Talking like a ‘zerolingual’: Ambiguous linguistic caricatures at an urban secondary school

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1. Introduction

The official English language website of the regional government of Flanders (www.flanders.be), the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium, features the following paragraph devoted to ‘official language’:

“The Flemings speak Dutch. They do not speak French, or a non-existent language such as Belgian. [...] In Wallonia, people speak French: a Latin language. Brussels, just north of the language border, is bilingual. Over 21 million people in Europe have Dutch as their mother tongue.”

What is interesting here is that Flemings are said to ‘speak Dutch’, suggesting in a way that this is why Dutch is Flanders’ official language, although a stroll in any major Flemish city bears out similar signs of multilingualism to those that can be found in other parts of Europe: studies indicate that one in six families in Flanders speak another language instead of or alongside Dutch (e.g., De Houwer, 2003). Given the fact that Flemings are said to speak Dutch, it may look slightly redundant to write that “they do not speak French”. But this seems to be tailored to those foreign visitors who, like many others, assume that Belgium is exclusively or mainly French speaking, which is continuous irritation for many Flemings in view of the decades-long fight for Dutch linguistic rights in Belgium. And apparently it doesn’t leave the Flemish government unaffected either. A second paragraph, on ‘multilingualism’, reads as follows:
“Flanders is part of Belgium. In Belgium, three official languages are acknowledged: Dutch, French and German. So Flemings are in any case used to being confronted with different languages. Moreover, throughout its history, the geographical area of modern Flanders has been governed by a variety of rulers (Austrians, Spaniards, French). These historical developments and influences did bring about a multilingual situation in Flanders. What’s more, Flanders is surrounded by world languages: English, French and German. These languages are widely spoken. Abundant access to both printed and televised media from France, the UK, Germany and other international sources makes Flemings receptive to foreign languages. Also Flemish education emphasises its pupils’ active learning of foreign languages. The school curriculum sets aside a considerable amount of time for a second and often third language. Flemings have a widespread knowledge of other languages. This involves a better understanding of different viewpoints and constitutes a major asset and advantage.”

Here, the positive statements on multilingualism literally abound: Flemings are said to be familiar with other languages, receptive to them and happy to learn, and consequently able to speak at least a couple of world languages well. Several historical developments and influences even brought about “a multilingual situation in Flanders”, though this is curiously in contrast with the abovementioned “the Flemings speak Dutch”. Clearly, these self-describing quotes are meant to signify a picture of Flanders as a linguistically tolerant and no doubt therefore attractive venue for foreign investment and tourism.

Even so, quite the reverse from this rosy picture transpires when one looks at contemporary socio-political developments within Flanders and Belgium as a whole. Fired by a nationalist radicalization of moderate Flemish political parties, especially the last years have seen mounting tensions between the Flemish and Walloon communities, leading to, among others, an escalating volume of separatist voices and a widespread hostility towards the use of French on Flemish territory. This comes on top of a tradition of low-level intolerance within Flanders for cultural diversity and a dearth of support or encouragement for ethnic minority languages (cf. Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998). And it appears that a domain where languages other than Dutch (and varieties other than Standard Dutch) are nowadays most emphatically cleansed from the temple is education (which is a federalized matter in Belgium that resorts under Flemish community authority). Faced with the soaring school failure rates of ethnic minority students in particular, educational policy in Flanders has recently reinvigorated a radical Dutch monolingualism and submersion into Dutch at the earliest possible moment for all students.

This article reports on ethnographic data that show a number of ethnic minority students at a secondary school engaging with this linguistic and educational structure and moulding an “ambiguous agency” (cf. MacLeod, 1992:534; Ahearn, 2001; Ortner, 1996) that accepts as well as rejects these structures. More precisely, I shall try to indicate that students produce assertive linguistic caricatures (disguise, self-mockery, masquerade) that clearly allude to the abovementioned social and linguistic scene. At other times, however, their linguistic caricatures often precisely reproduce rather than call into question the social structures surrounding them, and moreover help reinforce dominant positions on the local linguistic and symbolic market. By describing these contradictory ‘agencies’, I am contributing to a perspective that is wary of equating agency only with resistance or oppositional agency, and providing ethnographical evidence for a view that takes the action of subordinates in a context of unequal power relations as much more ambivalent and complex than is usually attended to (for a fuller discussion see, among others, Ortner, 1995, 1996; Ahearn, 2001; Rampton, 1995:67–91). In doing so, this paper is also part of an interactional sociolinguistic tradition which investigates how urban youth, at school as well as other contexts, reconcile the demands of (linguistic) action in the here-and-now with larger-scale processes and representations that range across ethnicity, nationality, gender and social class (see, e.g., Auer, 2007; Bucholtz and Skapoulli, 2009; Chun, 2009; Heller, 1999; Jørgensen, 2008; Pujolar, 2001; Rampton, 2006). Frequently in these studies, there is attention for how language variation is a resource for stylization practices (Coupland, 2007:30) which are taken as illustrative of young people’s perception of the interplay between their daily lives and wider-scale social routines, and as contributive to their attempts to comment on, rework, recycle or delay the impact of these routines on their lives.

In the next section, I will first explain how the radical Dutch monolingualism in Flanders can be viewed as oppositional itself, or at least how it ensues from a history of fighting for linguistic rights. After that (section 2.2) I will provide a few more details on Flemish educational policy, before looking at ethnographic data (sections 3–6) that show how linguistic caricature functions in daily interaction at school.

