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Jürgen Jaspers and Michael Meeuwis

Away with linguists! Normativity, inequality and metascientific reflexivity in sociolinguistic fieldwork

Abstract: This paper addresses the fact that in spite of the descriptive and well-intentioned ambitions of much sociolinguistic-ethnographic research, members of studied groups often continue to interpret such research as a largely vertically organized socio-political activity that communicates a prescriptive social and linguistic normativity the researcher is inevitably taken to embody. We argue that while many researchers agree that sociolinguistic fieldwork is inherently political, actual descriptions of informants' awareness of this are still rather scarce. In the process, we demonstrate how members' metascientific reflexivity can be particularly active precisely in and during fieldwork encounters and in the entire research event, complicating the idea of a pure and disinterested description and understanding.

Keywords: metascientific reflexivity, prescriptivism, observer's paradox, sociolinguistic fieldwork, Flemish Belgium, Belgian Congo

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1 Introduction

Probably all contemporary linguistic research insists on the purely descriptive nature of its endeavors as much as it writes off prescriptivism as a mark of bygone, 19th century academic habits. Related to this, much current sociolinguistic research is convinced of its politically benign intentions towards the groups it sets out to describe, which it often selects from among the disenfranchised communities of modern society. In this paper we wish to demonstrate how members of such communities often continue to interpret the well-intentioned research practices they are subjected to in prescriptivist terms, that is, as fundamentally driven by the linguistic norms prevailing in their society at

that time, and as inevitably determined by a relationship of political verticality between themselves and the establishment-representing researcher.

In concentrating on members' interpretations of research practices, we do not intend to help overcome what is usually described as a methodological, 'technical' issue in qualitative research manuals, such as the trouble with reluctant or resistant respondents (see Adler & Adler 2002 for an example of this). Such an approach diagnoses informants' interpretive behavior as a consequence of their personal traits, be it an unwillingness based on alleged paranoia or a lack of sufficient information on the well-intentionedness of the research. As Schwalbe & Wolkomir (2002: 206–207) argue, it suggests that informants' interpretations and possible objections are nothing but 'noise that one must filter out in order to get at the real data.' Important strands in sociolinguistic research, especially those associated with the work of William Labov, have done exactly that, contributing to a long tradition that strives to minimize the possible effects of the so-called observer's paradox through weeding out all data that could point at speakers' metalinguistic or metascientific awareness – in spite of Cicourel's early advice (1964, 1968: 112–123; see also Briggs 1986) always to examine fieldwork and interview 'problems' for their potential to offer informative value in and by themselves, and to interpret every researcher–researched encounter as a social-communicative event on a par with any other type of everyday interaction. Inversely, recent years have seen much more attention to 'inauthentic,' exceptional, self-conscious, and observer-paradoxed speech (to name only a few, see Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2009; Coupland 2007; Jaspers 2011b; Madsen 2013; Rampton 1995, 2006), not least because such speech is seen as a highly rewarding starting point for analyzing how it (implicitly) comments on the situation in hand at the same time as it reveals speakers' perceptions of and engagements with larger-scale ideologized representations of language and social behavior. In fact, Michael Silverstein (2012) gives a fascinating argument in a recent chapter to show that a thorough reconsideration of the metalinguistic awareness displayed by Labov's informants in his classical variational studies can actually shed important new light on 'what happened' when these informants responded to Labov's team's stimuli. This paper will likewise treat metalinguistic and metascientific data as 'real' data.

In attending to informants' awareness of sociolinguistic fieldwork, we do not wish to prove as much as consider it a valuable starting point that social science is always predisposed to taking as its object of study the problems that echo 'the sociopolitical mood of the times' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 240; see also Varenne & McDermott 1999), and that sociolinguistic fieldwork practice is often shot through with pre-theoretical conceptions and ideological assumptions. There have been various accounts of this type already, proffered either by

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(sociolinguistic) ethnographers analyzing fellow ethnographers (e.g., Stocking 1983), feminist fieldworkers (Kondo 1986; Henry 2003; Wolf 1996) and by self-ethnographers introspectively gauging what goes on during the fieldwork (e.g., Agar 1980; Christensen 2004; Goldstein 2002; Hintzen & Rahier 2003). It has likewise been argued extensively, at least since the 1960s, that research in the humanities, and linguistic fieldwork in particular, is inherently relational and political (Rabinow 1977; Fabian 1995; Tedlock 2003, among many others). Thus, researchers are invited to recognize that ‘the real is relational’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 232) and that their research, as a social activity, is embedded in a larger sociopolitical field where they occupy specific positions vis-à-vis their informants or objects of study.

