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IS LOCAL PLANNING REALLY 'LOCAL'? NATIONAL PLANNING CONTEXT AS A  
DETERMINING FACTOR FOR LOCAL DISCOURSE

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## Abstract

Local planning discourse is torn between three trends: the withdrawal of central governments from local issues, the rise of local expertise and powers, and the mobility of policies from one country to another. While these trends have an impact on local planning, their respective weight is left undiscussed. This paper analyses the textual discourse of 34 French and English local transport plans using textometry combined with the constitution of comparable lexical categories in two languages. Our results show that local discourses are shaped by the national context they belong to, and that no trace of trans-national homogenisation is yet visible.

Keywords: national planning context; planning culture; comparative planning studies; planning institution; local planning discourse; discourse analysis

## 1. Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century, in many European countries local authorities were assigned the task of elaborating plans to establish a framework for land use decisions and development activities by both private and public sector actors. Local planning was further strengthened in the 1980s and the 1990s in several countries, when local authorities were given increased powers (transport, housing, and economic development, for example) and greater budgetary and policy autonomy over their plans.

The elaboration of local plans constitutes a form of 'local planning discourse', and plans represent one of the ways in which local authorities interact with partners and stakeholders to develop discourses about the nature of localities and their future trajectories. Although in the literature local planning discourse can sometimes refer to a wider spectrum of written sources and discourses that go beyond these documents, plans nevertheless represent a significant vector for discourse development and articulation. These plans are clearly identifiable and potentially comparable between countries. Over the last forty years, since the intensification of neoliberal globalisation, local planning discourse has been caught between three major opposing trends that compete and have effects on plan form and content.

Firstly, there has been a withdrawal of the State and other national actors ensuring the coherence of local planning policies on the national territory (Brenner, 2004). Neoliberal globalization and devolution have eroded the capacity of central governments to implement their objectives locally (Savini, 2013). Following the logic of budget cuts, States that were key actors in the formulation of local plans until the 1980s, have since partially withdrawn, and left a larger place for private actors. This trend tends to minimize the effect of central governments and, consequently, tends to weaken homogeneity in local planning discourses within a single country.

Secondly, the different national legal frameworks have invited cities to take ownership of planning documents in order to adapt them to their context. In other words, the legal framework sets up an expectation that the ‘problem setting’ part of the document, as well as the ‘problem solving’ chapters, will be aligned with specific local priorities (CERTU, 1996; Louvet, 2004). This echoes localist discourses extolling the appropriateness of local approaches in planning, given that local authorities are more aware of the specificities of their territory. The devolution of planning responsibilities and powers has also led to a gradual rise of local planning expertise in areas where, for a long time, government services were the dominant actors to plan. All these features suggest that, over several decades, local planning discourse has had to diversify greatly among cities, given their particular characteristics (composition of local private sector, economic base, urban form, local planning history, topography, etc.). This second trend facilitates greater diversification of local planning discourses.

Finally, numerous research studies have shown that public policies are becoming more mobile, notably in the field of urban planning (McCann & Ward, 2011). This mobile urbanism is the product of the action of international consultants, specialised think-tanks and international clubs of cities, and of the increasingly common use of benchmarking by local authorities. As a result, certain urban policy models tend to spread from city to city, independently of national borders. Such transfers are never a matter of copying and pasting a model, but rather assemblages made up of policy elements identified elsewhere, translated and reformed, together with more local elements (McCann & Ward, 2011). This third trend drives the diffusion of certain dominant models of local planning discourse across national borders.

The existence of these three types of trends (i.e., withdrawal of the State, local empowerment and mobile urbanism) and their influence on local discourses is demonstrated in the literature. That said, their respective weights are a matter of debate. For example, the real importance of the mobility of urban policies is questioned by some who wonder whether this is “a real empirical finding” or “the

reflection of the arrival of more scholars into the field” (Benson & Jordan, 2011, p. 372). To the best of our knowledge, these three trends have never been analysed together beyond a single case study, thus limiting possible generalization of the results. This lack of systematic and comparative analysis is regrettable since the balance between these three trends seems fundamental and could theoretically lead to several configurations for local planning discourse.

Configurations for local planning discourse	[1] Withdrawal of the State	[2] Local empowerment	[3] Transnational mobility for planning policies
[A] European uniformisation	High	Low	High
[B] Transnational clusters of specific discourse	High	High	High
[C] Persistence of national pre-eminence on local discourse	Low	Low	Low
[D] High diversity of local discourses	High	High	Low

*Table 1: Four theoretical configurations for local planning discourse*

Table 1 summarises four plausible configurations ranging from (A) European uniformisation of local discourse to (D) total diversification due to territorial specificities and the incomparability of discourses. An intermediate configuration (B) would be when several transnational clusters emerge, bridging together cities with similar discourses; but in this paper we explore a fourth possibility (C), a persistent and primordial explanation of local discourses through their belonging to a national planning context.

In other words, we explore how the differences in national planning contexts affect local planning discourse. Our hypothesis is that, although the State is partly in retreat on local planning issues, and national planning instruments tend to resemble each other, planning cultures (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015) and planning systems and institutions (Taylor, 2013) still differ greatly from one country to another and continue to determine local planning discourse.