2. A well-intended monolingualism

2.1. A history of resistance

Unforgiving as the abovementioned linguistic antagonism vis à vis the use of languages other than Dutch on Flemish territory may seem, it is important to recognise how the vigor with which Dutch is promoted and the tenacity with which its standard variety is hung on to as the prime means for emancipation and educational success, are fanned by a history of fighting for Dutch linguistic rights in Belgium (Deprez and Vos, 1998; Hermans et al., 1992). Even though in 19th century Belgium, Dutch often served as a distinctive couleur locale that legitimized the young Belgian state and made it less obvious a prey for French annexionist ambitions, it is fair to say that at least up until the 1920s and 1930s, Dutch (varieties) had extremely low value in achieving socio-economic success in Belgium – the same was true of course for the different Walloon dialects – and that a widespread language shift towards French was far from unimaginable. From the second half of the 19th
century onwards, however, this was increasingly deplored by Flemish middle-class who felt they were unjustifiably disadvantaged by French-only speakers on the job market in the north of Belgium (and of course, a recognition of Dutch or need for it would give them an serious edge over French-only speakers on that market). These sentiments joined hands with nationalist-romantic ideas on the need to preserve authentic Dutch folklore from the general appeal of French and the modernity it represented, which in and around Brussels above all rapidly frenched 'authentic' Flemish territory. In addition, there was more and more liberal-emanicipatory consideration for the predicament of non-French speaking individuals in the educational, administrative and judicial system. Out of these combined concerns, a “Flemish movement” arose, which eventually led to the construction of a separate political and monolingual zone in the north of Belgium and the emancipation of those who disposed of marketable linguistic skills.

With regard to such skills, it is not irrelevant to add that the specific language for which rights were being demanded was subject of considerable debate itself. Briefly put, rather than developing a standard Flemish, 19th century Flemish intellectuals decided to adopt the Dutch that was then used as the standard language in the Netherlands (Deprez, 1999; Willeyns, 1996). This however implied that the ‘people’ for whom Flemish intellectuals were waging a language battle, eventually ended up in a similar linguistic regime where what they spoke was not considered up to standard. Dutch speaking folklore was undeniably cherished for its authenticity, but the uncouth language that accompanied it was not at all to be confused with the Standard Dutch that was meant to cast Flemings into the modern, civilized world. In other words, at the same time as Dutch gained its foothold in Belgium, the once dreaded frenchification was replaced by a regime of 'Standard-Dutchification', where just as before it was necessary to acquire one purified, elite variety for obtaining access to socio-economic success and welfare (cf. Jaspers, 2006; see Bauman and Briggs, 2003, for a fuller discussion of the relation between language and modernity).

All in all, it isn’t unarguable to say that the heydays of the Flemish movement as an opposition group are now over. There is ample reason to consider the frenchifying enemy of yesteryear largely defeated. Dutch speakers now outnumber French speakers in Belgium. French cultural life has been completely ousted from Flanders, the former steel industry-giant Wallonia has become an economic backwater in comparison with its thriving Flemish neighbor, and many top political and administrative jobs have become practically unattainable for French-only speakers. For these and other reasons, it has become very difficult to claim that Flemings are still living under a French-favoring regime. Furthermore, with its cultural identity successfully defended, the Flemish community is challenged to now also define itself without being in opposition to an exterior enemy (cf. Heller, 1999:15). To be sure, Dutch-speaking Flemings are now themselves a dominant majority as opposed to ethno-linguistic minorities. This could invite policy makers to seek new ways of building solidarity and socio-political mobilization, but recent political action mainly feeds on the old tune of self-defence in which Dutch is continuously under siege. This legitimizes firm policy measures such as obligatory citizenship courses for unemployed non-EU newcomers or reducing the linguistic facilities for French speakers in some Flemish communities around Brussels. Recently also, social housing in Flanders has been made dependent on applicants’ willingness to learn Dutch, some municipalities around Brussels have reserved building land for Dutch speakers exclusively, while elsewhere, social service departments only give out welfare benefits to candidates learning or speaking Dutch. Explicit admonitions by the UN (March 2008) and the European Commission (September 2008) on these policies are usually received with widespread indignation and incredulity, as these admonitions reverse the preferred victim-offender roles and put the blame on Flemish policies rather than on those the policies are meant for. Although officially denied, the Flemish government’s decision to hire an image manager in March 2009 may very well have been inspired by increasing worry about its international reputation as a result of these admonitions.

In this climate, ethnic minority adolescents especially have not been enjoying a good reputation. They are widely perceived as unwilling or incompetent speakers of Dutch, who moreover all too often are seen to feature in criminal or anti-social behavior news reports, and this frequently leads to stereotyping, stigmatization and suspicion. In addition to this, they fail at school in astronomical numbers.

2.2. Education: salvation or zerolingualism

According to a number of recent Belgian studies and the OECD (2006):

- only 5 out of 100 students in Flemish higher education have an ethnic minority background;
- of these 5, no less than 4 fail in their first university year;
- moreover, about 50% of ethnic minority pupils do not earn a secondary school degree.

Appalled by these devastating numbers, Flemish educationalists have in recent years made beating ethnic minority school failure their focal concern, which has led to a succession of remedial initiatives such as, among other things, guidance and coaching by ‘diversity managers’, truancy plans, and various attempts to advance the influx of ethnic minority children

1 Brussels, now officially a Dutch-French bilingual region, used to be a largely Dutch speaking city in the 19th century. There are about 10–15% of Dutch speakers residing in Brussels nowadays.

2 Although its role is now successfully taken over by ‘welfare nationalists’ who appropriate the heritage of the age-old struggle for linguistic rights while arguing that Flemish independence is a reasonable, business-like alternative for difficult multi-party negotiations at the Belgian federal level.
in nursery schools. The media are also widely agreed that swift action needs to be taken, and that these students need to be rescued lest one wants to create a future time-bomb.

By miles considered the most effective way of fighting school failure and promoting emancipation, however, is improving pupils’ skills in Dutch. Since, so policy documents hold, “only by guiding each pupil to a correct and rich skill in the standard language, will education be able to guarantee that opportunities in society do not depend on social origin, but on the extent to which somebody’s talents have been developed” (Vandenbroucke, 2006:6).3 What’s more, fostering the acquisition of Dutch by ethnic minority pupils is something the Minister of Education even admits to be his ‘obsessional hobbyhorse’, indeed living up to this image by relentlessly repeating that knowledge of Dutch is the principal tool to move up on the social ladder.4 He also insists that, since dialect and substandard language use can be a source of failure, this should be knowledge of Standard Dutch, and he argues that if one doesn’t help pupils to acquire this standard variety, “we’re creating a dual society” of haves and have-nots (Vandenbroucke, 2006:7).

