latin-based signs into the interaction. While her Spanish may be insufficient to communicate informational content about temporary cards, the borrowing of books, or obtaining full membership of the library it is adequate to evoke social stereotypes, which she goes on to use resourcefully to build a relationship with the young woman. Ignoring reference to the young woman’s claim to Brazilian nationality in line 19, she makes a pitch for Spanish, and a set of linguistic resources which she anticipates can be shared with the library user. Winnie peppers their conversation with Spanish words: sí, hola, muy bueno, gracias, adios, and other Latin-based words, such as oui, ciao, voila. Meanwhile her interactant also introduces additional tokens such as, muito bem, válido, and firma into their English-dominant conversation.

Goffman (1967: 54)) refers to ceremonial rules which guide conduct in matters felt to have secondary or even no significance in their own right, but which are important “as a conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation”. In her deployment of tokens which traditionally ‘belong’ to French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, Winnie acts ceremonially, symbolically, and convivially. The various linguistic tokens are sign-vehicles which together (and separately) carry a ceremonial message: that in this space difference is not only accepted, but celebrated, and is far from problematic. The ceremonial activity does not need to ‘make sense’ referentially, as its symbolic function creates a convivial environment. Winnie plays with the linguistic tokens, has fun with the available resources, and in doing so is able to engage in convivial interaction with the young Brazilian woman. Rampton (2014) cautions that we should be careful not to be too ready to interpret communicative encounters as convivial, arguing that whether or not small talk can be characterised as convivial will very much depend on the contingencies of where, when, how, by, and to whom it is produced. Rampton (2014) proposes that “instead of being an adequate analytic characterisation of everyday practice, ‘conviviality’ describes a particular local ideology”. In the example here Winnie’s convivial deployment of diverse sign tokens instantiates and exemplifies a local ideology in the library which welcomes and supports difference.

‘Muy buen’ becomes a refrain which Winnie returns to throughout the interaction. After rejecting the Portuguese equivalent for ‘very good’, ‘muito bem’ (line 24), Winnie and her interlocutor settle on the phrase ‘muy bueno’ as a term indexing a shared sense of Spanishness. This ‘negotiation’ comes after Winnie’s insistence ‘but you still speak Spanish’ in line 20, and her interlocutor’s consent in line 21, ‘but I still understand Spanish’. She speaks much less confidently about her English in the same utterance, ‘but English no’. ‘Muy bueno’ is repeated 14 times, along with other recognisable Spanish items such as ‘hola’ and ‘si’, and they are all symbolically deployed. These lexical items have an indexical value which is not based on any substantial content in the message but rather refers to a foreignness and difference which both interlocutors are prepared to explore further. Spanish is not ‘owned’ by either of them but nonetheless it serves as a resource through which to lighten the constraints of a highly repetitive
ritual, and to build common ground and alignment between them (Rymes 2014). As we have suggested, the tokens deployed by the interactants have a ceremonial action. However, their referential function is not entirely lacking. ‘Muy bueno’ does not contribute much to making sense of the intricacies of library membership, but it does oil the wheels of social interaction. It achieves this in several ways. First, the denotational value of the phrase ‘muy bueno’ meaning ‘very good’ contributes to placing the interaction on a positive footing. Although meaning always emerges through interactional practice, the ‘fixed’ and ‘static’ dictionary value of the term ‘muy bueno’, repeated throughout, has the effect of providing positive, supportive interchanges at several conversational turns. For example in line 64, after Winnie learns the new word ‘firma’ < signature >, she says, ‘muy buen, muy buen’, ratifying her understanding of the new lexical item. Second, Winnie uses the phrase productively to shuttle between serious and joking frames. In the same example in line 64, she switches from a playful deployment of the Spanish token to an information statement for the client: ‘muy buen muy buen good. OK? so you can still use our computer.’ The Spanish tokens Winnie deploys lead to good-natured laughter throughout. Third, the use of Spanish tokens affords the young woman some expertise and agency in the interaction. For example in line 38 she initiates a joke with Winnie by using the phrase as a response to encourage Winnie’s stated desire to learn Spanish. Fourthly, the term ‘muy bueno’, along with other tokens of Latin-based emblems, serve important functions in the access ritual which makes up an element of the conversation. ‘Muy buen’, ‘adiós’, ‘ciao’, and ‘gracias’ all serve to close the interaction in a civil and friendly manner. The ritual is therefore highly conventionalised, while acknowledging difference. It starts and ends with typical greetings and closings, and provides the information content requested. However, it also incorporates a language lesson, and advice about teaching and learning.

We might say that Winnie treats the customer with the same courtesy expected of all service encounters (Goffman 1967). But Winnie does not shy away from perceived difference. Indeed, her acknowledgement of difference becomes a resource for further communion, involvement and connectedness. Winnie’s emblematic Spanish is an attempt to give both participants access to a shared set of cultural texts, which they play with socially. Despite significant differences in language proficiency in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French, they build their relationship through a civil acknowledgement of difference which draws on shared cultural resources. A study by Link, Gallo and Wortham (2014) found that basic Spanish words and ‘faux Spanish’ forged solidarity and commonality in the school classroom on the US / Mexican border, and pointed to a heterogeneity and flexibility in interethnic relations which, in turn, probed negative expectations about the use of Spanish in classrooms. As they put it,

Faux Spanish was used by non-Spanish speakers trying to align themselves with positive characteristics of Spanish speakers, in situations where the aspirant did not have sufficient skill to speak proper Spanish (Link, Gallo and Wortham, 2014: 270)

Link et al found that children achieved this in several ways. First, by talking about Spanish through such strategies as noticing or asking about the use of Spanish, asking how to say words in Spanish, expressing a desire to learn Spanish, requesting translations, or engaging in play related to the Spanish language. Second, through repeating or parroting Spanish words, and mimicking Spanish vocabulary for classroom activities, interactional rituals and evaluative remarks and simple commands. And also by deploying ‘faux Spanish’, nonsense syllables which
sound like Spanish in their phonology and interaction. These are all strategies which Winnie uses here. Winnie’s exaggerated Spanish is a ‘reflexive communicative action’ (Rampton, 2009: 149) which produces a stereotypical version of Spanish, or as Bakhtin puts it, ‘an artistic image of another’s language’ (1981: 362).

As we saw earlier, Reyes (2009) argues that stereotypes are not necessarily or always discriminatory and prejudicial. Stereotypes are typical features, approximate descriptors that individuals need to move about the world. Winnie incorporates tokens of Spanish in an attempt to identify with her interlocutor and make a connection. She builds the relationship through smatterings of stereotypical Spanish in a light-hearted way which does not mock the language or its speakers as inferior (Hill, 1998). Moreover, it allows Winnie to introduce a light-hearted footing to an otherwise boring routine. Across our data sets Winnie deploys a range of discursive means of representing groups. She evokes stereotypes about language and people which appear not to offend, and in fact create a shared communality. In a larger national debate which is often rife with negative evaluations of immigrants and foreign languages, she challenges normative discourses.