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We inscribe ourselves in this tradition. But to go one step beyond these observations, what we wish to focus on through evoking ‘the social production of the ethnographer from the informants’ point of view’ (Venkatesh 2002: 91) is how the fundamentally prescriptivist and political nature of linguistic research may be an active element in the metascientific interpretations informants make both of the researcher and of their relationship with him or her. Cameron *et al.* (1992: 5) rightfully stress that if ‘research subjects ... are active and reflexive beings who have insights into their situations and experiences,’ then these insights and experiences merit description since they affect the practices fieldworkers have isolated for study. Insights and experiences of being the object of research ought not, in our view, be exempt from such a description, especially as they help explain the research as a ‘relational’ event, subject to interaction between researcher and informants, and conditional to what researchers approach as ‘real.’ Our point is that knowing that the ‘real is relational’ is not just a property of reflexive academic thinkers, engaged in the sociology of scientific practice, but that this insight also belongs to those who find themselves being investigated or recruited for research. And we will argue in what follows that lay members’ metascientific reflexivity can be particularly active precisely in and during fieldwork encounters and in the entire research event, complicating the idea of a pure and disinterested description and understanding.

To set the stage for this discussion, we shall first briefly present a historical case of overt prescriptivism to illustrate how this was perceived, received, and countered ‘from below.’ This account will provide a stepping stone for a discussion of descriptive linguistics, which we will argue is not fundamentally different from old, overt types of prescriptive regulation.

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2 From overt to covert prescriptivism

Most researchers would find it wholly uncontentious that prescriptive linguistics, whether in the form of corpus or status planning, must be seen as a ‘vertical’ and fundamentally authoritative enterprise. It presupposes hierarchical relations between a linguist, or a body of linguists, and language users, since intended changes in the structural or lexical fabric of the involved language or in the contexts of its use depend on a directive emanating from a linguistic authority that is recognized as such by the subjects whose language behavior is to be altered. Equally uncontroversial is the fact that ‘prescribed’ language change is never fully effective. The least successful endeavors leave no traces at all, while the most successful ones may approximate, but never perfectly represent, the initially envisaged design; the majority occupy the many intermediate points between these two extremes (Kristiansen & Coupland 2011; Spolsky 2004).

A crucial obstacle in the way of a perfect realization of ‘prescribed’ plans and designs is language users’ metalinguistic awareness. Language users are never merely the passive receivers or submissive implementers of norms and standards issued to them from above, notably because they have ideas of their own about language and language use. This is why [linguistic] reforms that “stick” are not the most “natural”, “efficient” or “rational” in linguistic terms, but those which are found to be congruent with widely held beliefs about “the ways things ought to be” (Cameron 2004: 319), and why language users are often seen to appropriate prescriptions in unintended directions. In other words, in language standardization and language planning, not only the prescribers and planners, but the ‘subalterns,’ too, are agents (see, e.g., the contributions in Cuvelier *et al.* 2010).

To illustrate this we refer to the case of the Bantu language Lingala, spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly the Belgian Congo (cf. Meeuwis 2006, 2009, 2010). Lingala issued from the pidginization of Bobangi in the last quarter of the 19th century. Around the turn of the 20th century, Belgian Catholic missionaries, e.g., Egide De Boeck (1875–1944), recognized the impressive geographical spread of this pidginized language and the social efficacy with which people made use of it as a lingua franca. But, epitomizing a more general stance towards pidgins at the time, they were appalled by its restructured features, such as the highly reduced verbal and nominal inflection systems, and a wide range of lexical and grammatical generalizations, to name only a few. In response to this, they set out on a wholesale programme of corpus planning, attentively designing additional grammatical rules and new lexical forms. They were, in other words, expanding the lexicon and grammati-