This radical monolingualism is furthermore supported by successful ethnic minority members, who are strongly against any attention for other languages than Standard Dutch in education. Conversely, critical voices are quickly depicted as the promoters of an elitist ‘laissez faire stance’ or a ‘pedagogical indecisiveness’ that is ‘at odds with equal opportunities’, and sometimes as completely out of touch with ordinary people’s dire circumstances that press for strong and purposive measures. It can hardly be a surprise that in this climate, suggestions of bilingually organized education are given the cold shoulder or are viewed, as the Minister of Education does, as ill-considered and easily leading to a “zerolingualism”,5 i.e. to a situation where pupils would underachieve in both languages. This is not to be confused, so policy makers say, with a perspective that is averse to multilingualism. On the contrary, such criticism is often countered by referring to small scale multilingual CLIL or “content and language integrated learning”-experiments set up by the Flemish government. But these, however, are only allowed to target Dutch speaking students in a Dutch/English or Dutch/French bilingual context, excluding any ethnic minority language as well as ethnic minority students. The latter, rather, first have to become skilled in Dutch before acquiring other, ‘valuable’ foreign languages such as French, English, German or Spanish.

Of course, there are many reasons to doubt that this radical focus on Standard Dutch will be able to change much about present school failure rates.6 Relevant for my purposes here, however, is that in data I collected at a secondary school around the turn of the century – so, just a couple of years before this recent radicalization of monolingual policy in education – I found a quite similar orientation to this idea of zerolingualism, or at least to linguistic incompetence in Dutch. That is to say, a number of ethnic minority students, mainly of Moroccan descent, appeared to be quite aware of linguistic hierarchization processes in Flanders and assertive about their own linguistic image or position in this hierarchy. More particularly, they delighted in messing around with incompetent or broken kinds of Dutch and in this way seemed to be critical as well as protective of the social order around them. In what follows, I will first situate this in a wider local context.

3. Ethnic observational observations at school

My ethnographic research focused on two ethnically mixed classrooms at a secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium (see Jaspers, 2005, 2006).7 Though the school itself had an official Dutch status and an exclusively Dutch speaking teaching staff, the two classrooms I visited were undeniable hubs of multilingualism, where one could hear several varieties of Arabic, Berber, Turkish and Dutch. I frequently heard phrases in English and French, often in combination with the rap or hip hop in these adolescents’ cassette-, CD- or minidisk-players. Ethnic minority students (in contrast with their Flemish classmates) saw themselves as equipped with an abundant linguistic repertoire rather than as (native) speakers of one particular variety, and they were generally proud of their knowledge of other languages. The school, however, applied language rules such as “When at school, speak Standard Dutch”, very much in line with official policy mentioned above.8 Some teachers emphasized that these rules were necessary from an emancipatory perspective in order to ‘give pupils the opportunity to learn Dutch’, while others framed them in terms of widespread conventions such as politeness and respect. In practice, actual implementation of these rules could vary.

These two classrooms were numerically as well as discursively dominated, however, by students with a Moroccan background. At the discursive level, this meant that many of the latter students stood out in a humorous practice they

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3 All translations from this policy document are mine.
4 Elections took place during this article’s publication process, such that the Minister of Education mentioned here has been succeeded in June 2009 by a party-member who has until now closely adhered to the policy lines drawn by his predecessor.
5 A term (“zerotaligheid”, in Dutch) used several times by the Minister of Education in a number of Flemish media interviews.
6 Not least, the fact that Standard Dutch has always been the sole linguistic policy in Flemish education, and has obviously not been able to preclude current failure rates. Several authors have also formulated serious criticism on total submersion programmes (see, e.g., Cummins, 2000).
7 The data I draw on are the result of two and a half years of fieldwork in one secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium (between May 1999 and April 2002). Data-collection involved participant observation, interviewing, individual (audio) recording, classroom (audio) recording, and feedback-interviews on extracts from the recordings. The corpus consists of 35 hours of individual audio-recording and 35 hours of (simultaneous) classroom recording, and 45 hours of interviewing. The fieldwork concentrated on two classes in the last years of secondary education (thirty-five pupils in two different groups; in each group Moroccan-Flemish students made up two thirds of the total number; there were three students of Turkish descent, and 10 Flemish ones (of which one was female); ages varied from 16 to 21; backgrounds were working class, all but two were Belgian-born). The focus on Moroccan-Flemish adolescents was strategic (cf. Bucholtz, 2003) as they are a heavily stigmatized group in Flanders.
8 Of course, the school language policy mentioned here precedes recent policy measures discussed earlier, but as is clear from the discussion, current educational policy reinvigorates, rather than enfeebles, the monolingual approach that was also prevailing at the time of the research.
themselves called doing ridiculous, a practice largely comparable to what others have named ‘messing about’ (Gilroy and Lawrence, 1988:136–137), ‘making out’ (Foley, 1990) ‘working the system’ (Goffman, 1961), ‘badinage’ (Dubberley, 1993), ‘having a laugh’ (Willis, 1977; Woods, 1976) or ‘knowledge-avoidance practices’ (Graham and Jardine, 1990). More in particular, doing ridiculous involved play-acting in class, faking ignorance and enthusiasm or giving confusing or inappropriate answers which sometimes considerably delayed the rhythm and fluent organization of what in their eyes were ‘boring’ or all too ‘serious’ situations such as lessons or research interviews. This very often happened at that moment when there were problems establishing a work frame or when something was up, i.e. when there was a heightened sensitivity around social roles and obligations. Those, however, who did not participate in this practice (or were not very good at it, or missed the point, or were made the butt of a ridiculous joke) were effectively marginalized in class – a fate which usually befell Turkish speaking and especially white-Flemish classmates.

Their ability to play fake and lead teachers and others up the garden path was undeniably helped by these Moroccan-Flemish students’ good vernacular competence in Dutch (in contrast with their Turkish classmates). In fact, their habitual Dutch appeared to be characterized by wider patterns of social stratification in Flemish society. Some evidence of this routine style-shifting can be found in the following table (Table 1), where I selected one token speaker in three different settings that vary in terms of formality:

(a) a formal book presentation (formal, 5.30 minutes);
(b) an interview with the researcher and a short conversation with the teacher after class (semi-formal, 7 minutes);
(c) a playground interaction (informal, 10 minutes).