Our analysis of detailed observations of interaction suggest that difference is commonplace and normal in the library context. Like Link et al (2014) and Rampton (1995, 2006), we view these practices as ways in which people can forge solidarity with others from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Here we depart somewhat from sociologists working in superdiversity who imply that diversity in public spaces ‘has become so normal that it is often not even noticed’ (Wessendorf, 2013, 2014: 27), and that in the public realm people treat everybody universally the same while ignoring differences. In contrast, we have found that in the public as well as the parochial realm people’s different backgrounds are acknowledged and sometimes talked about. In the civic space of the Library of Birmingham difference is noticed and often commented on, and serves to lubricate communication in contexts of social diversity. It is the everydayness of difference in the public realm which allows a ‘difference commentary’. In Birmingham’s public meeting spaces, with their myriad social encounters, civility towards diversity also incorporates a commentary about difference. Commenting on such difference can be a resource for social solidarity.

Whilst Winnie was able to deploy ‘Spanish’ as a useful stereotype (even when it was Portuguese), other languages and countries of origin were less easily available to her as resources. She was always keen to ask people where they were from, and which language they spoke. This conformed with her philosophy and ideology, which embraced difference and diversity. However, in the following example she remains a little nonplussed by the answer. Here a man (ZY) and woman (XW) approach Winnie at the information desk. CA is Winnie’s colleague at the same service point:

1 W are you OK?
2 XW I want to join the membership
3 W sure yea yea
4 XW I’ve already registered
5 W yea, so what’s the eh [typing] OK do you have the ID with you? name and address please? do you have an address please?
address
so OK this is your present address. yea? yea ah, you see, just look at the date of birth. I give back this to you first. thank you. [CA] can I have a new library card? thank you. OK, that’s it. missus can you please sign here? thank you. so where are you from?
Eritrea
ah?
Eritrea
eh? where’s (xxxx)
Africa
ah Africa I’ve never heard of that it’s a
it’s part of Ethiopia
oh they speak French
no, Amharic
ah?
Amharic
oh, so the language they speak. so this your full member. eh, this is the new opening hours
ah?
opening hours. and this tells you how many books you can take
I can take books today, anywhere yea?
no no the full member full member
full member
full member four years you can take ten books temporary card only two
oh what about the books if I want to borrow straight away
yea you can borrow now straight away are you going to stick to the twenty eight days? sorry I did tell you, ten books
um
twenty eight days
um
four, three renew. you can renew your books up to three times OK
OK
when you take books it’s free yea, but there’s overdue charge, if you are late yea
you’ll be fined, ya ya
if late yea
but you can renew your books say telephone online you can renew your books
all right.
again another but only if you can’t renew if somebody reserve it somebody
waiting the books you had you know. so you can’t renew you have to bring it back. you can’t renew. otherwise you just renew three times, OK, thank you very much
thank you very much. thank you
OK. thank you thank you bye-bye
what’s the PIN number? do you have it?
what’s the PIN number?
you don’t have it?
Winnie opens up a state of talk with the access ritual, ‘are you OK?’, and the woman, XW, says ‘I want to join the membership’. As in many of the interactions we observed, the grammatical correctness or otherwise of the library user’s English goes unremarked. Her request is sufficiently clear to allow the interaction to advance. Her second turn at talk demonstrates that she already has some understanding of the process by which she may become a member of the library. At lines 5–6 and 8–10 Winnie deploys institutional discourse to ensure that the business at hand is accomplished. Having done so she switches to phatic communication, asking, as was typical of her, ‘so where you from?’. Each of the library users answers in turn, ‘Eritrea’. On each occasion Winnie responds with a sound of bewilderment, ‘eh?’. She asks where Eritrea is (and struggles to pronounce ‘Eritrea’), and the man says ‘Africa’. Winnie is at a loss, unable to fix her co-ordinates on the information, and is honest about her ignorance, ‘I’ve never heard of that’. The man explains that ‘it’s part of Ethiopia’. At this point Winnie dredges her bank of national, linguistic, and regional stereotypes, and, no doubt recalling that some African countries are Francophone, speculates ‘oh they speak French’. This is an advance on ‘I’ve never heard of that’, and as such constitutes Winnie’s attempt at conviviality and her continuing embrace of diversity. Normally such a strategy is effective in opening up a space for communication. She can take ‘Brazilian’, and, through the magic of the stereotype, deploy tokens associated with Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese to turn a tricky encounter into a joyful exchange. Not so here, however. Winnie’s repertoire is stretched beyond its limits, and her response to ‘Amharic’ is the relatively bland ‘so the language they speak’, and then she segues into the comfort zone of her institutional script once more (‘so this is your full member’, ‘this is the new opening hours’).

The couple’s information that Eritrea is ‘in Ethiopia’, and that the language of the region is ‘Amharic’ is (at least) a simplification, and carries ideological baggage. But for their purposes, and the purposes of this analysis, and in the absence of further knowledge of the visitors, we may be wary of over-interpretation. Winnie retreats behind the safety barrier of her institutional script, telling the couple how many books they may borrow, for how many days, how many times they may be renewed, that charges will be payable for late return, and ways of renewing. She interweaves (in Goffman’s terms) request (‘if you are late yea you’ll be fined’) with interdiction (‘you can’t renew you have to bring it back’) and the offer of free goods (‘telephone online you can renew your books’). Quite unusually for Winnie in her interactions with the public there is also a hint of irritation (‘I did tell you ten books’), perhaps stemming from her inability to make her convivial kite fly on this occasion. Before she lets the couple go she turns to the male client and says (as we have seen her do before) ‘how about you? you are not joining?’. But it turns out that he is already a member of the library, so farewells are made, and they go on their way. There is a sense of disappointment in Winnie that she has not been able to deploy the stereotypes within her repertoire, and this has limited the extent to which she was able
to turn the interaction into a lively and entertaining occasion. The fact that she tried to do so and failed throws into relief the strategies she deploys when she is successful in this regard.

On another occasion we observed a young woman from Iraq (VU) approach the counter where Winnie was ready to offer support and information:

Listen to the Audio

1  W  what’s the number please?
2  VU  erm S D
3  W  no no just the number
4  VU  six seven
5  W  six and [typing]
6  VU  two two
7  W  two two two um as I said have you had any ID with you?
8  VU  yes
9  W  em ooh, thank you um, you have urm a Wolverhampton address
10 VU  yeah
11 W  can I have a see at it? Wolverhampton address the ID means a name and address
12 VU  this is my name
13 W  yeah but
14 VU  the ID
15 W  the bu ah ah the home address?
16 VU  ah
17 W  you don’t have? so what is you don’t have a home address I only can give you a temporary card
18 VU  yes
19 W  OK then next time when you come back you can
20 VU  I have a home address what do you mean the ID for the home address?
21 W  the proof ID means your name and address. it’s called ID yeah?
22 VU  mm hm
23 W  so of course if you have that that would be good
24 VU  I’m I’m urm oversea student I’m oversea student,
25 W  oversea student yea so you mean you don’t have your ID with you now? it means
26 you name and address? that’s OK. I give you a temporary card
27 VU  yeah, that’s fine
28 W  then next time you come
29 VU  will this card let me? can I um borrow books?
30 W  two books um but full member you get ten books so you will as I said come back
31 again and urm bring the proof if ID proof of address
32 VU  mm
33 W  we know where you live, at least, isn’t it?
34 VU  yeah
35 W  you can imagine, you come here, take the books out, but where you live? but
that's you got a proof, yea! isn't it so this card only temporary until July. as I said anytime you come back here bring a proof of address. name and address. like telephone bill bank statement

so are you are you wh oh you just arrived hehe because this card OK but that’s all right when you come back with your name and address we give you full member all right

if I don’t have such an ID what shall I do cause my ID is only my passport and

you live in number 66 in Halesowen, yeah? is a rent flat? is a rent house?
er no it’s not rent I live with other family

other family?

