

The acquisition of sociolinguistic variation among contemporary urban youth. An interactional perspective with evidence from Antwerp.

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‘Lentepoets’ (Spring cleaning)



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Interaction (example 1) illustrates awareness of:

- linguistic variation
 - hierarchization of variation
 - stereotypes of minority youth
 - language learning expectations
- > symptomatic for larger socio-linguistic context



Acquisition of sociolinguistic variation

Linguistic-ethnographic case study of two multi-ethnic classes in Antwerp at a secondary school (Jaspers 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008, 2011a, 2011b).

- Clear signs of acquisition of sociolinguistic variation
- Perceptually and in linguistic practice

Acquisition of sociolinguistic variation

In linguistic practice:

- See small-scale statistical evidence (cf. table 1)
- See awareness of sociolinguistic variation in interaction
- See ‘stylisations’: imitations of varieties that are situated at the extremities of one’s linguistic repertoire

Stylisations: definition

- [S]tylisation involves an “artistic image of another’s language” (Bakhtin 1981: 362). [...] When someone switches into a stylised voice or exaggerated accent, there is a partial and momentary disengagement from the routine flow of unexceptional business, and the recipients are invited to use their broader understandings of society to figure out exactly what ‘image of another ‘s language” this is actually supposed to be.

Stylisations: definition

- At the same time, the recipients are also asked to figure out exactly what dimension of the practical-activity-on-hand the voice or accent might be relevant to – so as well as “What is this voice representing?” there is the question: “How is this voice relevant to the business-on-hand?”. And on top of that, they are invited to provide an evaluation – “Is this representation any good?” How does the performed image compare with your own sense of the language, people and events being modelled?”.

Stylisations: definition

- Overall, the stylised utterance constitutes a small, fleeting but foregrounded analysis, suggesting that the person, event or act that occasions the switch-of-voice can be classified and understood as the instance of the more general social type that the different voice evokes. This small piece of analysis is offered for public consumption, and the recipients can welcome, ignore or reject it in the interactional moves that immediately follow, celebrating or forgetting it in the activity after that". (Rampton 2006: 225)

Stylisations

Other references: Coupland 2001: 345, 2007: 146ff.;
Rampton 2001: 85, 2006: 218; Pujolar 2001: 36; Chun
2009.

Data-set: 35 hours of individual audio-recording, 20 hours
of interviews

Three varieties frequently stylised:

- Antwerp dialect (85 examples)
- Standard Dutch (31 examples)
- 'Illegal Dutch' (= broken Dutch) (21 examples)

→ stylisation once every 25 minutes.

Stylisations: examples

Antwerp dialect:

‘Being funny again?’ (example 4)

Standard Dutch:

‘So you are a repeater’ (example 5)

‘For four little hours’ (example 6)

Illegal Dutch:

‘Yes and for Dutch 7,5’ (example 7)

Players with limitations

→ “savvy sociolinguistic players” (cf. Snell 2010: 650), insiders rather than outsiders

→ But this competence isn’t unlimited:

- stylisations: never perfect, idiomatic renditions
- serious difficulties with academic Dutch
- typical ‘interlanguage’ phenomena
- limited literacy in home languages (cf. Harris 1998)

And: routine vernacular contained linguistic elements of *each of the stylised varieties* (besides elements of home language use) => A dense, hybrid mix

Similar findings

→ Data in line with a range of other reports of youthful language use in Europe and elsewhere:

UK: Rampton 2006, 2011a/b; Li Wei 2011;

Scandinavia: Jørgensen 2008; Møller 2009; Madsen 2011; Quist 2008; Quist & Svendsen 2011; Svendsen & Røyneland 2008; Bijvoet & Fraurud 2011

Netherlands: Cornips & Nortier 2008; Cornips & De Rooij (forthc.)

Germany: Androutsopoulos 2001; Auer & Dirim 2003; Depperman 2007

US: Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999; Chun 2009

Stylisations: important?

- Just a stylistic flirtation? Typically youthful?
- Symptomatic for fascination with ‘post-modern’ textual play?

No, for 3 reasons:

1. Frequent stylisations: of politically charged and collectively known varieties
2. A patterned occurrence of strategic social actions, which
3. Evoked larger-scale, routine, socio-linguistic representations

Stylisations: important?

Stylisations: produced on ‘transitional moments’, such as:

- The teacher trying to control pupils at the start of the class (example 4)
- Entering the classroom
- Being reprimanded by the teacher or alluding to such potential reprimands (example 4)
- Being identified as not meeting academic or linguistic expectations (example 5, 6, 7)
- Formulating requests
- Suddenly being recorded by a microphone (example 5)

→ socially “sensitive” moments (cf. Goffman 1971)

→ Rather than idiosyncratic linguistic events: patterned occurrence of strategic social actions

Stylisations: important?

In many of these patterned occurrences:
highlighting or throwing into relief of wider-
scale, routine, sociolinguistic structures: see
examples

“actively and creatively coming to terms with
the situations in which they find themselves”
(Eckert 2000: 8)

Methodological issues

1. These data → hard to explain as: “marking in-group/ethnic/covert identity”
2. Stylisations: not typically part of variationist sociolinguistics’ scope, since ‘self-conscious’, non-routine (Bucholtz 2003; Eckert 2000; Hudson 1996; Labov 1994)

But this logic: reduces picture of contemporary urban language use

A way out: recent discussions see stylisations as part of metalinguistic ‘enregisterment’ activity (cf. Agha 2005; Rampton 2011b)

Methodological issues

Enregisterment = speech typification (through stylisation, commenting, naming language use, professional and state discourses)

Enregisterment processes or value assignment processes offer a “set of directions for locating one’s own speech in relation to th[at] of others” (Agha 2005: 56)

→ stylisations: integral facet of same sociolinguistic process as routine language use

Longer-term effects?

- Schools/adolescence: special juncture in life. → “unequalled efflorescence of symbolic activity” (Eckert 2000: 5). But stylisations may mellow (cf. Cutler 1999; Rampton 1995).
- On the other hand: evidence that densely mixed vernacular lasts into adulthood (Rampton 2011b; Møller 2009).
- Enduring hybrid style: effect on majority language? (cf. Cheshire et al. 2008: ethnically mixed urban groups function as transmission channels for ethnic minority speech features)
- But: mixed vernacular → low prestige as result of wider-scale metalinguistic/enregistering discourses

Longer-term effects?

- “Ultimately, all change unfolds in the course of day-to-day exchange, and that exchange involves constant local reinterpretation and repositioning. Ultimately, it is in this action that we can get at the meaning-making that gives life to variation. While the larger patterns of variation can profitably be seen in terms of a static social landscape, this is only a distant reflection of what is happening moment to moment on the ground” (Eckert 2008: 472).

References

(see handout)