Which leads to significant differences according to a chi square test ($p < 0.05$), in line with other style-shifting findings in Flanders:

Table 1
Routine style-shifting across three different settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faisal’s realization of t-deletion in goed (‘good’) and niet (‘not’) across 3 settings:</th>
<th>Non-standard deletion (‘goe’, ‘nie’):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t-deletion</td>
<td>Non-standard deletion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[a] vs. [aː] or [Aː]</td>
<td>[oː] or [uː]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard [a]</td>
<td>Non-standard [aː]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard [oː]</td>
<td>Standard [uː]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[a] vs. [aː] or [Aː]</th>
<th>[oː] or [uː]</th>
<th>Unclear</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book presentation</td>
<td>19/23</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pupil–teacher interaction/Interview</td>
<td>9/10</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faisal’s standard and non-standard realizations of [aː] as in vader (‘father’) across 3 settings:</th>
<th>[aː]</th>
<th>[Aː]</th>
<th>Unclear</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[aː] vs. [aː]</td>
<td>[aː]</td>
<td>[Aː]</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book presentation</td>
<td>19/35</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pupil–teacher interaction/Interview</td>
<td>11/31</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>1/22</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of Faisal’s realization of standard [oː] versus non-standard [uː] or [Aː] in pupil–teacher interaction, all rows show a steady rise of non-standard features and decline of standard features as the situation become gradually more informal. Naturally, these data are based on a single student’s speech and can only be indicative of wider patterns in the corpus, although other data parts seem to confirm the tendency shown here in table 1. Furthermore, a number of Moroccan students could be seen experimenting with or stylizing several varieties of Dutch, such as Antwerp dialect, Standard Dutch, and ‘Illegal Dutch’ (see section 5). Consequently, these students could be seen as possessing a versatile competence in Dutch that comprised routine style shifting as well as playful linguistic jesting.

This competence needs to be balanced, though, by a consideration of the difficulties these youngsters had with producing academic language use. In fact, whenever Standard Dutch was the expected variety, Moroccan-Flemish students quickly failed to produce acceptable reading and writing skills, which teachers often alerted these students to in class. Additionally, their routine Dutch was characterized by features that are frequently mentioned as typical of ‘ethnolectal’ varieties (Cornips and Nortier, 2008). What is more, in interviews Moroccan-Flemish students themselves sighed that Dutch classes were....

Errors such as: generalization of the definite article (de boek instead of regular neuter het boek [the book]); strong instead of weak flection of the adjective with a neuter noun (een goede boek instead of Dutch een goed boek [a good book]); and incorrect flection of demonstrative pronouns (deze boek instead of correct dit boek [this book]). Most of these errors also occurred in speaking, together with frequent deletion of articles (moet gij gsm kopen? [do you want to buy cellphone?]); and home language-influenced phonology and prosody (with, for white Flemings, extreme rising and falling intonation patterns).
difficult, and also deplored that their non-Moroccan friends at times attempted to adopt what was in the latters’ view an attractive Moroccan-Flemish accent.\footnote{The imitation or adoption (for disparaging and favourable reasons) by non-immigrant youth of linguistic features that are seen to belong to youth with immigrant descent has been a widely attested phenomenon in various European countries and the US (see, e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2001; Auer and Dirim, 2003; Bucholtz, 1999; Cheshire et al., 2008; Cutler, 1999; Kotsinas, 1998; and the articles in Cornips and Nortier, 2008).}

In short, Moroccan-Flemish students:

- were highly multilingual (with at least proficient speaking and listening skills in either Arabic or Berber, next to a competence in school foreign languages and classical Arabic from religious classes at Sunday school); and
- fluently conversational in Dutch, unlike their Turkish speaking classmates; next to this,
- they playfully experimented with different varieties of Dutch, but
- they had serious difficulties with academic linguistic requirements, as the rest of their classmates (Turkish speaking and white-Flemish); and they also
- produced typical linguistic features that are recognised as colourful at best or wrong at worst.

Hence, in spite of their undeniable linguistic skills and rich repertoire, it is easy to point out – from an academic point of view, and from the point of view of friends who wanted to speak like them – that the habitual Dutch of these Moroccan-Flemish students exhibited unambiguous differences, both from Standard Dutch and from an idiomatic, so-called non-ethnolectal Dutch. Thus, there was much potential for being identified as less than a normal or competent Dutch speaker.

4. Apprehension about variation

It may therefore not be coincidental that in interview reports and in my field notes, these youngsters very often showed they were well aware of the stereotypical image they had as incompetent or unwilling speakers of Dutch, and thus of their vulnerability for stereotypification. In truth, it wasn’t unusual at the start of my ethnographic activities that my interest in them was framed by some as ‘checking up on their level of Dutch’, and, in spite of my positive intentions, some of them seemed to have serious doubts about the usefulness of describing linguistic variation. One Friday morning right after maths class, e.g., one student scornfully asked: “Are you joining us for drama class? Yeah that’s what you’re interested in, isn’t it? Finding out how well we can speak Dutch”. And without having mentioned anything about Dutch another student responded to the news that I wanted to record their daily speech: “Record our Dutch? Nobody here speaks Dutch”. Still another one kept on asking when I would start taping them since he could “speak Dutch very well”. When in several interviews I tried to coin a name such as “Moroccan Dutch”, a variety I then thought I was digging up, this wasn’t greatly appreciated (cf. Jaspers, 2008). So even though the term wasn’t around at the time, many of these students seemed to be articulating their (cynical) apprehension about being identified as different from the mainstream, incompetent, or ‘zerolingual’, in current Flemish educational terminology.

Contrary to what one might expect, given their pride and alertness to linguistic identification, it was difficult to find any explicit political scripts on their linguistic predicament. My interviews usually contain approvals of the need to learn or speak Standard Dutch in future professional or institutional contexts. But elsewhere in my data, that is, in interactional practice and largely implicitly, at least a number of these students systematically made it clear they wanted to be seen as competent or mainstream Dutch speakers. Competence, however, here seemed to imply not being seen as linguistically under- or in-competent at the same time as avoiding to be seen as an over-competent or serious speaker. So although Moroccan-Flemish students frankly admitted there was a ‘perfect’ way of speaking beyond their actual linguistic abilities which opened up spaces for being called non-mainstream, they were often quick to point out that speaking perfectly, i.e. Standard Dutch, was either nerdy or unnecessary (cf. Jaspers, 2006). And it seemed that one of the more spectacular ways (for linguists) with which these youngsters warded off potential stigmatization ‘from above’ (i.e. from those higher on the linguistic ladder) was by experimenting with and stylizing others’ incompetent, accented or broken Dutch, i.e. by talking Illegal (‘Illeegal spreken’, in Dutch). This involved faking incompetence in Dutch, and in doing so, these students appeared to imply that if anyone was to be seen as linguistically incompetent, it certainly wasn’t them.