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151 cal structures of the language from above, with the aim ‘to form ... a more
 152 correct language’ (De Boeck, in Hulstaert & De Boeck 1940: 124) and ‘to bring
 153 this “jargon” back into the grammatical descendancy of its ancestor languages’
 154 (De Boeck 1904: 4). In regions where they held monopolies over educational
 155 and mission networks, they managed, to high degrees, to have the local popu-
 156 lations internalize the confected language, and pass it on to following genera-
 157 tions. This was much more difficult to accomplish outside of these regions.
 158 Especially in the capital Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), it was easier said than
 159 done to renovate the daily language behavior of a cultural vanguard, a socially
 160 self-conscious, and rapidly growing urban population. There, the missionaries’
 161 intended language change met with linguistic-ideological resistance, similar to
 162 what Joseph Errington, referring to other situations across the colonized world,
 163 describes:

164 The capacity to devise [language forms] did not translate into full control of the ways
 165 they were ‘transmitted’ to colonial subjects: not just taught but learned, not just imposed
 166 but assimilated in ways missionaries did not necessarily recognize or condone. (Errington
 167 2008: 120)

168 Largely unreceptive to the missionary language, Leopoldville residents contin-
 169 ued to use Lingala in daily life as it already existed in its pidgin forms and
 170 developed it in directions of their own, introducing loanwords from languages
 171 the prescribing missionaries had not taken into account and expanding the
 172 grammar in other than prescribed ways. To mark the distance between ‘ordi-
 173 nary’ Lingala and its missionary variant, the residents of the capital coined
 174 distinguishing labels for the latter, such as ‘book Lingala,’ ‘Church Lingala,’
 175 and ‘missionary Lingala,’ thus accepting it – and at the same time keeping it
 176 at bay – as a language for a very limited set of purposes.

177 We want to use this example from the African colonial context as a step-
 178 ping stone for a discussion of descriptive linguistics. Descriptive linguistics has
 179 always been opposed to prescriptive linguistics, with the former seen as an
 180 emblem of good, modern, (socio)linguistic practice and the latter as a tradi-
 181 tional, preachy grammarian custom that hindered the study of actual language
 182 form and use. Colonial linguistics, however, is one of the fields that has most
 183 acutely drawn attention to the idea that power, hierarchy, and authority are
 184 not only involved in prescriptive linguistics but may also deeply characterize
 185 the descriptive study of language. Since the 1980s and especially the 1990s, a
 186 wide range of studies (Fabian 1983, 1986; Harries 1988; Errington 2008; Makoni
 187 2013; see Meeuwis 2008 for a succinct overview) has shown that linguistic
 188 descriptions in colonial contexts re-enacted the ideological scaffolds of colonial
 189 ruling as they were operationalized in the ethno- and geolinguistic categoriza-

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tions of the colonized. Descriptive linguistics under colonialism implied the colonizer's and missionary's prerogative to delineate and classify speech forms, to decide which variants were worthy of description and which were not, thus creating bounded 'languages' (Gal & Irvine 1995; Makoni & Pennycook 2007). Moreover, as Stoler (2002: 8), referring to Hacking (1995), argues, 'the power of such categories rests in their capacity to impose the realities they ostensibly only describe.' Thus, the 'descriptive' exercise immediately allowed the colonial linguists to present the selected forms and described variants as the norm, generating qualitative hierarchies of standard ('good') language forms, versus lower-grade 'dialects,' hierarchies which in their turn were translated into hierarchies of peoples, indexically or metonymically related to the speech forms (see also Gilmour 2006: 3).