To test this hypothesis, we will carry out a textual, systematic and comparative analysis of planning discourse for two relatively similar types of local transport planning documents: English LTPs (Local Transport Plans) and French PDUs (Plans de Déplacements Urbains) covering 34 local plan areas. LTPs and PDUs are typical examples of the Europeanisation (i.e., homogenization) of planning instruments. These instruments appeared in the same period, following the translation into national law of European directives, pressures and recommendations, to allow local authorities to take charge of their local transport planning (Menerault & Mongin, 2000). LTPs and PDUs offer us a chance to test our hypothesis because they are similar in content and form, yet England and France have distinct planning systems and cultures (Booth et al., 2007; Newman & Thornley, 1996). First, however, we need to explore further how national planning contexts can affect local planning discourse.

## **2. National Planning Contexts Matter**

### **a. National planning contexts: a theoretical construct bridging planning cultures and institutions**

Recent research tends to define and underline the importance of planning cultures. Although the concept of planning culture is relatively recent in the literature (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015; Sanyal, 2005) it underlines something that has long been well identified by professionals and scholars: spatial planning in each country has its own particular and unique form. More precisely, in the culturized planning model (Othengrafen, 2010) each national planning culture involves particular planning artifacts (i.e. visible planning products, structures and process), a particular planning environment (i.e.

shared values, assumptions and cognitive frames taken for granted by planning professionals) and a particular societal environment (i.e. taken-for-granted general beliefs and perceptions affecting planning). Planning cultures are therefore “unwritten patterns of power” (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015, p. 2137).

The concept of planning cultures has some detractors who, rightly, point out certain conceptual weaknesses. First, the status that research assigns to planning culture is unclear (Taylor, 2013). Is it an independent variable (i.e., an external force that influences planning and its outcomes) or a dependent one (i.e., subject to macro-structural forces such as globalisation)? Secondly, the concept of planning culture is considered static and, therefore, unable to explain change in national planning systems. Finally, research on planning cultures is largely descriptive, as only a few contributions propose a model for understanding how these cultures are constituted.

Theoretical debate notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to conclude that institutions and cultures interact and form a system. Planning institutions and planning cultures are inseparable entities: national institutions shape planning cultures which in turn reinforce institutions (Taylor, 2013). Therefore, we will consider that the notion of ‘national planning contexts’ encapsulates both planning institutions and planning cultures without trying to identify where one starts and the other stops.

Questions about national planning cultures and institutions have intensified since the early 2000s, because some studies have predicted that neo-liberal globalisation could eventually undermine national planning cultures and gradually homogenise them (Friedmann, 2005). In our case, the European Union has arguably participated in this transformation (Chorianopoulos & Iosifides, 2006) and had effects on national planning systems in Europe (Tewdwr-Jones & Williams, 2001).

Within the architecture of the 'culturized planning model' (Othengrafen, 2010), it seems that



planning artifacts and planning environments are gradually converging: tools and instruments increasingly tend to resemble each other, and ideas are shared through the organization of international conferences, internationalization of academic careers, and exchanges among cities through networks. Societal environments are, however, more difficult to modify and still strongly differentiate planning cultures (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2015, p. 2137).

France and the UK, although close geographically, present divergent planning contexts often seen as polar opposites (Ashford, 1989). With the aim of giving more substance to these differences, we outline below the main contrasts between these two contexts, combining cultural elements and institutional ones. To do so, we sketch the planning contexts at three significant periods in their history: the 19th century, the 1980s and the late 1990s.

### ***Historical polar opposites in planning administrative cultures***

France and the UK's national planning institutions and cultures traditionally reflected contrasting values and beliefs. Newman and Thornley (1996) identify France and the United Kingdom as distinct cultural types which have been stable throughout history, at least from the 19th century: the Napoleonic culture of planning for France (which it shares with Benelux and Southern Europe) and the British cultural model for the United Kingdom, shared across the British Isles.

The British model is based on a legislative framework in which jurisprudence, past experience and empiricism prevail. This model presents a clear separation between the central and local spheres, which inhabit separate worlds that communicate little directly. Local Authorities are politically weaker entities than in France, focusing on the primary purpose of service delivery, and have no constitutional protection (Newman & Thornley, 1996). The British model represents a system where planning involves local coordination of the actions of individuals, central and local governments and where a primary role is given to private actors.

The Napoleonic cultural model of administration and planning is defined by pronounced use of rather abstract legal norms to tackle issues in advance (Newman & Thornley, 1996). These abstract legal norms are then refined through debates (parliamentary, for example) through which they are rendered concrete and implementable. What also distinguishes this cultural model is the municipality as a basic political unit, considered as a counter-weight to central government, with the figure of the Mayor wearing two hats: as a locally elected official and as representative of the state in the municipality. This system is defined, nevertheless, by strong centralisation of decisions and a culture of State interventionism. Consequently, planning represents an instrument of control and power almost exclusively in the hands of the public sphere (Newman & Thornley, 1996).

Occasionally, cultural models of planning seem to experience significant and rapid changes. The 1980s is seen as just such a pivotal period where inflections took place, both in France and in the UK.