5. Talking Illegal as playful criticism

There are about 21 instances in my data in which incompetent Dutch is being stylized (4 noted, 17 taped). I relied on various criteria to decide whether a specific utterance was an example of talking Illegal.\footnote{Whether or not a certain fragment counted as a performance of ‘talking Illegal’ was first and foremost informed by my long familiarity with these boys’ usual and unusual ways of speaking and by my own knowledge of Dutch varieties as a relatively standard speaker who grew up and lives in Antwerp. Other important indicators included some kind of pidginization signalled by phonetic, prosodic or morpho-grammatical features. Phonetically, open vowels were sometimes closed or retracted, short vowels were lengthened and sometimes all vowels were simply deleted. Voiced and aspirated consonants were often produced voicelessly and unaspirated, and vice versa. On a prosodic level, highly intonated utterances signalled ‘illegal’ talking, as well as utterances in which unidiomatic or simply all syllables were stressed. Sometimes, ‘talking Illegal’ could involve very slow and intense wording, contrasting with what came before and after. Morpho-grammatically, ‘talking Illegal’ often meant deleting copula verbs, articles and pronouns, with no inflectional morphology or a markedly different one.} Usually, talking Illegal involved producing Dutch-based foreigner talk, but it could also embrace ‘Illegal English’ (based on non-native English used in television news reports) or various kinds of jabber-talk that were named ‘Kosovarian’ or ‘Polish’ when I asked what the funny
talk or accent was they were producing. As mentioned above ‘Illegal’ was short for illegal refugees, which (for them) comprised all those who spoke (various kinds of) imperfect or learner Dutch, such as recent immigrants, political refugees, older immigrants as such as their parents, young ethnic-minority children, East-European guest workers, but also French-speaking Belgians. Because of this variety of reported sources and the lack of a wider known ‘immigrant accent’ in Flanders (comparable to Türkendeutsch, e.g., see Androutsopoulos, 2001) it didn’t seem appropriate to call this a ‘Stylized Moroccan Dutch’ following Rampton’s (1995) Stylized Asian English.

In interviews, talking Illegal was often mentioned as a popular practice outside school walls, where people didn’t know how proficient they were in Dutch, or with temporary teachers within school. As one student said: “we think most Belgians, when they, e.g., teachers, when they enter a class full of Moroccans like completely full […] that they’ll suddenly start thinking ‘they must be all illegals’, you see?” and of course, ‘talking illegal’ can be used to reinforce that impression. Thus, the tram was pointed out as an eligible place where this could happen, and temporary teachers could also be the butt. Each time, these reported fabrications ended with an explicit down-keying (Goffman, 1974), where those who mistakenly took these adolescents’ stylizations for real were addressed with a deadpan question or remark (to a temporary teacher: “nice meeting you miss”) in their ordinary and fluent Dutch. These youngsters are in fact reporting here on a practice described by Rampton as ‘tertiary foreigner talk’: “a language practice where people with migrant or minority background strategically masquerade in the racist imagery used in dominant discourses about them” (Rampton, 2001:271).

But as it appeared, one could also talk Illegal to, or in the presence of, known and ratified participants. In my field notes there is one example where Illegal Dutch is used in text messaging, and in the following example Imran uses Illegal Dutch to impersonate an external jury member’s hypothetical evaluation of his Dutch after a final examination he did particularly well:

Example 1

I notice Imran in the school hall and ask how his final exam went. ‘Great’, he says, ‘I’ve got the best grade in class. A 9 [out of 10]! Yeah, everybody else tells the jury everything they know in those ten minutes, but I kept a couple of things behind, like the safety devices, and some slides, and when they asked about those I could answer them rightaway’. When he sees Mr A [one of his teachers] pass by Imran tells me he’s probably given him a 10. Same for Mr B. Habib and Rakif had joined us in the meantime, and Habib adds: ‘yeh I’m sure those of the jury gave you a bit less, isn’t it, a 9 or a 9.5 or something?’. To which Imran replies, heavily accented: yes and for Dutch, seven and-a-half. [laughter] (Fieldnotes)

When Habib suggests the external (company-based) jury members had probably been a bit more critical of his work than his own teachers, Imran builds on the stereotypical expectation that unfamiliar adult white Flemings will look less than favourably upon his own and his classmates’ linguistic skills, and self-mockingly suggests a jury member found that his Dutch still left a lot to be desired. In evoking the stereotype where a white adult ‘puts the immigrant back in place’ (cf. Hinnenkamp, 1991) and recontextualizing it ironically as a flaw in his exam performance, Imran may be seen as ‘reclaiming the pejorative language that has been used to and about them’ and in this way “drawing its sting” (Coupland, 2003:20). While I was only a ratified bystander in example 1, the next example from an interview on their linguistic habits shows that I could also function as a direct addressee for talking Illegal:

Example 2

Setting and participants: Interview with Faisal [18], Imran [18], JJ [24]. May 2000. In a busy lunch snack-bar, JJ asks if Imran’s and Faisal’s language use at school is different from what they speak outside school. (This is the first interview I did with both students, and both are the very first I’ve interviewed in my research). Talking Illegal is in bold-face, with phonetic transcriptions underneath; English translations (at times tentative given the unidiomatic Dutch) are in italics, with Illegal stretches underlined.