family they are living here in the UK and I live with them

OK urm that’s fine how about when you go to the bank you must do the banking register with the address isn’t it when you go to the bank register the bank letter

ah so any letter

so that’s it

any letter that proves my address?

with your address yeah so that’s why they got urm that’s why or ah some people have driving licence

I’m not having it here

aw not yet not yet yeah

(xxx)

where are you from?

from Iraq

Iraq OK yeah so you know now what to bring yeah only just one not more we only only want to know where you live and then we give you a full member full member

yeah yeah

this is only temporary full full member you can have ten books and you can enjoy look this is full member full member but now (3) so is there [name] right?

[name] this is not my surname, this is [spells name]

is that [name]?

[spells name]

oh R I O

O U

[spells name] yeah?

yeah

OK here you are so sign here please you can because this is temporary card you can um you can take books for two books and use our computer no problem OK use our computer and if you some people come here use the computer you can book computers

with this card?

yeah with this card

what erm can I take two books with me now?
Public libraries are meeting places “frequented by all groups in society” (Aabø and Audunson 2012:140). The library is a ‘community square’ in which people meet in a variety of ways, and where exposure to social diversity is the norm. Aabø and Audunson (2012: 139) suggest the library “stands out as an arena that exposes its users to the pluralism of today’s community” (p. 148) while Johnson (2012) found that libraries are viewed as positive places where people can go without having to provide a reason, coming and going as they please. They are viewed as welcoming and comfortable places, separate from home or work, the most trusted of public agencies. Audunson (2004) describes how libraries promote the civic skills of citizens by remaining public, open and accessible to all. Communality in norms and values across social difference is recognised as important for maintaining the high status that libraries hold in the public eye.

Codes of conduct in the library have been developed over time to govern the acceptable use of facilities and services and to ensure fair, equitable access for all. Libraries are highly normative, organised places where the majority of users follow the rules. We can also say that most activity in the library is characterised by a high degree of instrumentality and functional interpersonal exchanges. In our own observation of social practices in the library we noted a good deal of routine such as borrowing books, becoming a library member, finding out local information. This
interplay between instrumentality and emotional connection, normativity and flexibility returns us to Goffman’s interaction ritual. In the interaction between the overseas student from Iraq and Winnie there is evidence of routine interaction, but also departures from what is purely instrumental and functional. However, we find that the extension beyond the purely functional does not necessarily lead to a warm and emotional connection between the staff member and the library user. We do not claim that Winnie is particularly ‘kind’, ‘nice’ or ‘supportive’ to the overseas student. Nonetheless the student benefits from the exchange beyond the purely instrumental because she is provided with the information she requires, but also has access to other cultural and linguistic information. Winnie gives time to the student, teaches her key vocabulary, provides interactional opportunities for language learning and explains social and cultural practices. In Goffman’s terms this normative access ritual can be characterised as a broadly supportive interchange which indexes the library’s historic orientation to communality and civic behaviour. What functions as a basic request to become a library member provides access to even greater social capital such as knowledge of English, and lessons about the borrowing of public goods.

In this everyday exchange we are able to make visible the ritualistic nature of the interaction and the access such conventionality provides for social contact and social knowledge. We also see the construction of the information desk as a place for teaching and learning. The interaction also offers a means to re-examine questions about what constitutes language proficiency and ‘native-speakerism’. We will discuss each these three issues in turn.

In the interaction between Winnie and the overseas student we view ‘a little ceremony’ which is typical of the interchanges which permeate interactions between staff and library users daily (Goffman 1967: 63). Goffman describes this kind of interpersonal ritual as a “small patrimony of sacredness” and a “little piety” of civility and good will in society. It is through these brief encounters that people provide signs of involvement and connectedness to one another. Although they may appear at first glance as trivial and empty – “the dust of social activity” (Goffman 1967: 64) - they are fundamental to the social connection which make up human relationships. As we have seen, a greeting such as ‘hello’ or ‘excuse me’ is an example of the positive rituals which Goffman describes as access rituals. An access ritual is highly conventionalized and contains supportive acts for increased and decreased access to social contact. We view the beginning of the exchange here as an access ritual. Although the interaction does not start with an ‘excuse me’ or ‘hello’, it does commence with a physical presence at the information desk. The information desk is a place to access information, and a person’s arrival there functions in the same way as a greeting or an opener. It requires the staff member to address the needs of the client. Indeed, when Winnie responds with, ‘I’ll do for you’, a fully-focused gathering is constituted, and Winnie becomes uniquely accessible and available to the overseas student for further communication.

Why might access rituals be worthy of mention in this particular interaction? Our interest is in the civility the library displays towards its users, which in this case means a newcomer to the country. Libraries have a long history in supporting multiculturalism. The overwhelming diversity of the public library makes the public library a place for everyone. Audunson, Essmat and Aabø (2011) found that the library played an important role for immigrant women when it comes to learning the language of the new country and identifying rights and duties. Aabø and
Audunson (2012) described how the library normalises diversity, so that “the possibility of simply being normal among other normals, not a client, an employment-seeker, an asylum-seeker, and so forth, is an important quality of the library”. (2012: 147). Library users are equal in status, “where the marginalized can conceal their marginalized situations and be equal with others in a room of normality”. The library is therefore of great interest as a public space in the way it acknowledges difference while simultaneously having the capacity to reduce or erase these differences by treating people as the same. This constant tension between social difference and sameness plays out in the small ceremonies of information-seeking interchanges which happen constantly between staff and users. The concept of the ‘access ritual’ is particularly evocative in the library where providing access to information is the core business of library staff. We find the concept compelling for thinking about what social goods are accessed through these small ceremonies. Positive rituals provide access to a particular social capital, that of social and linguistic diversity. In the library’s ‘room of normality’ both users and staff are in contact with commonplace social diversity and act towards difference with civility.