Apart from a few notable exceptions, active state colonialism, or at least the form it took in the 19th and early 20th centuries, has by and large disappeared. But as an ideological, socio-historical phenomenon that inspired and legitimated the active exploitation and submission of populations deemed eligible for such interventions, it need not, in all probability, be seen as a hallmark of yesteryear. Errington indeed asks 'whether ... linguists are justified in regarding their field as having left its colonial roots' (2008: 150). It is hard to ignore the fact that from their inception, disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and anthropology have been intensely fascinated with studying non-modern, non-European, non-bourgeois others (e.g., Asad 1973; Moerman 1974; Ritchie 1993). And it is not an overstatement to claim that this trend of fascination persists today given how mundane it still is that researcher-researched relationships generally obey these historical distinctions: middle-class, white, Western members usually study working-class, non-white, developing country members, or their 'representative immigrants' in Western countries, rather than the other way around. Political verticality may thus not only be a characteristic of linguistic descriptions as they were carried out under the historically contingent conditions of colonialization. Increasingly, therefore, the common belief held by social scientists in the righteousness of their intentions to 'elevate the humble' is making room for the realization that their own scholarly descriptions of social and linguistic behavior, and the classifications of speech forms or human groups they unavoidably imply, are 'not a benign cultural act but a potent political one' (Stoler 2002: 8; see also Blommaert 1999: 434; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 12; Kroskrity 2010). Such acts do not necessarily have beneficial consequences. '[A]ny language description implies an intervention into people's lives, and the intervention might have unexpected adverse effects on exactly those same people whose interests we think we are promoting or safeguarding' (Makoni & Pennycook 2007: 32; Stroud 2004; see also Joseph & Taylor 1990 on

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the ubiquity of ideology in description). A number of authors have therefore argued that we must attend to the possible collateral damage or detrimental consequences linguistic work may have for those who are described: ‘We should be asking ... who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why language serves as a terrain for competition’ (Heller & Duchêne 2007: 11).

What is generally missing in these accounts is that this awareness of the fundamentally political, power-permeated nature of descriptive linguistic and sociolinguistic work is not just the privilege of reflexively aware social scientists, but that it is available to language using ‘subjects’ as well. There are not, furthermore, very many descriptions available of informants’ actual metascientific reflexivity. As mentioned in the introduction, when such descriptions are produced, they immediately raise the specter of the observer’s paradox. The more ethnographees are seen to be aware of the research they are participating in, the less ‘real,’ ‘true,’ and unmonitored they supposedly become, and the less useful as objects in an essentially nostalgic social science predicated on describing social behavior as it occurred before the arrival of science and the modern world it represents (cf. Bucholtz 2003). Hence the work many sociolinguists have put into avoiding ‘unreal’ data, and the idea that sociolinguists and ethnographers ought ideally to be invisible when they do their work, or non-identifiable in terms of language, income, gender, sexuality, style of hair, hidden agenda, and so on. But in effacing whatever ethnographees think or say about them and their activities, researchers may have been able to create the positivist fiction of being a fly on the wall, though only at the cost of representing their informants as ethnographic dopes, unable to understand the workings of modern science.

Consequently, in what follows we will first describe how informants detected or presumed linguistic normativity as the bottom-line of one linguistic-ethnographic case study, after which we shall illustrate how this perception of prescriptivism was couched in a larger set of verticality-implying representations of the fieldworker and the research.

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3 Detecting linguistic normativity

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The case study is a sociolinguistic-ethnographic investigation of linguistic variation conducted by Jürgen at an urban, multi-ethnic, lower league secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium, around the turn of the 21st century (Jaspers 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011a, 2011b). The study set out to describe the reality of

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- 395 8. Karim: | H-WA!?! [.] JÜRGEN?
 396 | 'H-WHA? [.] JÜRGEN?'
 398 9. HEI [lacht] () hé
 399 'HEY [laughs] () eh'