1 JJ: euh als gulke dan zo euh buiten ’t school ga spreekte gulle dan op een ander manier dan
2 wanneer da ge binnen de school zijt?
   uhm when you when you like uh walk out of school do you speak in a different way than when you’re inside the school?
3 Imran: dan ( ) wij spreken half Marokkaans half Nederlands
   then we speak half Moroccan half Dutch
4 JJ: half Nederlands [. ] gewoon ’t zelfde eigenlijk dan of wa?
   half Dutch [. ] just the same then in fact or wha?
5 Imran: nee da’s zo euh [. ] ( )
   no that’s like uh [. ] ( )

12 Here, as in the following examples, the age of my informants (18, 19 and even 21) might appear surprising in the frame of a secondary school context. The regular age for final year secondary school students is 17–18. Older students in this context have repeated one or two years, as was the case for almost half of my informants.
Faisal: *(ma ik)* **ikke kan ikke kanne nie-nie goe Nederlands hé**

*I can’t speak Dutch very well*

J.J.: [smile voice:] *ik hoor het*

Faisal: *maar ik kanne mijn best doen hé*  

*but I can try my best*

J.J.: *jajajaja.* [.

Imran: **bijvoorbeeld als die heeft da doen hé dan [] [lacht]**

*for example if he has this do then [*laughs*] he cannot always do that*

Faisal: **ik ben die [] ik ben die gisteren []**

*I am (the?) yesterday*

Imran:  *( ) zo *( ) like

Faisal: **ik ben die gisteren rond de [] ik ben die gisteren [] rond hier gewandeld=**

*I've walked around here yesterday*

Imran:  *(xxx)-straat [] ikke komen eenen agent tegen [] zj noemen zich smurf []*[laughs]***

*x*x*x-street [] me run into a police officer [] they call themselves smurf []*

J.J.: maar ge past da nie heel hard aan als ge ( )

Faisal: **ja [] en hij zeg tegen mij [] hebt u zich de pas bij?**

*Have you got your passport with?*

J.J.: *ja*

Faisal: **ik zeg vvaarrom? en hij zeggen tegen mij [] handenen omhoog [[]]**

*I say why? And he say to me [] hands up []*

Faisal: **en ik was bang jij weet hé [] hij heeft hier een geweer of [] je weet wel**

*And I was scared you know eh [] he’s got a gun here or [] you know*

J.J.: *jaja*
In reply to my question if their language use at school is different from what they speak outside school, Faisal suddenly starts speaking Illegal: he uses substandard ikke instead of regular ik in subject position, makes syntactic mistakes (het u zich de pas bij? instead of regular hebt u uw pas bij [‘have you got your passport with you’]), and produces morphological (ik kanne instead of regular ik kan [‘I can’], handenen instead of regular handen [‘hands’]) and phonetical (vwaarom instead of waarom [‘why’]) irregularities, along with a frequently oscillating intonation.

Clearly, by talking Illegal Faisal foregrounds an ethnic/social category instead of a biographical one: although Faisal knows that I know he can speak Dutch fluently, he disguises himself as someone who speaks Dutch very poorly, and who is even afraid of an unarmed traffic warden (‘smurfs’ used to be a common nickname for them in Antwerp). It is not irrelevant to point out that this persona enters the interaction at a time when stereotypical expectations come into view: my question in lines 1–2 could be understood as stemming from the expectation that Moroccan-Flemish students speak Dutch at school but largely resort to Arabic, Berber or something else outside school. My repetition of Imran’s “half Dutch” in line 4 might only add to this impression. In addition to this, the interview-situation itself was somewhat atypical: this was the very first interview I did with any of these lads, and it brought along a sudden difference in footing, since other than usually, I wasn’t a bystander or onlooker, but now took up the position of a not all too experienced question-asking and turn-allocating authority, who was even taping everything they said, right in the middle of busy lunch bar.

Unusual moments such as these are what Goffman calls ‘ritually sensitive’ moments, i.e. moments at which actual or potential rips show up in the routine fabric of social life, or moments where constraints apply “regarding how each individual ought to handle himself with respect to each of the others” (Goffman, 1981:16). Quite often on such occasions people use special linguistic material (a standard language, formulaic expressions, …) that has significance beyond the practical requirements of the here-and-now in order to re-synchronise the interaction or resume polite conversation – although these occasions are equally susceptible to creative, playful and aesthetic behaviour (Rampton, 2006). There is in fact a hint of an apology here, with Faisal saying that he can’t speak Dutch, but that he will try to do his best. Goffman specifies (1971:113–114) that in apologies, people split themselves in two parts: a self that was guilty, and a self “that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving’. Usually, the latter self communicates something of a promise that a similar offense will not be made again, and is therefore often accompanied by a sincere or serious voice – and possibly here, signs of discomfort about not being skilled enough in Dutch. In this example, however, the apologizing voice is quite inauthentic, not in the least anxious, and it therefore invites us to determine how the specific variety that is used can be reconciled with its interactional setting (cf. Rampton, 2001:269–270). Given the evocation of stereotypical representations and the atypical interview setting, it may not be unreasonable here to see Faisal’s stylization and comical narrative as a ritual response to an unusual situation which at the same time throws those representations, and the interview itself, into critical relief: in response to my question as to whether they speak differently outside school, Faisal (a) fakes linguistic incompetence; and so (b) appears to answer not the question but to address the background assumptions it is based on; at the same as (c) he turns the interview upside down in reversing question asking and answering roles (see lines 17–18) and in setting up a lengthy and unsolicited performance. There is an echo of this criticism in Imran’s similar but less stylized summons to ‘ask some serious questions’ (line 30), and in the slightly carnivalesque switch of interviewer–interviewee roles in lines 30–33. In other words, talking Illegal can be said to produce a playful caricature of macro-discursive linguistic expectations, an “interruption to the hegemonic reproduction of social structure” (Rampton, 2006:368) and the representations that shape and legitimate that structure. The insight into social and linguistic stratification that would seem to be conditional to this was also implicit in students’
attentiveness to the micro-reproduction of wider ethnic relations: when I wanted to set up an interview only with their white classmates, for example, I was quickly told “hey, only with Belgians, isn’t that a bit racist?”. I regularly could notice a similar intuition of how their educational trajectories corresponded to less than favorable future labor market positions. If we can presume insight in these domains, it is plausible to imagine that Faisal’s stylization of broken or Illegal Dutch critically engages with the linguistic hierarchy surrounding him (and with a researcher who’s on top of that hierarchy), albeit in a short-lived and ephemeral way.