The exchange between Winnie and the student is an example of a frequently repeated activity within the Library of Birmingham: that of becoming a new member of the library. Winnie and her colleagues repeat this information daily as different people approach the information desk. Becoming a member of the library is an exemplary ritual. There are several pieces of evidence pointing to its highly repetitive nature. For example, in line 3 Winnie interrupts the student sharply and directly as she attempts to head off the wrong information, which the student is about to provide. Winnie’s repetition of the words ‘no’ and ‘number’ three times suggest this is a common error best dealt with forthrightly and without mitigation. A second piece of evidence supporting the argument for ritual comes when Winnie uses the phrase, ‘as I said’. This is a telling phrase because Winnie has not in fact ‘said’ anything before to this particular user about proof of identification. Winnie has repeated this many times to many people. A third indication of the ritualistic nature of the interaction comes in line 17, when Winnie says, ‘you don’t have?’ The rapid response to her earlier question suggests Winnie already knows this piece of evidence will not be forthcoming. A fourth piece of evidence is the list she provides in lines 43-45 in relation to the kinds of proof of ID accepted: telephone bill, bank statement, driving licence. The list is quick-fire, suggesting she is used to citing it to members of the public. The interactions at large in becoming a member of the library are routine, repetitive and ritualistic. They are part of Winnie’s institutional script.

Winnie uses whatever biographical information she can glean to address the student. The student describes her own status in line 26 as an ‘overseas student’ but it is likely that Winnie has already determined this from the flow of the conversation. The ‘overseas student’ category allows Winnie to take a teacherly role in the interaction. For example the following items appear as key vocabulary items, and are frequently repeated by Winnie: ‘proof’ (5 times), ‘ID’ (7 times), ‘temporary’ (4 times), ‘full’ (8 times), ‘member’ (7 times), ‘address’ (13 times), and ‘register’ (twice). These words are central to the message Winnie wishes to relay in order for the student to follow the procedure for becoming a member of the library. The repetition of the words indexes their social significance and becomes part of message being negotiated. As Tannen suggests:
Repetition creates sound patterns—the musical level of language, including rhythm, intonation, and prosody—that involve the audience with the speaker or writer and the discourse by sweeping them along, much as music sweeps listeners along, luring them to move in its rhythm. Repetition also creates involvement through listener participation in sense-making, at the same time that it creates meaning (2006: 600).

The duplication of these items shows an investment in them. They also provide a rhythm to the interaction, as repetition serves as a beat to give stress to the salience for Winnie of these lexical items. The ritual provides a reframe in the musical sense, as the speaker comes back to a definition of ‘ID’ time and time again: ‘ID means a name and address’, ‘proof ID means your name and address’, ‘it’s called ID yeah?’, ‘means your name and address’, ‘proof of address’, ‘name and address’, ‘come back with your name and address’. But this is not a transmission form of interaction. Winnie is not simply delivering a message. This is not monologic but dialogic. For example in line 63 Winnie checks for comprehension, when she says, ‘so you know now?’.

Winnie’s confirmation check seeks to ensure that the student has understood the message. The dialogic nature of the interaction also allows the student to play an active role in checking for understanding. There are four instances in which the student either checks or requests more information: ‘what do you mean by ID with home address?’ (clarification request); ‘and with this card can I um borrow books? (comprehension check); ‘if I don’t have such an ID what shall I do?’ (clarification request); ‘ah, so any letter?’ (confirmation check).

In addition to vocabulary teaching and language learning opportunities, there are also lessons on values and practices. Winnie explains to the student why the library needs the information she requests, and in doing so she goes beyond library membership information. She provides a rationale for proof of ID. She wants the student to understand why her address is needed. She mitigates the burden of the request by saying ‘only just one, not more, we want to know where you live’. She also attempts to problem-solve for the student. After establishing that the student lives with a family, Winnie suggests that a letter from the bank is most feasible. She therefore extends help beyond the immediate information exchange. We might think of this as Winnie just doing her job as a public servant, and being professional. But these interactions provide important opportunities for language learning, for knowledge exchange, and for convivial communication in the public realm.

But what about the elephant in the room? What about Winnie’s non-standard English as she ‘teaches’ the student key vocabulary? How do we feel about such models of English in circulation in our public institutions? Winnie speaks a variety of English which might be broadly described as inflected by her Cantonese background, while the student from Iraq similarly speaks English with an Arabic accent. Neither speaker comments directly on the other’s English, although as we have indicated, there are signs they are both aware of the different varieties in play. Winnie puts herself in a teacher’s role and is willing to use her ‘expertise’ to help the newcomer. It is very likely that Winnie views herself as having higher proficiency than her interlocutor – she is more native-like, and is an insider in that she lived in the UK for many years. This is not to suggest that Winnie is unaware of her own English proficiency. One of Winnie’s most common complaints during our observations was that she needed to improve her English. She wanted to write and speak in a more standard way. Winnie is very aware that her English limits her chances. Indeed if we subjected this short extract to an error analysis, it is
likely that the error count would be significantly higher for Winnie compared to the overseas student. There are very few errors in the overseas student’s English. But in which analytical direction would this take us? Listing the errors Winnie makes in English grammar would shift the focus away from what the exchange between the Customer Experience Assistant and the library user achieves socially. It would mean that we failed to look at how the exchange rubs along despite differences in the way the interactants talk.

Doerr (2009) points out that in research in both Second Language Acquisition and English Language Teaching there has been a tendency to treat ‘native speakers’ and ‘non-native speakers’ as homogeneous groups. The biographical histories of Winnie and the overseas student mean they have access to very different kinds of social capital in terms of cultural and linguistic knowledge, but also have different access to institutional knowledge, and different prior experience of the context and its demands. Winnie holds all the cards in these areas. On the other hand, the student’s background may have exposed her to all kinds of privileges in education which Winnie did not have access to. This makes them very different kinds of ‘non-native speakers’. Moreover, our observation of Winnie throws up interesting questions about ‘native-speaker’ models. Winnie saw her participation in the research project as an opportunity to improve her English (especially her English literacy). She approached Rachel directly in this regard, and, as we have seen, Rachel generously gave of her time in supporting Winnie. No doubt Winnie viewed Rachel as a highly educated member of the academy, and a model of native speakerism. Winnie’s apparent lack of confidence in her written English was somewhat at odds with her larger-than-life presence in her interactions with library users (and colleagues) from all walks of life. When she was not concerned with ‘correctness’ the question of whether she sounded anything like a ‘native speaker’ was of no consequence. Winnie was at her most comfortable, and her most confident, when she was ‘translanguaging’ – that is, when she was making the best use of the semiotic resources available to her.