### ***Contrary trajectories in the 1980s***

During the Thatcher period (1979-1990) in the UK, change for local authorities and planning was pronounced: local government power was reduced through financial policies, by-passing experiments, and transfer of service provision and responsibilities to the private sector and quangos. All this stemmed from an ideology that gave pride of place both to economic liberalism and the authority of central government (Newman & Thornley, 1996).

Since that time, British cities have been heavily constrained by central government's financial controls. New forms of direct partnerships amongst local and regional, public and private interests have intensified to compensate for the increasing scarcity of central government subsidies. At the end of the 1980s, the combined pressures from grass-roots movements in reaction to the urbanization of rural areas and demands from the EU, forced the government to acknowledge the importance of environmental issues in planning. Plans became (again) "the arena in which the difficult job of

balancing different interest groups could take place.”(Newman & Thornley, 1996, p. 121). But, although plan making has seen a resurgence of interest, local authorities can only use the power if they conform to the limits set by central government.

France similarly underwent major reforms in the 1980s, but took a somewhat different path. The watchword of the time was the devolution of powers to the local level. Local planning was central to devolution. Since 1943, planning had been practiced mainly by technocrats in Paris, in collaboration with decentralised state services in the ‘Départements’, on behalf of the 36,000 municipalities. Decentralisation required the elected representatives of municipalities to take responsibility for drawing up planning documents themselves, at least partially.

### ***The late 1990s and the emergence context of local transport plans***

The end of the 1990s marked a counter-movement to the 1980s in both countries. During this period local transport plans appeared, with distinct objectives. The LTPs were born in 1998 in a wider context of devolution, this time in the UK. Their introduction can be understood as an attempt to give some power to local authorities after years of weakening (Allmendinger et al., 2005; Menerault & Mongin, 2000). For LTPs, as for other local plans, central government kept the last word on providing financial resources. Central Government provides its subsidies over the duration of the accepted plans and calculates the amount of subsidies based on the plan assessment. Central government therefore retains the dominant position in the planning system. Consequently, in the United Kingdom, LTPs are as much a detailed justification for access to subsidies as a planning document for local authorities and their partners. To clarify its own criteria for assessing LTPs, and to ensure that its principles and priorities are incorporated into local documents, in 1999 the Department for Transport published guidance for provisional LTPs – a document revised before each nationally synchronised revision of the plans. This follows a tradition of making explicit recommendations through publishing specific thematic guidelines, as was the case between 1990 and 2012 with the Planning Policy Guidance Notes

and the Planning Policy Statements, and since 2012 with a National Planning Policy Framework (Tewdwr-Jones, 1997). The tradition of drafting guidelines is part of a planning cultural model in which precision and evaluation criteria play important roles.

In France, the introduction of mandatory PDUs in the French context in 1996 can be understood as the opposite movement (Menerault & Mongin, 2000). Its main rationale resides in the intention of bringing the action of many local authorities in the field of local transport under central control. Since 1973 local authorities have benefited from access to their own fiscal resources, which has allowed them to plan their transport relatively independently, in various formats and with diverse results. Therefore, PDUs can be understood as efforts to align local transport strategies, and to ensure the incorporation of national priorities. The main role of the PDUs is to require local authorities to be explicit about how they will implement the new national transport strategy (Offner, 2006).

For PDUs, as for other documents in France, the State systematically retains the power of Prefects (representatives of the Central Government appointed in the 101 'Départements' and 18 'Régions') to check the legality of plans ('contrôle de légalité'). This amounts to scrutinizing the content of the proposed local plans and verifying strict compliance with the legislation currently in force. The legality check is far from a formality and sometimes leads to refusals on the part of Prefects, most often following appeals by pressure groups. By contrast with the United Kingdom, the power of the French central government does not lie in the provision of financial resources but in the exercise of a final control.

There is no tradition in France of planning guidelines, published directly by central government offices. That said, several specific structures were created or reinforced in the early 1990s to ensure that the principles of the law are transposed into local plans. These structures such as CEREMA (the technical centre for planning in France), or ADEME (the French National Agency for controlling energy-consumption) publish short recommendations and how-to guides, organize conferences that bring

together planners and scholars, and propose training courses. Although administratively part of Ministries, the agencies nonetheless formulate priorities independently (CERTU, 1996).

The French approach is less textual than the British one, more related to inter-personal events, and more based on an exegesis of sometimes abstract legal texts. Nevertheless, their preoccupation remains the same: to ensure conformity and coherence in local planning nationwide by incorporating national priorities in plans.

#### **b. National contexts and their effect on local planning discourse**

In both cases of central-local relations, one constant is the existence of a central government that is very far from having lost all control and power over local transport policies - quite the contrary. Centralised control has effects on local planning discourse. For example, when central government imposes a binding framework, local authorities tend to adopt a certain mode of expression that guarantees or, in any case, maximizes their capacity to obtain central government funding (Hastings, 1996; Rydin, 1998) or the approval of their plan by Prefects (Buhler et al., 2018; Buhler & Lethier, 2020).