Nevertheless, though it is tempting to applaud such stylizations as small-scale acts of rebellion that provide momentary release from prevailing social and linguistic norms, it may be difficult to see them as pure resistance against either local or wider linguistic policies. For one thing, when Faisal and Imran are talking Illegal, they are not questioning the status of incompetent Dutch nor linguistic hierarchization per se. Also, playful stylizations such as these did not really run the interview aground or call it into question, apart from making me feel slightly uncomfortable or clumsy. On the contrary, Imran throws the conversational ball back into play in line 30 (‘ask some serious questions’), and appears to propose a trajectory for interactional readjustment which paves the way for shared laughter and the establishment a new common ground – a ground that got lost and was found anew a couple of times in the course of this interview. For reasons such as these, I’ve called this and similar stylizations occasions of ‘linguistic sabotage’ (cf. Jaspers, 2005). By this I mean that these youngsters are not directly confronting the hegemonic framework they are part of, but their actions rather seem “to disrupt ease and order in social occasions, this to be done by means which do not have a directly continued consequence beyond the situation in which [the sabotage] occurs” (Goffman, 1974:426). Put differently, Faisal and Imran could perhaps be termed skilled players of the game of social life who are slightly ‘stretching the game’ in the example above (cf. Ortner, 1996:16) to come to terms with what is expected of them, while they continue playing that game and in this way protect it. This stretching can obviously critically highlight the rules of the game, but the focus, at least in this example, still seems to be on overcoming rather than overthrowing. Indeed, Faisal and Imran’s digression remains on topic, and seems to “depend crucially on the artful avoidance of any decisive interruption of the [interview]”, and the pleasure of playing is “derive[d] from the interweaving of realities, not from a breach that would require deciding on one or the other” (Grahame and Jardine, 1990:301).

Such stretching or playing can, furthermore, be mutually enjoyable (see lines 27–28), as was the case in Rampton’s discussion of ‘Stylized Asian English’: if interactions in which this variety was used ended well, this could “generate some reassurance that although it could not be ignored, knowledge of ethnic stratification was not dangerous or threatening for the relationship of these particular participants” (1995:86), and could be successfully recontextualized and/or defused (also see example 1). This mutual enjoyment is also in keeping with the wider practice of doing ridiculous I have hinted at in section 4: although this often led authority figures up the garden path, Moroccan-Flemish students were usually quick to play everything down as ‘only a joke’ when called to account, and those teachers who were willing briefly to go along with doing ridiculous could actually build a good working consensus (also see Dubberley, 1993; Pollard, 1986:73–74, 200ff.; Woods, 1976). In this sense, doing ridiculous could make life at school (and knowledge of ethnic stratification) bearable, and made those who engaged in it much more ambiguously agentive than a term as resistance would allow for.

An exclusively resistant view of talking Illegal would, moreover, be hard to reconcile with the fact that talking Illegal wasn’t exclusively anti-authoritarian but also remedied virtual peer conflict (which I cannot illustrate here due to space limits), and with some of the more crude and unfunny uses of it in interactions with classmates ‘from below’.

6. Laughing with classmates ‘from below’

If part of presenting themselves as mainstream Dutch speakers involved an engagement with how their own linguistic skills could be potentially viewed from above by more skilled or Standard Dutch speakers, Moroccan-Flemish students put lot of time and energy into distinguishing with speakers from ‘below’ or with identifying other people’s speech as below standards. In their view, a lot of people spoke Dutch less well than they did. They laughed about what they saw as the inferior linguistic skills of students in vocational curriculum tracks (“they need simultaneous interpreting!”), and they delighted in identifying the speech of some of their teachers and of their white Flemish classmates as too dialectal and thus as ‘bad’ Dutch according to prevailing standard language ideology – in this way they downgraded speakers generally considered to be ‘above’ them, which was of course an inversion of prevailing relations and therefore very amusing. The implication of this was not that they claimed the ‘standard’ label for themselves as much as they appeared to dispute others’ authority in identifying them as less than average speakers, given these others’ own vulnerability for such a labelling.

Turkish-Flemish classmates in particular were often the laughing stock. Their difficulties with Dutch, and those of other Turkish speaking students at school, were regularly the object of much hilarity. Turkish-Flemish classmates were aware of the kind of sociolinguistic image they had (“they think we’re tourists”). Unsurprisingly therefore, Moroccan-Flemish students also talked Illegal to their Turkish speaking classmates, which frequently entailed jokingly addressing them with utterances as “gij spreken Nederlands?” (“you speak Dutch?”) – where spoken (“to speak”) is left in the infinitive. On one particular occasion, Karim tried to tease his Turkish speaking classmate Tayfun into saying, while Karim was wearing a

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13 Although most of my Moroccan-Flemish informants were Belgian by nationality, they typically reserved that name for white Flemings and resented being called either Belgian or Flemish, usually preferring ‘Moroccan’ as an apposite label.
14 Also see De Certeau for his notion of “la perruque”, a French expression referring to “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (1984:25; cf. Ahearn, 2001:119; Rampton, 2006:315–316).
microphone, that he often went to the Antwerp red light district (commonly, the ‘Skipper Street’). As soon as Tayfun vaguely muttered a ‘yeah’, Karim gleefully said, in ‘Illegal Dutch’:

Example 3

“But me lan [=Turkish for ‘mate’], me tape everything eh? Me lan, look, cable. [Repeats with Italianized pronunciation:] Cable. [1.0] Tape everything lan. [] You’re had eh? [.] [grins:] Skipper Street eh!”.

This switch to Illegal happens right at the moment when Karim makes clear that he was pulling Tayfun’s leg (cf. Goffman, 1974:88–89), as if talking Illegal was a suitable down-keying variety in light of Tayfun’s just displayed naveté, illustrating the shift from the ‘pretend’ frame to a ‘real’ one. This is of course still an enjoyable form of teasing that didn’t seem to harm their relationship afterwards. At other times though, interactions could be cruder and help produce more tense relations, as in the following example:

Example 4

Participants and setting: Chakib [19, wearing microphone], Driss [21], Osman [Turkish, 18], Miss Dujardin [40+]. November 1999. During French class on computer related terminology, Chakib asks Osman whether he has had sexual intercourse (‘bam-bam’ and ‘boom boom’) yet. ‘Kardash’ is Turkish for ‘mate’. ‘Illegal’ is in bold-face, English translations are in italics, French is in bold italics.

