

A sociolinguistic ethnography of pupils' speech in Flanders: trying to clear the fog

Linguistic ethnography – education – Flanders - tussentaal

Flemish linguists and opinion makers haven't always been welcoming the evolution, but it is clear now that "a standard variety of Belgian Dutch [...] is in any case losing ground to the variety of colloquial Belgian Dutch [...] referred to as *Tussentaal*" (literally *in-between-language*) (Grondelaers & van Hout, 2011). While this contrasts with the Flemish education ministry's renewed demands that all pupils speak Standard Dutch, it is striking that there are virtually no data available of current colloquial Dutch in Flanders (De Caluwe, 2009; Grondelaers & van Hout, 2011; Van de Velde, 2002; but see e.g. Jaspers, 2011). At the same time, linguists are increasingly at odds over whether *tussentaal* can be seen as one separate variety. There are indications that the situation is more complex and unpredictable, with speakers often producing eclectic linguistic cocktails that range from 'speaking more dialectal' to using a 'fairly standard' speech style (Vandekerckhove & Nobels, 2010).

Traditional, sociolinguistic – mainly quantitative – descriptions of this complex situation do not seem to brighten up the discussion. Linguistic ethnography helps us discovering categories and meanings, rather than presupposing and testing them (Eckert, 1997) and it encourages us to dive into day-to-day practice where the (re)construction and negotiation of meaning happens (ibid.). The current research therefore intends to analyse language use and perceptions of pupils in a secondary school using sociolinguistic-ethnographic methods. It investigates what pupils exactly speak, what variation this speech is characterized by, what motives pupils have for speaking as they do, and how this hangs together with their perception of themselves, each other and their social environment. Already, the limited results of the research reveal some important aspects of the language use and attitudes of the pupils which can contribute to the discussion about the conceptualization of *tussentaal* and its role in Flemish education. So maybe linguistic ethnographies will help clearing the fog in the (future) linguistic skies of Flanders.

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