Recent developments in the literature tend to show that, in addition to their programmatic dimension, plans are, above all, signals sent to one another by planning actors (Hopkins & Knaap, 2018). In our case, local transport plans are largely used by local authorities to convince the central government that local priorities take full account of the national strategy. Thus, a plan cannot deviate from the expectations of legal texts. This generates a measure of national homogeneity in local planning.

#### **c. Language itself has an effect on planning discourse**

Although cities sometimes compete beyond national borders, their planning discourse is still expressed in their national language, following specific constraints and particularities in at least three ways.

First, in the planning prose, some terms are loaded with a particularly strong ideological content (Rydin, 1998), which is inseparable from its context, making them particularly difficult to

translate properly. This leads to situations where terms seem synonymous but turn out not to be. One illustration of the challenge is the comparison between the terms 'partenariat' and partnership. Although in other contexts these terms are considered close equivalents, in planning the first (in French) applies essentially to joint actions between public actors and is little used in planning discourse; the second systematically implies the presence of the private sector and is frequent in British plans. The same is true for many conceptual terms in urban plans (such as 'enabling local actors' or 'territoire'), where words tend to suggest implicit or implied elements, and sometimes mask power inequalities (Barreteau et al., 2016; Rydin, 1998). The semantic history of certain terms in planning is specific to each nation. This can lead to a much greater use in one country than in another where the closest equivalent has little ideological load.

Second, planning actors sometimes use vagueness in plans, to avoid giving too many details surrounding an infrastructure project to come, for example (Buhler, 2021; Buhler & Lethier, 2020). Vagueness can either help to keep information from competing actors (and in particular groups of opponents) or avoid overly precise objectives, thus protecting public actors from criticism if aims are not attained (Kaza & Hopkins, 2009). Vagueness and ambiguity are probably the most difficult discourse elements to translate between languages (Krieg-Planque, 2012) because of language specificities in each country.

Third, more general features of each language tend to affect the types of expressions found in local plans. We might suggest here such features as the frequent use of the passive voice in English, or sentences in French that are systematically longer than in English for similar content, because of a greater appetite for articles and pronouns (Van Bonn & Swales, 2007).

National planning contexts in general, and the Franco-British comparison in particular, show the specificity of the historical, institutional, cultural and linguistic context of local planning in each country. Although nowadays local planning is based on instruments that are becoming more similar across national boundaries, a question remains: do local discourses tend to conform to such

homogenization, and to resemble each other, or do they remain strongly determined by their national context?

### **3. A Comparative and Systematic Analysis of Discourses**

Our aim is to analyse a substantial number of local plans in two countries and identify whether their discourses tend to resemble each other or not, by using a method that is both comparative (i.e., ensuring comparability) and systematic (i.e., allowing reproducibility of results and analysing substantial corpora). We thus seek to address some limitations of existing comparative research on local planning discourses.

#### **a. Textometry as a response to pitfalls in classical comparative research**

Discourse analysis in urban planning emerged in the late 1990s (Hastings, 1999). These studies use a wide spectrum of sources, but most rely on readings of planning documents exclusively grounded in an interpretative or a descriptive approach (Jacobs, 2006).

Relatively few papers can be identified that use planning documents to build international comparative research. Due to the considerable work involved in the qualitative analysis of these documents (i.e., reading, interpretation, comparison in different languages...) such studies are generally based on a few cases: for example, Vienna and Sydney (Brandtner et al., 2017) or Brisbane and Birmingham (Pemberton & Searle, 2016). How representative are such selective case studies? In studies exclusively grounded in an interpretative approach, questions arise concerning the frequent lack of explanation about the methodology used and about the traceability of the interpretative path followed by researchers (Jacobs, 2006). A recurring shortcoming is the potential risk of overgeneralization linked to the analysis of a particular excerpt, the choice of which may be open to debate.

In local planning discourse, the space allocated to each topic is critical: devoting a short

paragraph to an issue in a plan is not the same as giving it several pages of discussion. These nuances are of the utmost importance since documents are generally expressed in non-conflictual terms, and all the topics introduced by the legislative base must be covered to a minimum degree. Thus, planning discourse tends to minimize conflictual subjects that are considered to be low priority. Such features of plans require a specific methodology to analyse nuances and contrasts. Systematic textual data analysis measures the relative importance of terms, or categories of terms, and allows the relative importance of topics to be analysed, beyond the simple presence or absence of a subject (Buhler & Lethier, 2020).

Another pitfall of classical comparative research arises from the use of small data sets. When documents from two or three cities, in different countries, are analysed together it is methodologically difficult to separate the aspects of discourse that are framed by their national context from the specificity of the local strategy developed by the city.

Several methods of Textual Data Analysis are available for analysing relatively large corpora (natural language processing, lexicometry). We selected textometry for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is a computer-assisted and systematic method that allows a quantified approach: calculating the lexical specificity of a group of documents within the corpus, for example, or monitoring a specific term over time. Textometry allows the researcher to return to a qualitative reading of the text at any point, and thus reduces the danger of misinterpretation (for example 'accessibility' in English as in French could refer to geographical accessibility or to a range of measures to enable access for the disabled). When comparing corpora in two languages, the possibility of a return to the original text is crucial. It reduces the risk of mistranslation and misunderstanding partial synonyms that may be employed in quite different ways, such as partnership and 'partenariat'.