401 Karim asks Aziz a quite schoolish and evaluative question, to which Aziz replies
 402 in the best possible way: he admits to having studied for four hours already,
 403 saying this in Standard Dutch, the variety these pupils are expected to use at
 404 school. Neither Karim nor Aziz really excelled at school and would rather be
 405 caught dead than found talking Standard Dutch to each other in a serious way,
 406 so we can interpret Karim as animating the fieldworker's role through asking
 407 questions about school-related matters, something that Aziz immediately plays
 408 along with through doing being the interviewee. So much is also clear when
 409 we see how the exchange is reframed in line 5, where Aziz juxtaposes what he
 410 suggested before in both form and content: he now admits to indulging in
 411 sexual rather than, or alongside, intellectual pleasures, and he says this in a
 412 stylized Antwerp dialect, the variety that is diametrically opposed to Standard
 413 Dutch. The result is a multi-layered process of destabilization: through sexually
 414 thematizing the fieldworker, Aziz 1) breaks through and 'down-keys' (Goffman
 415 1974) the frame of the exchange that Karim initiated (in which Karim imperson-
 416 ated Jürgen); 2) talks about sex and taboo sexual fantasies at school; 3) reverses
 417 the gaze that the fieldwork imports (see also extract 5 below) and tackles the
 418 powerful figure of the fieldworker on his own turf (the recording); 4) denatural-
 419 izes, even if temporarily, the fact that he is being recorded and observed, and
 420 so negotiates his inclusion in a research frame that he took to be representative
 421 of a wider social and linguistic hegemonic order of norms; 5) complicates the
 422 retrieval of scientific knowledge that the researcher was hoping to collect
 423 through recording them (also see extract [5]).

424 Fleeting and playful as these signs of metalinguistic awareness may seem,
 425 later in the fieldwork, during retrospective interviews in which Jürgen replayed
 426 extracts for the recordings, it would appear that metalinguistic awareness of
 427 the fieldwork and its possible outcomes was less innocent or inconsequential.
 428 As is illustrated at length in Jaspers (2008), pupils repeatedly disagreed with
 429 the use of linguistic labels that would earmark their own regular speech as
 430 somehow special or remarkable, *in spite of the obvious and hearable differences*
 431 they noticed themselves. This means that at least some of these pupils passion-
 432 ately rejected white teenagers' imitation of (some of) their speech features as
 433 pathetic attempts to 'act Moroccan' from 'slimeballs' who want to 'kiss ass'. As
 434 one pupil said: 'Belgians who talk Dutch with a Moroccan accent just want to
 435 show to other Belgians "hey I've got Moroccan friends", but then talk "serious"

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had access to the teacher's room and that he could come and go to school as he pleased. But while these references to being somebody who was checking up on them for other reasons than he seemed to be admitting wore off as Jürgen's presence at the scene grew, some representations were much harder to shed. Though he repeatedly suggested being called by his first name, which some certainly did, others continued calling him 'sir' through the fieldwork, as if he was a (temporary or trainee) teacher and certainly not 'one of them.' In his field notes, Jürgen regularly noted that he was attributed elite cultural qualities (in terms of dress or music) and high intelligence. One example is:

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- (2) During class Mourad notices a special offer in an old magazine for ten Mozart CDs and asks me: 'hey, isn't this something for you?' A bit later Samir likewise suggests I have a predilection for classical music when he asks: 'which music do you like? Pavarotti or what?' as he imitates a bombastic violin player. (fieldnotes)

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At other moments pupils were in awe of the fact that Jürgen had attended 'general secondary education' – symbolically higher in the ranking than the technical track the pupils under investigation were following – and expressed true surprise at the news that he had never had to take an extra year at school or feigned disappointment at his inability to solve a mathematical problem after obtaining 'an A1 degree.' He was called 'smarty' on a couple of occasions and got sanctioned for using 'too difficult words.' When one pupil asked if he 'had picked up a lot of girls here already' and Jürgen jokingly replied 'but of course, all of them,' the pupil answered 'ha yes, with a formula right?'

Another way in which relations of societal inequality between observer and observed transpired was in how pupils facetiously or less facetiously suggested they were somehow involved in criminal matters through offering to sell drugs, cell phones, and other goods. One pupil, Aziz, thus said, 'If you need speed or pills just ask, or don't you know anyone who needs those things? A gram is only 130 francs [= 3 euros].' Jürgen found some pupils flagging surprising amounts of money at him, or putting money in his hands and suggesting it was a gift, subsequently saying, upon receiving the money back, that they 'were offering it only once.' During one interview, Jürgen was told that he would never be able to understand them, because he belonged to a group of people for whom crime (at least the blue collar type) is taboo:

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- (3) *Participants and setting.* February 2001. Interview with Mourad (20), Adnan (19) and Moumir (21) (simplified and abbreviated transcription).