In another interaction two young black women (FA and FB) approach Winnie at the ground floor Reception desk to explain why a book is overdue. Rachel Hu (RH) is also present:

Listen to Audio

1  W  hiya hello morning
2  FA  yes er cos er she has a pass but er she brought her er pass er port
3  W  the PIN number you mean yea
4  FA  yes
5  W  ah, you got the outstanding fine, seventy five pence, I think maybe erm
6  FA  yes because er
7  FB  what?
8  FA  because er she she need er understand we when we when we come here
9  W  we want to return
10 FB  return but don’t have a card pass card
11 FA  PIN number
12 FB  PIN number
13 W  when you return you don’t need a PIN number, only when you take books out,
14 W  OK? so er you still want book or no – is it your card your card?
yes yes yes it’s my card
ah OK now this book, Gra ah Grammar Practice Level One
it is yes
ah OK are you finish now?
yes
OK. it’s late, it’s late, yea
I know, but always I want to return but I don’t have the time, I live in Solihull it’s very far yea, I want er always I come but it’s er closed
if it closed you can put outside
where, which one?
she, need the PIN number for for
oh outside you need a PIN number?
yes that’s why
oh, I see. so um are you return now?
yes please
I’m sorry, it’s late, it’s late. can’t help it, ah, return, I will return first for you (8)
level one OK (3) it’s er seventy five pence
oh, on peut paie encore?
oh you speak French?
yes
aah, oui oui oui hahaha oui
oui
(xxx) qu’elle er vous parler Français?
non hehehehe
tiny little bit of
I want er return but erm er if I come by the time I come here it’s closed, oh no, closed tomorrow I come closed tomorrow I come here it’s OK but er I’m free
today yea
mm
yea
sorry
she don’t want to pay because er hehe
she don’t want to pay
because it’s not her fault
(xxxx)
it’s not her fault
yes because she don’t have a PIN number and er we can’t
ahh, outside need a PIN number?
of course!
(xxxx)
we have lot of money for bus fares
oui oui oui oui hehe
hehehe I return my book
OK that’s fine (3) OK that’s fine
yes next time I have er
the PIN number
This interaction is also typical in that it is the type of service encounter that occurred frequently while we observed Winnie at work. It is characterised at first by the normative structures of this library, and of libraries in many places. Goffman pointed out that an interaction may be subject to the interaction order of the institutionalized service arrangement. That is, the parties involved in the transaction may have a highly developed knowledge, based on experience, of the type of transactions that may be conducted in that particular setting. Transactions between an ice-cream vendor and a customer are of a certain type, as are those between a butcher and a customer, a professor and a student. The line maintained by and for a person during contact with others tends to be of a legitimate institutionalized kind (Goffman 1967: 4). Interactions between librarians and library users are usually of a particular type, and are governed by certain norms.
The exchange here is initially characterised by regulatory discourse, as Winnie invokes the rules of the institution. However, the interaction is not straightforward, as the clients claim that they should not have to pay the fine because the fact that the book is overdue is not their fault. The “participants find themselves confronted with uncertainty” (Rampton 2014: 286). The interaction is set with the vast filigree of trip wires which, Goffman (1971) suggests, individuals are uniquely equipped to trip over. Supportive and remedial ritual acts may be required in order for the participants to step through the exchange without tripping. Goffman (1971: 109) argues that the function of remedial work “is to change the meaning that otherwise might have been given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable”. Rampton (2014) notes that interaction ritual actions are evasive or redressive, and are aimed at the restoration or preservation of normal relations. Interaction ritual offers a defence against the vulnerabilities of the ordinary world, and is oriented to the maintenance and recovery of stability.

In the interaction here Winnie immediately notices that the library user is returning an overdue item, and there is a fine of seventy five pence payable. At line 8 one of the young women, FA, attempts to explain why the book is overdue: ‘because er she need er understand we when we when we come here we want to return’. As we have seen, Goffman (1971) refers to ‘accounts’ as remedial interaction rituals which constitute the means by which offenders or accused argue that they were not fully responsible for their crime. The more an actor can argue mitigating circumstances successfully, the more he or she can establish that the act is not to be taken as an expression of his or her moral character. Here the young woman speaks on her friend’s behalf, but due to her relatively limited proficiency or confidence in English her account is faltering. Her friend helps her out (‘return but don’t have a pass card’), but Winnie explains that it is not necessary to have a PIN number to return books, and by implication she re-asserts the regulatory discourse of the institution. Winnie establishes that the library user no longer requires the book, but insists on the regulations: ‘OK, it’s late, it’s late, yea’ (line 20). The library user now offers a different account to mitigate her offence, saying ‘always I want to return but I don’t have the time, I live in Solihull it’s very far yea, I want er always I come but it’s er closed, oh no, closed tomorrow I come closed tomorrow I come here it’s OK but er I’m free today yea’. She dramatises her narrative, emphatically voicing ‘oh no’ in a high-pitched voice, performing her own character speaking as she arrives to find the library closed. Here she offers two, or perhaps three accounts: first, that she has no time to return library books, second (which is related to the first) that she lives far away from the library, and third that when she comes to the library it is always closed. Winnie holds the institutional line, saying ‘it is closed you can put outside’, meaning that there is an out-of-hours book return service outside the library. FB insists that a PIN number is required to use this service. Winnie, for a moment uncertain, asks whether this is true (26). But Winnie returns to the script, saying (in a smiling voice) ‘I’m sorry, it’s late, it’s late, can’t help it’. Here she does two things: she apparently apologises for having to fine the client, saying she can’t help it, implying that rules are rules and she is not in a position to exercise discretion. Winnie’s account again distances herself from what she represents as an institutional offence. At the same time the repetition of ‘it’s late’ shores up the institutional position. Winnie’s discourse is double-voiced, and dialogic, speaking from more than one position. Her voice is both centrifugal and centripetal, speaking on behalf of the institution while extending a form of compassion to the offended clients. Having ‘returned’ the book on the computer system Winnie says, ‘it’s er seventy five pence’. The young women’s accounts have
not been able to shift the established structures of the institution, and it looks as though they will have to pay.

However, now the exchange switches register. One of the young women says to the other in an indignant voice, ‘oh, on peut paie encore?’. Winnie immediately notices that the young woman is speaking French, and says ‘oh you speak French?’. Perhaps recognising the potential of the translanguaging space, or just excited by the opportunity for linguistic play (or both) Winnie’s attitude seems to change at this moment. She immediately engages in a kind of ‘faux French’ (Holly Link, Sarah Gallo and Stanton Wortham, 2014: 270) which she deploys stereotypically (Angela Reyes 2009) as a resource for convivial engagement: ‘aah, oui oui oui hahaha oui’. FB responds with ‘oui’, and her friend asks her whether she should ask Winnie if she speaks French. FB says ‘non’, clearly unconvinced by Winnie’s foray into the language. Winnie apparently understands and answers the undelivered question anyway, saying ‘tiny little bit of’. Now FB has another go at providing a convincing account for the late return of her book: ‘I want er return but erm er if I come by the time I come here it’s closed’. Winnie perhaps does not fully understand the account, and says only ‘mm’. She then apologises, and the interaction has shifted further, with the representative of the library now engaging in remedial interaction ritual to put right the offence caused. FA gains strength from the shift, and says her friend ‘don’t want to pay because it’s not her fault’, establishing a more general account. Winnie echoes her words, typically falling back on repetition in a moment of uncertainty. FA continues, again offering the account that a PIN number is needed to return books through the out-of-hours system. Winnie again turns the account into a question, displaying her own uncertainty about the system.