#### **b. Are PDUs and LTPs comparable?**

In comparative discourse analysis, corpora have to be sufficiently homogenous (each document in a



corpus should have certain characteristics in common) and comparable (comparison between one corpus and another must be valid) (Kilgarriff, 2001). We chose our sample of French PDUs and English LTPs with these criteria in mind, considering their outline and content, as well as the governance processes surrounding them.

	PDU (France)	LTP (England)
Aims	<b>Equivalent.</b> PDUs and LTPs aim to coordinate transportation modes at the local scale. They are mandatory documents dealing with the infrastructures and services to be put in place, changes in transport modes, urban logistics and access for the disabled. Major objectives are the lowering of car-related emissions and traffic together with a greater use of public transport, walking and cycling.	
Geography	All "agglomérations" (>100 000 inhab.)	all parts of England
Length	approximately 62 000 words/doc.	approximately 40 000 words/doc.
Timing	<b>1996 LAURE Act</b> (PDU became obligatory) Revised every 10 years	<b>2000 Transport Act</b> Initially revised every 5 years synchronically After 2011: frequency of the review at the discretion of the LTA
Power relations	AOMs have financial autonomy AOMs can franchise the service with one operator	LTAs need for Central Government subsidies LTAs license self-financing operators (in competition)

PDUs and LTPs have equivalent aims and are similar in form and size. The main target of these documents is to focus on ways to lower single occupancy car-use in city centres and to develop strategies to reduce transport-sector emissions, while considering social demands and constraints on

car mobility. They generally include a problem setting or problem analysis section, an assessment of the previous document version, an explicit strategy section, and an implementation part in a document of 100 to 300 pages.

The bodies drawing up the documents ('Autorités Organisatrices de Mobilité' or AOMs in France, and Local Transport Authorities or LTAs in England) can be considered geographically equivalent since AOMs are conurbation-wide government entities with comparable responsibilities to English LTAs. There are only minor differences in powers (responsibility for on-road parking in England but not in France). PDUs and LTPs are therefore a good example of the convergence among planning artifacts (Othengrafen, 2010) found in Europe.

#### **c. A large and representative data set**

We chose the corpora to be representative of their national contexts (diversity of political affiliations, city sizes, types of structures drawing up the documents) and to cover a relatively large proportion of all local transport plans (27% of French documents and 26% of English ones). We limited our study to English cases because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different transport planning arrangements. The population sizes and political colour of cities in our sample represent the characteristics of their respective national contexts.

#### **d. Analysing corpora in different languages: categorisation and respect of specificities**

The method developed seeks to reduce bias in textual discourse analysis, but multi-lingual comparisons impose three main limitations. First, it would be meaningless to compare discourses by taking a word-for-word approach: for example, public transport in English has at least three equivalents in French: 'transports publics', 'transports en commun', 'transports collectifs'. So instead, categories of terms with similar meanings in English and French are compared. Consequently, the

statistical inferences will not be calculated from occurrences of a single term or lemma<sup>1</sup> only, but by reference to the category, thus enabling meaningful comparisons.

A second methodological impasse would be to ignore specificities of languages. In our corpora, as well as for other sources, the percentage of verbs or prepositions varies by language, 13% and 10% respectively in English, versus 8% and 15% in French. Statistical analysis on these classes of words would be difficult to interpret due to the difference. Therefore, our categories were drawn exclusively for nouns and adjectives which have a similar frequency in both languages (respectively 33% and 8% in English; 30% and 7% in French).

Finally, another significant error would be to compare the full lexicon of the two sets of documents. The categorization of all terms, even reduced to nouns and adjectives, would be a long project and, sometimes, perfect equivalents would still be difficult to identify. So within nouns and adjectives, we chose to focus on three main objects that belong to the most common vocabulary in transport planning: actors, transport modes and general subjects. The rationale here is to analyse the metrics of the simplest and most common vocabulary in local transport planning. As a corollary, we have chosen not to analyse terms with strong ideological load (such as 'partnership' / 'partenariat'), or terms without equivalents that would misleadingly overestimate national specificities in local discourse (for example, the UK governance system has no equivalent for French Départements).

The constitution of comparable categories of terms required time for verification, comparison, and modification of categories through an iterative process. We developed exhaustive lists containing references to actors at the different levels, on each side: identifying every term related to each category of actor. For example, the intercommunal (unitary council) actor in France, may be referred

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<sup>1</sup> Lemmas are conventional lexical forms which group all the conjugated forms (e.g. 'is', 'are') under the same entity (e.g. 'be'). Similarly, nouns and adjectives are reduced to their masculine singular forms.

to by its name (Communauté d'Agglomération de Besançon), by its territorial brand name (Grand Besançon), or by a simplified reference to its status (la métropole). Moreover, this referencing of actors requires a disambiguation procedure when the words are polysemic. For example, in French and English the terms referring to the territorial institutions also refer to space (e.g. the term 'city' does not mean the same thing in "the city of... has just set up a car-sharing service" and "a 3-point increase in the car ownership rate between 2007 and 2015 in the city of..."). This iterative construction resulted in the identification of three comparable types of actors: local authority, private sector and state sector.