- Mourad: Jürgen Jürgen, do you know- do you want to understand us? 310
 Do you really want to understand us? [...] Because you guys are never 511
 going to really understand us. Just drop by one of these days, at a pub, 512
 and then you'll see how we sit there. [...] No, Jürgen look, among your, 513
 I'm not exaggerating or anything, but crime among your kind that's ... 514
 taboo. But we grew up with it. Look where we were raised, on one corner 515
 there was a restaurant of the Albanian mafia itself, and we know all the 516
 pubs, we know all the dealers, these are all friends of ours, are we going 517
 to report them to the police or something? That's just impossible, we 518
 grew up with it. Just come and have a look, you'll see it all- everything 519
 happens in front of you, and we just laugh with it, it's become a habit, 520
 we grew up with it. Have you ever seen *kilos* [of drugs]?! 521
- Some pupils also seemed to find that the fieldworker was prudish, or at least 522
 they seemed to want to test how easily he could be shocked by sexually offen- 523
 sive references. So they frequently mentioned sexual activity, presuming not to 524
 know anything and wanting advice on very specific sexual acts that Jürgen 525
 would have to be expert in given that he was a couple of years older. One or 526
 two pupils were quite inquisitive and asked him about his own sexual activity, 527
 offered to give him interesting videos and tried to hook him up with girls at 528
 school. Here is one example: 529
- (4) During practical mechanics class, Aziz and Saïd are talking about 'the 530
 Bazaar', a pub supposedly next to the large hotel on Antwerp's Astrid 532
 Square, where Aziz pretended to work as a male prostitute. I am invited 533
 to come and take a look. Aziz then asks whether I am gay, 'because you 534
 can be honest about it, with the Millennium and all' ('The Millennium' 535
 was used throughout class as a legitimation for noteworthy or remark- 536
 able deeds and confessions). A bit later Aziz and Saïd return, continuing 537
 their conversation about sex, now asking whether I have had sex yet, if 538
 I never hire prostitutes, how long it has been since I have had sex, how 539
 often a day I perform masturbation, and so on. (I remember that on 540
 another occasion Karim wanted to know if I had performed oral sex on 541
 a woman and 'whether that tastes good'). Saïd then goes on to tell me 542
 that Karim – who isn't at the scene – has experienced a trauma because 543
 he has been abused by his neighbour, called 'John', when he was little 544
 (which is patently untrue). He says that Karim came to school crying 545
 and that the only reason he could mention was 'John'. Aziz adds: 'yeah, 546
 but that was the first time I heard about him, I didn't know about him 547
 then'. A couple of minutes later Saïd tells me that his classmate Neal 548
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20. Chakib: **da kan na niemeer hé** [.] Jürgen [.] I lo- I love you [.] I-
'that can't be true eh [.] Jürgen [.] I lo- I love you [.] I'
21. Aziz: | Jürgen **ik heb aa deur joenge wa deedegij**=
| 'Jürgen I know what you're up to what were=
=**ginder in 't stadspark?** [.] **hé?**
=*you doing over there in the city park? [.] eh?*'
22. Chakib: **héhé boom d-boom 43 wa deed gij daar? hé?**
'heyhey tree d- tree 43 what were you doing there? eh?'
23. Aziz: **ge wou mijne flikker zien** [.] **weet- en ik weet aa wonen** [.]
'you wanted to see my willy [.] know- and I know where you live [.]
=**potverdorie mejaawe fiets** [.] **hé detective**
=*darn with your bicycle [..] hey detective'*
24. Chakib: | ja ja en-en-en-
| 'yes yes and-and-and
25. Aziz: | **(gij zijt hier)**=
(you are here)=
26. Chakib: **=BIJ MIJN KLOETE joenge kloete Jürgen kloete** [.] **vuile vetzak**
=*WITH MY BOLLOCKS boy bollocks Jürgen bollocks [.] dirty bastard*
27. Aziz: **misschien gaat die ons verklikken** [.] **ik heb die gisteren bij de**=
maybe he's going to grass on us [.] I've seen him yesterday with the=
28. Aziz: **politie gezien** die stem zo 'AJAJA da's Hamid [.] Hamid'
police his voice like "YESYES that's Hamid [.] Hamid".'