At line 55 of the young women deploys a further remedial interaction ritual, pleading that they have money only for their bus fares. Winnie returns to faux French at this point as a token through which to engage in convivial play: ‘oui oui oui oui hehe’. FA also laughs at Winnie’s playfulness, and says ‘I return my book’, implying that it is agreed that the fine will be waived. Winnie agrees: ‘OK that’s fine OK that’s fine’. It appears that Winnie’s values of openness to strangers and playful embrace of languages other than English trumps her values of institutional propriety. Having escaped punishment for their misdemeanor, the young women are keen to restore the equilibrium of the interaction, saying ‘next time’ they will have their PIN number. In Goffman’s (1971: 113) terms, the young woman’s apology is “an espousal of the right way and an avowal henceforth to pursue that course”. At this point Winnie restores the breached defences of the institution, picking up the young woman’s promise, saying ‘next time, the same thing, you got to pay, because you know’. In re-establishing the order of things Winnie ensures that neither she nor the library loses face in the interaction. The clients reiterate that they had made three or four attempts to return the book, and balance seems to be restored.

At line 66 Rachel, the researcher in attendance, offers the young women a leaflet with the opening times of the library, which had recently changed. Winnie, either through curiosity, or conviviality, or in order to correct the young women, proposes that the clients show her the out-of-hours book return service outside the building. She takes the opportunity to engage in the kind of translation we frequently saw her initiate when she came across speakers of languages other than English: ‘outside, yea. what’s outside in er French?’. The young women play along, and Winnie practises her new word several times. Sherry Simon (2012) points out that translations are rarely neutral events in a placid field of encounter, rather they are events which sustain or
transform social interrelations. Translation, she argues, “is a process through which a common civility is negotiated” (p. 7). As the group leave the library through automatically revolving doors Winnie loudly and playfully choruses ‘allez dehors. dehors’. When she asks the young women not to push the doors FB joins in with a playful voice and Winnie continues to play with faux French tokens as a means of convivial connectedness, ‘voila voila voila voila voila voila voila voila come on’. There is still disagreement, or at least miscommunication, between Winnie and the young women, on the question of whether it is possible to return library books out of hours without a PIN code, but it is not consequential, and Winnie says twice, ‘never mind’. All that remain are thanks and farewells. When an interaction is to be terminated a supportive ritual will often occur, namely, some form of farewell display performed during leave-taking (Goffman 1971: 79). Together with greetings, farewells provide ritual brackets around a spate of joint activity, and both are ritual displays that mark a change in degree of access. Here the access ritual is convivial, and produces values of common civility as the clients go on their way. Winnie initiates the small ceremony with a token more typically Spanish than French, and more typically a greeting than a farewell – ‘hola’ – but it matters not, and she continues with ‘merci’ in response to FA’s ‘thank you’. FA picks up the cue, saying ‘merci bye bye au revoir’, and Winnie echoes her farewell.

The interaction, precarious at first as each side set out its stall for a fight, ends in convivial good humour and civility. This is partly due to engagement through small ceremonial acts of account, explanation, and apology – Goffman’s remedial interchange. However, what shifts the structure and tone of this exchange is Winnie’s openness to, and interest in, multilingualism. As soon as she knows the accused young women are French speakers she is willing to offer them a reprieve, if not a pardon. Instead of viewing them as transgressors in need of punishment and rehabilitation she sees them as an opportunity to open up a space for translanguaging and translation. The act of translation, and the moment of translanguaging, introduce conviviality and lightness into an exchange which began as a petition against a miscarriage of justice. Winnie’s deployment of faux French, and her translation game, act as metacommentary, acknowledging and valuing difference. In the translanguaging space faux French is acceptable, translation is a linguistic game rather than a functional communicative act, and even a token from a language which ‘belongs’ to none of the interactants (hola) plays a positive role. Winnie’s openness to translanguaging and translation is her heritage, and is potentially the heritage of all of us. Over many years we have learned that, despite the discourse of some politicians and policy-makers, multilingualism does no harm in or to society. Just as negative discourses about multilingualism often symbolise negative attitudes to superdiversity, so positive voices and practices symbolise positive attitudes to superdiversity. Such attitudes and practices are the values we inherit. They are moments of heritage, constantly made and remade, and in the process passed on to each other over time and space.

In another example Winnie is on the Knowledge Floor information desk with a female colleague (PO). A library user (MC) arrives at the desk. The client is very tall, and African Caribbean in appearance, wearing a white jacket and a camouflage, army-style hat, out of the back of which project long locks of hair.

https://youtu.be/-37O3wk_jIE
ah hello

I haven’t got a library card, I have got a library card but I didn’t bring it with me at the present moment and erm I’ve got a book out that needs to be reissued for today

yea

is there any other way that I can do it like I know my number I know my password

you know your password do you have ID with you?

I’ve got no formal ID with me whatsoever

but you remember your oh your

but I remember my number my pin number

ooh that’s let’s see let’s see is it correct yea

yea I need to write it down

yea, write it down yea no problem

can you pass me a piece of paper please thank you very much [(3)] I appreciate it thank you dee five one two three four five six (4) oh damn! (xxx) one two three four five six (7) one two three four five six I’ll be back in a minute I just have to

yes no problem yea have a think have a good think

yea yea [laughs]

no problem [sings] whe when when people polite it make a worl it’s make such a big difference when people polite

yea yea

you I you although sometime you you don’t it doesn’t matter it’s not the end of the world you know they c- but let let I will do it for him but you said azawazawa well can never get I definitely no

The initial part of the interaction is typical of the routines we observed repeatedly in the library, as the client reports that he wants to return a book, but he has not brought his library card with him. He has no formal identification, but he (says that he) knows his library PIN number and his password. Winnie shifts the register of the interaction slightly when she introduces a relatively light-hearted tone of voice at line 12, saying ‘ooh that’s let’s see let’s see is it correct yea’. There is no indication that she mistrusts the client, and this appears to be an attempt to leaven the exchange by behaving in a convivial way. Rather than simply telling Winnie his PIN number, the client wants to write it down. He points to some scraps of paper on the desk, and says ‘can you pass me a piece of paper please’. Winnie’s colleague hands him a piece of paper, and he says ‘thank you very much’, and ‘I appreciate it, thank you’. Such solicitous gratitude seems excessive in relation to the act which precipitates it. Goffman refers to the delicate balance of the ritual code. He points out the risks of displaying too much considerateness in interaction, thus behaving as “someone who is too socialised, who leaves others with the feeling that they do not know how they really stand with him” (1967: 40). In some contexts hyper-politeness is performed ironically, and is hence a form of impoliteness (Goffman 1967). However, here the client appears to be at pains to be polite and courteous. This is an example of self-conscious, albeit positive, ritual interaction. As he writes the number on the piece of paper the man mumbles to himself, trying to remember the numbers. He curses himself for failing to remember the number (‘oh damn!’), in a vernacular display which seems at odds with his recent hyper-
politeness. This may be a response to a potential loss of face – having confidently announced to the Customer Experience Assistants that he remembered his PIN number and password, it appears that he is unable to bring them to mind. In a further dramatic response, the man points away from the information desk, says ‘I’ll be back in a minute’, and runs briskly to a different part of the floor. His physical action is marked: in all our weeks of observation we did not see any other library user or member of staff running in this way. Even given the relatively relaxed environment of this spacious and ultra-modern library, this is an unusual action. The man literally runs away from the possibility of losing face. Through ritual we are taught “to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honour, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise” (Goffman 1967: 44). These rules, when followed, determine the evaluation we will make of ourselves in an encounter. In the interaction here the client seems to invest heavily in conducting himself through ritual interaction which constructs him as one with dignity, poise, and considerateness. However, the ritual order collapses when he is unable to recall his PIN number, and he hastens the conclusion of the exchange. His laughter as he moves away from the information desk is partly prompted by Winnie’s advice that he should ‘have a good think’, but is also no doubt a nervous response to his predicament. Winnie repeats three times one of her stock phrases: ‘no problem’. For Winnie, as we shall see, there is indeed ‘no problem’ in the threat to the ritual order experienced by the client. Rather, she is impressed by the man’s politeness.