Categories regrouping all the terms related to the transport modes (private motorised modes, urban public transport, cycling, walking, carpooling and sharing) were also drawn up. To complete these modal categories, we constructed a sixth one to enumerate the rather fuzzy formulas regrouping non-motorised modes, such as 'active travel' or 'sustainable modes' that are found in both corpora.

In the same vein, after an exploratory semantic analysis using the software Iramuteq, three main general subjects were found within both corpora: policy-orientated terms, infrastructure-oriented terms, and terms related to people, their safety and health. Policy-related terms are nouns and adjectives associated with the process of planning in its diversity (e.g., consultation, strategy, objective). Infrastructure-oriented terms focus on networks and transport facilities (e.g., road, junction, station). 'People, safety and health' re-groups terms focusing on the individual and their well-being (e.g., person, healthy, lifestyle). These categories form a set of variables that will be the basis of further statistical inquiries.

## **4. Results**

### **a. The national context as the major opposition factor...**

The textometric software TXM allows the user to build a table showing the occurrence of the various categories of terms, where the columns are the categories of terms and the lines are the planning

documents analysed. Twelve variables: ([variables 1 to 3] local authorities, private sector, central government; [variables 4 to 9] private motorised modes, urban public transport, cycling, walking, carpooling and sharing, fuzzy expressions; [variables 10 to 12] policy orientated, infrastructure orientated, people and safety) are expressed in the number of occurrences per 1000 words to take account of the differences in document length. A final variable was added to express the percentage of terms associated with local authorities compared with terms related to other actors: a measure of the relative importance of the local sphere in the document ([variable 13] percentage local authorities / other actors).

These variables were plotted in a principal component analysis (PCA) (see Figure 1). This factorial method of representation is suitable for a data set with multiple quantitative variables. Factor methods transform n-dimensional point clouds (i.e., data set with n variables) into two-dimensional point clouds (or principal components) with a limited information loss. PCAs allow both the representation of statistical individuals (here, planning documents) with the active variables that contributed most to each factor (or axis). On the factorial plan, the longer an active variable is and the more orthogonal it is to a factor, the more it contributes to it.

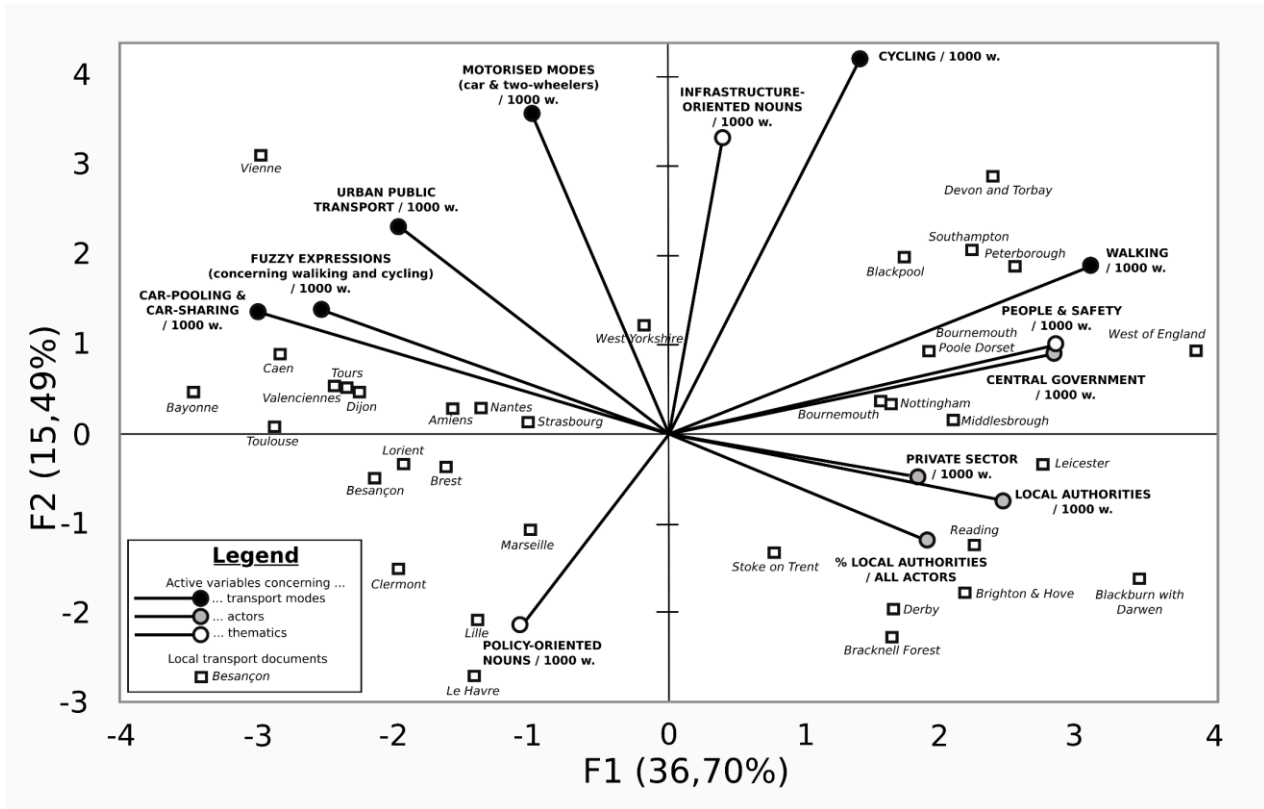


Figure 1 : The national context as the major factor of opposition in the corpus

The PCA analysed here was calculated on the 13 active variables presented above and distributed within the 34 local transport planning documents (LTPs and PDUs). Its two principal factorial axes have 52.19% inertia, meaning that more than half of the general distribution of terms identified in the documents can be explained by the combination of these two major factors. Ten other weaker factors are thus not considered in the Figure.