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In this example and in the preceding interaction, we find an abundance of fieldworker representations. Jürgen is presented as a police informant (line 1) who 'went to the cops' to grass on them (lines 4–5 and 29–30), a detective (line 25), as a gay sex cruiser in Antwerp's city park (which was renowned for this at the time) (lines 21 to 24), as a sexual object (Chakib in lines 3 to 10), as a bicycle owner (lines 1 and 25), as a dirty bastard (line 28) and as somebody who has blue eyes (lines 9 and 11–12). Jürgen is also threatened in various ways: Aziz promises to run him over (lines 1–2), says that he knows where he lives (line 24), Chakib mentions a black eye (line 3, but he misunderstands Aziz, thinking he means giving Jürgen a black eye [which is 'blue eye' in Dutch]), and not least, if Jürgen were to join them on their school trip to Prague, Aziz has an extravagantly violent sexual act in mind (rape through the nose, mentioned just before extract [5]).

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Both pupils knew that everything would be on tape and were convinced that the fieldworker was going to listen to this (they knew where the pause button was), so they seemed to be enjoying themselves knowing that Jürgen would be noticing this on the tape afterwards. Presumably this is also why these pupils did not, for example, sabotage or simply break the recording equipment. (For certainly Aziz was not to be taken lightly: a couple of months later he got arrested for three armed robberies and was sent away to a juvenile

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through filling up valuable recording time with what they presume is going to deliver useless data; 2) insulting, ridiculing and threatening the authority figure of the fieldworker and his interests (even if out of earshot during the actual recording); and 3) they are doing all this within the confines of an institutional setting that has allowed the research to take place on its premises and that strongly disapproves of the production of such anti-authoritarian discourse and of non-cooperation with an officially ratified activity such as a linguistic ethnography.

Strictly speaking, it would be possible to see the data above as a ‘technical problem’ (Adler & Adler 2002). They seem to demonstrate the fieldworker’s inability to secure successful access, or illustrate his permanent outsider status for at least some of these pupils. The data suggest failure, compared to an ideal of ethnography as a practice where ‘good’ ethnographers distinguish themselves by their capacity for chameleonic disappearance into the woodwork. But as Venkatesh argues:

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if we take seriously the proposition that relations between fieldworker and informant form a constitutive part of ethnographic research, then reconstructing the informants’ point of view ... can aid the researcher in the more general objective of determining patterns of structure and meaning among the individual, group, and/or community under study ... The interaction of fieldworker and informant is itself potentially revealing of the local properties of social structure and may also be mined to illuminate chosen research questions. (Venkatesh 2002: 92)

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Representations of fieldwork and potential contestations of it should in this sense be seen as ethnographic opportunities rather than signs of failure or distortions of the ‘actual’ data. We will tie the above together in our discussion and conclusion.

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5 Discussion and conclusion

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We started this article by arguing that language users’ metalinguistic awareness often stands in the way of institutional prescriptivism: language users’ own ideas of appropriate language use often leads official language prescription in unintended directions, as we have illustrated through our discussion of the evolution of the language Lingala in the Belgian Congo. Subsequently, and in line with Errington’s (2008: 150) question ‘whether ... linguists are justified in regarding their field as having left its colonial roots’, we have argued that while most contemporary linguists would now frown upon the overt political and ideological drift of prescriptive linguistic work and express their loyalty to a

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Ritchie 1993). But just as prescriptivism remains a powerful backdrop of descriptive linguistic research, it would be unwise to ignore that most academic research conceives of itself as disinterested, beneficial and neutral. Thus, while this article changes little about the verticality between ethnographer and ethnographees, it is necessary to point out that this hierarchy exists, that ethnographees are aware of it and that sociolinguistic ethnographic research needs to take this into account.

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Bionotes

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