As soon as the client departs Winnie engages in metacommentary on the interaction. In this metacommentary she positively evaluates the man's exaggerated politeness - his 'positive ritual interaction'. In doing so she creates a small narrative in which she comments on (generalised, anonymous versions of) polite, not-so-polite, and impolite clients. Although her metacommentary (ll. 20-25) at first sight appears to be inarticulate and hesitant, a representation of her narrative through an approach based on Hymesian ethnopoetics (Jakobson 1960, Hymes 2003) renders her voice more articulate:

1. when when when people polite
   it make a world
   it’s make such a big difference

2. when people polite
   you I you although sometime
   you you don’t
   it doesn’t matter
   it’s not the end of the world

3. you know
   they c- but let let
   I will do it for him

4. but you said azawazawa
   well can never get
   I I definitely no

177
Consistent with Hymes’ approach, we have organised the narrative according to repeated features. Winnie’s repetition of syntactic and semantic structure constitutes lines of equivalence which serve to emphasise her positive evaluation (lines 1 and 4, and lines 2 and 3). Equivalence describes recurrent features in the organization of a narrative. Narratives, seen from an ethnopoetics perspective, are organised in ‘equivalent’ lines and groups of lines (verses, stanzas). Hymes refers to ‘intonation contours’ as structures which organise narratives in lines. Verses may be signalled by a grammatical feature such as reported speech in a narrative, or turns at talk. Repetition of words, phrases, or grammatical structures may also mark equivalence. Hymes’ approach is one in which narrative is re-organised through attention to prosodic features, syntactic features, morpho-grammatical features, phonetic features, and lexico-syntactic features (Blommaert 2006a). Lines then combine into larger units, verses and stanzas, and again equivalence is the formal principle that identifies such units. A transition from one unit to another can be marked by a shift in intonation or prosody, a change in the dominant particles used for marking lines, a change in verb tense, or a lexical change.

In this example Winnie’s metacommentary represents the voices of three degrees of (im)politeness, and these voices structure her narrative. In verse 1 she indirectly refers to the client who has recently departed the information desk, positively evaluating his polite manner. In doing so, however, she moves beyond the particular and into the realm of the universal. She compliments the client in his absence, and in doing so offers her perspective on positive interaction ritual. For Winnie it makes a world of difference when people are polite, and the structure of the verse emphasises her point. In the second and third verses Winnie’s metacommentary again transcends evaluation of the exchange that has just occurred. She introduces her new point with the same line she deployed to introduce her first point (‘when people polite’), and in so doing retains the shape of the narrative. But this is not the same point: now, in a less transparent and more elliptical argument, she appears to dialogically negotiate with herself, and concedes that it is ‘not the end of the world’ if people do not go out of their way to be polite. In such circumstances she will still help the client (‘do it for him’). In this negotiation more than one voice is evident, as Winnie manoeuvres between her initial, complimentary metacommentary and the uncompromising and unforgiving voice that is to follow in verse 4. In this final verse the third degree of (im)politeness is articulated in a generalised, anonymous ventriloquation. Here we have a stylized, coarse, and gruff voice, which deepens and thickens as Winnie represents the generalized impolite client: ‘azawawawa’. The gruff voice continues in a ventriloquation which seems to point to negativity and unwillingness to engage in what Goffman calls a “state of talk” (1967: 34). The stylised voice of the anonymous client indexes the opposite of positive social interaction, and represents a point at which Winnie is no longer willing to engage with the imagined other. She will definitely not help someone who represents this third degree of impoliteness.

The client may have departed the scene precipitously when he perceived that his face was threatened. However, Winnie’s evaluation of his ritual interaction is nothing other than positive, and is contrasted to generalised others who fail to live up to her expectations of the social order. Winnie’s metacommentary is multivoiced. In Bakhtin’s terms, voices are present in her discourse even though they are not heard. The hyper-polite voice of the recently-departed client still resonates in Winnie’s metacommentary; the acceptable voice of the more-or-less polite, generalized library user is also present, however elliptically; and the unacceptable voice of the
impolite client is represented as verbal art. Each of these voices indexes an aspect of Winnie’s perspective on social interaction: this makes a world of difference, that doesn’t matter, the other is definitely not on. Winnie’s short narrative, on first hearing incoherent, disjointed, and fragmented, once reorganised in lines and verses, becomes a multivoiced, multifaceted perspective on social interaction. Winnie’s metacommentary is about values which she wants to safeguard. For her politeness is to be valued, and her evaluative remarks make clear that politeness should be inherited, and impoliteness not.

Translation and translanguaging as heritage

In these audio-recorded interactions with members of the public who arrive at Winnie’s information desk from (at least) four continents of the globe, Winnie deploys not merely conventionalised acts to get the business done, but a positive enthusiasm for, and willingness to engage in, translation and translanguaging. As well as being pragmatic, Winnie’s linguistic practices are emblematic of her wider orientation towards superdiversity. She is most at home when she is able to deploy stereotypes as heritage resources. She is entirely unconcerned about questions of whether she deploys the right word in the right language in the right grammatical position, to the right interlocutor. Her heritage, which is both earned and learned over time, is one which values difference as an opportunity for communication. Translation and translanguaging are means by which Winnie instantiates and processes that difference. It is what Robinson and Silverman (2015) call a new cultural form, which becomes heritage “through effective utilisation and community consensus”. If heritage only becomes heritage when it becomes recognisable within a particular set of cultural or social values (Smith and Akagawa 2009), then translation and translanguaging are both heritage practices in themselves and emblematic of an orientation to heritage which is chosen from inherited values and learned from lived experience.