Factor 1 (F1 36,70% inertia) is the most important in this representation. This factor separates the planning documents according to the country they belong to, with one exception. Thus, 16 English documents are found on the right side of Figure 1. West-Yorkshire's LTP is an exception as it is plotted in the centre of the plan. All 17 French documents are plotted on the left side of the figure.

Factor 1 is strongly determined by the frequency of references to central government, local authorities, and the private sector, and by the frequency of references to local authorities as a

percentage of references to all actors (see right part of Figure 1). References to walking, and to people and their health and safety also contribute to Factor 1. On the other side of the figure, other active variables, negatively correlated to the previous ones, contribute to factor 1: fuzzy expressions (concerning walking and cycling), references to car-sharing and car-pooling, and, to a lesser extent, references to urban public transport.

**b. ... leaving room for discourses that are statistically independent from the national factor**

The second factor is less explanatory of the distribution (15,49% of inertia). It expresses another series of oppositions inside the corpus that are statistically decorrelated from national contexts.

Factor 2 represents an opposition between ‘material and concrete discourses’ on the one hand and ‘policy and procedural discourses’ on the other. In the first type, embodied here by Vienne (FR), Devon & Torbay (ENG) and Southampton (ENG) (upper part of Figure 1) three major active variables seem to play a role (infrastructure-oriented nouns, motorised modes and cycling) together with a lesser contribution from urban public transport related terms. These active variables describe discourse that gives greater importance to material aspects (devices and facilities for mobility, and their geographical sectors), a central focus on modes that require specific infrastructures (such as public transport infrastructure, roads and cycle paths) and set the main issue to be addressed (i.e., the current prevalence of motorised modes at the city level).

Conversely, a second type of discourse can be identified in the lower part of Figure 1, whose main representatives are Le Havre (FR), Lille (FR), Derby (ENG) and Bracknell Forest (ENG). This second part is characterised by an interest in policy and procedure: whether strategy, participation, or the planning document implementation process. In other words, this type of discourse invests more in the policy process than in the material devices and services to be put in place. Although all 34 documents contain

both discourse types, the relative importance of infrastructure oriented and policy oriented emphases) differs greatly from one plan to another.



## 5. Discussion

Above all, our results do not suggest any transnational homogenization of local planning discourse between France and England. A strong homogeneity between two corpora would have led to weak factors difficult to interpret, and a cumulative inertia around a maximum of 10% or 15%. Our results, however, show a strong division between the 34 documents.

### a. Local planning discourses are strongly framed by their national contexts

As Figure 1 showed, the national transport planning context shows the strongest division in our corpus and explains more than a third of the overall distribution of the 13 variables in the 34 documents, which is substantial.

A priori, one would have thought that dominant actors would be cited more frequently: local authorities in France, and central government and the private sector in England. One would also have imagined that the passive voice would limit the occurrences of actors in LTPs, but this is not the case. On the English side, the names of actors, whether local, national or private sector, are much more frequently cited than in France. English Local Authorities need to both secure central government funding and regulate companies in the transport sector. Consequently, they may cite other actors frequently to involve them in the policy process, as well as their own name in order to mark their territory and as a reminder that they are in charge of issues. Local authorities tend to maintain a dominant presence in the discourse, while at the same time citing other actors. This result is in line with a historical British cultural model where the activity of planning consists in driving and coordinating various partners towards common objectives.

Another central result from the PCA is differences in thematic focus. LTPs develop a strong discourse on people, their health and safety in public spaces; this is of smaller importance in France. Reflecting the orientations, walking is presented in LTPs as a central solution, while PDUs particularly focus on car-sharing and car-pooling as a means to lower single occupancy car-use and car ownership. PDUs use fuzzy formulas to refer to walking and cycling ('modes doux', 'mobilité active', ...) and

prioritise urban public transport. These results suggest that the national context shapes local policy discourse in many ways.

#### **b. Local incorporations of national priorities**

Central government priorities can be incorporated by local plans through central government instruments. In the UK, this takes the form of guidelines and subsidies. Healthy Walking and Cycling in England is a perfect illustration. The Department of Health made obesity and subsequent cardiovascular diseases a national priority from the beginning of the 2000s, with an acceleration between 2008 and 2011 (Jebb et al., 2013). Cycling and walking have been identified as solutions to transition to more active life-styles by several central offices. As a consequence, the LTP national guidelines surrounding the 2011 cohort integrated it as a criterion to be incorporated in local documents (Department for Transport, 2009, p. 14). This generates a nationally homogenous focus, which is not found in French documents.