Suzanne Hall (2012) suggests that we may conceive of local language practices in superdiverse cities not simply as the maintenance of tradition, but as socially sustained renewal that connects with the present. She views the local as “a tangible place for the convergence of a multitude of histories, trajectories and expressions”, which are made more dense in superdiverse cities by the speed and scale of immigration since the 1980s. The Library of Birmingham is a tangible place, a local place, but a place “where minds, bodies and spaces respectively carry, enact and display references to many local places” (Hall 2012: 131). Hall points out that if the individual accumulates a local world by being social, rather than simply inheriting a local place by virtue of birthright or social position, the conditions and circumstances in which individuals are able to act, move and express are not insignificant. The Library of Birmingham is a space in which multiple localities intersect and overlap. Hall concludes that “learning to live with difference and change is as much a convivial process as it is a wrested-over one” (Hall 2012: 132). In her everyday practices Winnie goes beyond this. More than learning to live with difference and change she grabs hold of it and puts it centre stage, making difference and change a resource for good – for communication and certainly for conviviality. She is able to do this because she is not afraid to fail in her attempts to communicate, and because she is willing and able to transform an interaction through her practice of translation and translanguaging.
11. A Heritage for the Future

Ethnography of complex societies requires that we go beyond the here-and-now, and beyond the local, to understand social practices in terms of their structures and patterns. In developing such understandings we need to consider social practices in space and time. We benefit from an analytical gaze which opens a window on the historical trajectories of human beings, and the moments, actions, and discourses which reproduce or alter those trajectories. Such a window is offered by the work of Ron Scollon and Suzy Scollon (2003, 2004, 2008) on Nexus Analysis. What is provided by their focus on the discourses in place, the interaction order, and the historical body is a combination of a social and historical theory of practice, as theorised by social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, a heteroglossic orientation to time, space, and discourse, as argued by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, and a focus on the detail of everyday interaction between people, as studied by sociologist Erving Goffman. Nexus Analysis is thus fundamentally interdisciplinary, equipped to look beyond cognate academic areas into social life, and to enable us to better understand it. Nexus Analysis is a theory of practice that enables us to focus on the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which in turn alters those historical trajectories (Scollon and Scollon 2004: viii).

What, then, have we earned, and what have we learned from this ethnographic study of Winnie, a Customer Experience Assistant at the Library of Birmingham? We set out to investigate the question: ‘What constitutes heritage in a superdiverse context?’ In doing so we were alert to the values people safeguard and wish to preserve in a city which is characterised by complexity, mobility, and unpredictability. We were also interested in what people appeared to be learning as they communicated across difference. We took as our focus the interaction order of the historical body in heteroglossic space. Our questions about heritage are far from parochial. They are fundamental to our understanding of the social world in all its complexity. If heritage is based on values, meanings, and practices, and if it is rooted in the past but present in the future, it concerns everything we may learn about how people navigate the spaces of the superdiverse city. We can only understand the meanings of heritage with reference to how heritage is “received, talked about, looked at, circulated, ignored, and loved in the interconnected world and lived realities” (Robinson and Silverman 2015). Heritage is instantiated in objects and artefacts, gifts and memories, and physical ways of moving and being. Heritage is evident in overlapping histories, biographies, and localities as they come together in the ‘nexus’ of the great, hyper-modern civic space. Heritage is exemplified in patterns of communication which extend beyond and across ‘languages’, as semiotic resources are deployed in ways that transform exchanges between people.

We have seen that certain artefacts are imbued with a sense of history, identity and continuity. These artefacts represent values and meanings beyond themselves: they assert and express identity and social and cultural values and meanings. Values associated with, but paradoxically
remote from, ‘Chinese’ cultural heritage are preserved and protected. Winnie views Chinese inheritance from a safe distance, and this allows her to select a heritage fit for the present and the future. Heritage is found in the photograph collection of an elderly Birmingham man who wished to preserve his artefacts for the future. These are artefacts which index more than memories of the city: they are his work, and his art. Community heritage for now, they become legitimate heritage, and authorized heritage, once catalogued and exhibited.

In the superdiverse city, where myriad values, meanings, and qualities circulate, ‘choosing’ heritage as a significant means of bringing the past into the present and future. Inheritance is a resource from which to bring some features of heritage into the present and future, while leaving others in the past. Whether this means photographs of the city in the 1950s, a bamboo vase from Myanmar, or a convivial approach to linguistic and ethnic difference, we are able to observe all of these heritages in process. Furthermore, heritage is embodied, and includes gesture, bearing, and physical interaction between library staff and library users and colleagues. The historical body, learned diachronically and practised synchronically, is a significant feature of Winnie’s identity. Her way of being, her habitus, her body idiom, is one of activity, independence, and whole-heartedness. It is also an embodied orientation to convivial interaction with difference.

The aggregate of discourses circulating in and through the Library of Birmingham is complex and heterogeneous, testifying to the mobility and superdiversity of the library space. Many library users are young, fashionable, in long dresses and headscarves, wearing make-up and always with mobile phones. But the library users are very far from being a homogeneous group. The free-to-enter civic space attracts scholars and business people, international students and those without a home, immigrants and long-established residents, families and the elderly, tourists and sightseers, and so on. The users of the library and the staff of the library practise civility towards diversity, as they do so drawing on the resources of their inheritance to imbue their heritage, and learning “cosmopolitan skills to communicate across difference” (Wessendorf 2014: 165). In the public realm of exchanges between library staff and their clients, and in the parochial realm of interactions between colleagues in the lunch room or in quiet moments on the information desk, the library is a place in which language in use and action reflects the mobility and flux characteristic of superdiversity. We have seen that learning the repertoires required to navigate and participate in the superdiverse city is a dynamic process. It is a combination of choosing elements of inheritance and transforming them into heritage, and learning new ways of being based on the changing social world. It has become clear to us over time that in the superdiverse city ‘heritage’ is not fixed, nor does it belong to a single, essential culture. Rather, it is based on values and practices about which people may be ambivalent, and which are contested and disagreed about. It is changeable, but also versatile, and adaptable. That is, it is protean.

In the Library of Birmingham heritage is suffused with complexity, as indexicals of origin, belonging, and affiliation are woven through everyday interaction. Heritage is not found only in a fixed, essential ‘culture’, but also in the much more unpredictable exchanges of everyday life. These exchanges are themselves subject to change, as ceremonial ritual is deployed almost unnoticeably to restore and transform potentially difficult interactions. In the superdiverse city heritage, subject to conditions of mobility, complexity, and unpredictability, is as much about local ideologies and practices of sameness and difference as about safeguarding the past. These local ideologies include an orientation to difference that is convivial, and recognises difference,
and the dynamic tension between sameness as difference, as a resource to open up space for communication. Translation and translanguaging are often deployed as the communicative means which transform interactions between people whose biographies, histories, and trajectories are different from each other. Moreover, translation and translanguaging are *emblematic* of a positive orientation to superdiversity, as linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and national differences are acknowledged and deployed as a resource. Like Wessendorf (2014:169), we have found that “it is the everyday encounters of local residents, the unavoidability of such encounters and especially the competence of people to negotiate these multiple and diverse relations in different realms which form the glue of a superdiverse society”. This competence, we would argue, is a heritage which we choose to endow the present and the future. What we saw in our detailed linguistic ethnographic observations was that the Library of Birmingham was a convivial place where a multitude of histories, trajectories and expressions converge in overlapping and intersecting localities. The practice of conviviality in a timespace where a multitude of histories, trajectories and expressions converge and overlap constitutes a means to safeguard a positive orientation to superdiversity in the present and the future. This does not mean that old and new structures of prejudice and discrimination – heritage still, for some – have been erased from the social world. But what we saw gave us cause for cautious optimism that a protean heritage for the future is one in which social difference is commonplace, and is a resource in the superdiverse city.
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