The local incorporation of national priorities also exists in France, although these pass through other instruments: the legality check of Prefects and the role of *ad hoc* public structures that support the local authorities in planning. These organizations set their own priorities. ADEME has identified car-pooling and car-sharing as a strategic leverage on car-use, and financed many local associations set up throughout France in the 2000s (Vincent, 2009). For its part, CEREMA organised events targeting local technical actors during the 2000s and was thus instrumental in the dissemination of concepts throughout the French planning community. The integration of cycling, walking and other non-motorised modes was denominated by certain neologisms such as 'mobilité douce'. In our analysis, references to car-pooling, car-sharing and other fuzzy formulas for walking and cycling are more prevalent in French documents. These results indicate two things. Firstly, the importance of these *ad hoc* public structures, together with the Prefects, in the national harmonisation of local discourse in France. It shows the stability of a cultural planning model and its appetite for abstract concepts in planning.

**c. National frameworks that are less relevant to larger authorities with planning expertise**

Certain cities seem less concerned by national homogenisation. On the British side, the LTP of West Yorkshire – plotted in the middle of the factorial plan - seems relatively independent of any national influence. On the French side, closest to the centre of the plan are Strasbourg and Nantes, the two cities which have long since developed transport planning, notably around the first modern trams in the late 1980s and ambitious cycling policies (Offner, 2006). Marseilles and Lille, for their part, have intercommunal institutions with a high degree of autonomy in terms of budgets and policy orientations, and with many planners. This perhaps explains a greater distance from State priorities, compared to smaller French cities such as Vienne or Bayonne.

**d. Governance configurations that lead to local dominant actors setting their priorities**

Differences in discourse focus may lie more classically in the configuration of the governance system, and more precisely on the presence or not of a dominant actor at the local level. On the French side, the responsibility for implementing PDUs is devolved to locally dominant actors (in terms of power, administration and budget). These structures were primarily created and reinforced during the 1980s and 1990s to operate urban public transport. At the end of the 1990s, and during the 2000s, they gradually usurped communal prerogatives such as public space or highways and roads to create integrated transport and mobility departments, while still prioritising public transport planning and management. This tradition explains why there are more urban transport related terms on the French side of Figure 1. For local transport planning, a configuration with a central and dominant actor tends to focus discourse on elements that the actor controls or identifies as a priority.

Local incorporation of national priorities and the presence of a dominant local actor lead to particularly distinct local discourses in France and England, underlying the significance of discursive framing by the national context that includes both cultural specificities and central-local power relations.



## 6. Conclusions

### a. National contexts as a primary determinant of local discourses

The results of this work underline something that is generally admitted, but which some recent works seem to forget: the 'local' discourse of local planning documents contain an important share of 'national' discourse. 'National' discourse relies on specific power configurations, on planning cultures and on language. These elements imply a certain national uniformity in local documents and a marked difference between plans from different countries, even for documents with comparable form and content.

The analysis carried out on our dataset suggests that there are strategies shared by certain groups of cities, regardless of national affiliation, but the structuring effect of the 'national' discourse remains much stronger. We found no sign of transnational uniformity of discourse. Instead, the discourses of local transport policies in France and England offer a counter-example to analyses suggesting high transnational mobility of local policies. Our analysis calls into question the real importance of transnational policy mobility in local planning. It is possible that the effects of policy mobility are slow in coming, or that we are only at the beginning of a process; however, our results show that local planning discourses in the beginning of the 2010s were far from disembodied in their national contexts. The planning field often prioritises the analysis of what is moving, what is changing, and what is new, to the detriment of structures, repetitions and determinisms. Thus, certain phenomena are over-exposed in the literature, but may remain marginal in the daily exercise of planning. As a corollary, the determining role of the State and other national planning actors on local discourse is under-exposed in the literature but becomes evident in our analysis.

The BREXIT process will almost certainly limit or slow down the convergence of planning instruments between the UK and EU countries. Significant political change calls for research taking into account the diachronic dimension: to identify the evolution of local discourses over time, and their trajectories between nationally specific or global homogenisation.

### **b. Insights on methodological issues**

Methodological conclusions can be drawn about international comparative research on planning discourse. Papers that qualitatively compare a small number of documents encounter one major methodological impasse: when a comparison involves city documents, that are thought of as strongly independent of their national context, it runs the risk of analysing discourses as if they were the exclusive product of cities. Consequently, such research omits the role of national actors in the 'local' discourse found at the city scale. For example, comparing Southampton and another city in the world on walking policy discourse could be misleading as this discourse is essentially national rather than particularly local: it relies on multiple Central Government initiatives and guidelines on the subject. International comparative research on planning discourse could be improved in two ways: larger data sets and the use of systematic and replicable tools. Comparing at least five or six planning documents, representative of each country, would allow a more reliable identification of the 'national' aspects of certain issues. Replicable tools and methods – at least in combination with interpretative grounded methods - seem to be a *sine qua non* condition to ensure minimal bias and the consideration of contrasts between documents. These two methodological imperatives will enable comparative analyses to separate what is a local application of national discourses and what is 'really' a local discursive specificity.

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