1 Chakib: hé kardash kardash [.] nog nie ge-gvreê? [1.0] haven’t ma-made love yet?
2 Ms D: Chakib [.] un
3 Chakib: eh-un? un? one?
4 Ms D: ( ) tu dois encore un point ( ) you still have one point ( )
5 Chakib: qu’est-c- qu’est-ce que ça- qu’est-ce que ça? [.] what’s- what’s tha- what’s that? [.]
6 Driss: [laughs] haalt het eruit [laughs]
7 Ms D: comment peut-on réduire la consommation électrique? par l’extinction automatique= how can one reduce the electric consumption? by puttin your screen on automatic=
8 Chakib: (reclame) of wa? (advertisement) or wha?
9 Ms D: =de l’affichage écran? stand-by?
10 Chakib: hé kardash [1.0] hey kardash
11 Driss?: ( ) [laughs]
12 Ms D: nog altijd euh nie euh bam-bam berelem boem-boem? [bam bam berəˈləm bum ˈbum] still no uh bam-bam berelem boom boom?
13 Chakib: l’extinction automatique de l’affichage écran [.] qu’est-ce que ça veut= putting your screen on automatic stand-by [.] what does that=
14 Ms D: [laughs] [1.0] hé kardash [.] hey kardash

15 Simplified transcription. The Dutch original is as follows: “Maar ikke lan ikke neem alles op hé? Ikke lan kijk is kabel. Cable [1.0] Alles opnemen lan [.] Gij zij gepakt hé [.] [grijnste:] Schipperstraat hé!”
In line 1 Chakib poses an embarrassing question: either Osman admits to having had sexual intercourse, which is bound to attract everyone’s attention and possible mockery, or he declares not to have had any such experience yet, which is damaging to Osman’s reputation on the local symbolic market where having sexual know-how is a prime way of approaching the masculine ideal. (Chakib might be quite sure that Osman has no such experience whatsoever.) Osman doesn’t seem to answer, and Chakib formulates a comparable question in lines 13–14, replacing ‘making love’ with the commonly used (by these students) and slightly onomatopoeic equivalent ‘bam bam’, adding seemingly nonsensical words that are faintly alike (also see lines 19 and 23) and ending with the similarly onomatopoeic ‘boom boom’. Nonsensical as the words in between might seem, there might be a clue as to their interpretation elsewhere in my data. In one English class, all pupils had to divide themselves into quiz teams. One white Flemish student (Bart) had to be a team on his own since nobody chose him, one Moroccan-Flemish group called itself ‘Scar Face’, while Osman and Tayfun (two Turkish speaking students) and Philip (a white Flemish student) teamed up as “Sexy Boys”. Chakib, in a different group, at one point calls out at Osman: “ha kardash, what’s that, “sexy boys”? [...] hey! hey hey! normally, normally no vowels! [followed by hilarity in the Moroccan-Flemish group]”. Somewhat later in the lesson he calls them “hard boiled without vowels”. Obviously in both cases Chakib somewhat rudely alludes to the phonology of Turkish, and most likely to the fact that in his view, “sexy boys” contains too many vowels for Turkish speakers. We seem to find the same allusion to Turkish in example 4 above (especially in ‘words’ as berelem and b lm, lines 19 and 23). Chakib doesn’t seem to be very worried about whether his questions will be received convivially and lets Osman suffer the verbal blows. The latter might be said successfully to ignore Chakib, but his non-reaction here is pretty similar to the many other occasions when he, and other Turkish speakers, lacked the skill for witty repartee and were effectively ‘othered’ those who were most vulnerable for parody. Some solidarity existed between ethnic group members: Moroccan-Flemish students stood up for one another and did not accept any linguistic teasing from others, certainly not from white Flemish classmates who faced the threat of serious aggression and accusations of racism if they tried this. This threat also applied to me: in one quite good-natured interview, I couldn’t help but laugh after a hilarious imitation by one Moroccan-Flemish student of an angry parent’s broken Dutch, but was then immediately called to account (“do you think that’s funny?”).

But this solidarity could also break down. On several occasions, Arabic speaking students made a related distinction between normal and less than normal Dutch at the intra-ethnic level at the expense of their Berber speaking co-ethnics. In one interview extract, Nordin and Mourad (two Arabic speakers) are enjoying themselves with making very disparaging remarks on the linguistic skills of Berber speaking classmates – even though Driss, a Berber speaking classmate, was also participating in the interview. Thus, it was said, Berber speakers cannot speak Arabic, and, with accompanying smirk, “they can’t speak Dutch either, so they have to speak Berber!”. On account of this incompetence, Nordin added, thereby echoing extreme rightist discourse in Flanders, “they should be sent back to their own country”. To this Driss only feebly replied he did speak “a little Illegal”. Further on in the interview, Nordin illustrated his knowledge of Berber by suggesting a number of
different Berber words for the police (the ‘spotted’, because of their camouflage outfits, and ‘the sheep’), and he then immediately added other examples in Dutch:

Example 5

Participants and setting: Interview with Nordin [19], Mourad [19] and Driss [20]. May 2000. Illegal is in bold face, English translations in italics, with Illegal stretches underlined.

1 Nordin: of euh flikken [. ] [klakʃ] da’s Berbers hé
or uh cops [. ] [Berber: he is spotted] that’s Berber isn’t it?

2 JJ: serieus?
seriously?

3 Nordin: [klakʃ klakʃ]
[Berber: spotted spotted]

4 Mourad: maar da’s ‘t woordje dat wij gebruiken
but that’s the word we use

5 Nordin: [ve:kakaʃan] da’s ook in ander Berbers
[Berber: the spotted ones] that’s also in a different Berber

6 [laughter]

7 Mourad: [ia:kbeʃan]
[Berber: the sheep]

8 Nordin: en euh ‘de tafelpoot is nie van mij’ [. ] ‘de tafelpoot is nie van mij’ [laughs]
and uh ‘the leg of the table isn’t mine’ [. ] ‘the leg of the table isn’t mine’

9 Mourad: [formal:] maar weten jullie
but do you know

10 Nordin: [ heavily accented: ] of ‘ik heb een BMW-auto’
[ikep ən be:əm vʌmætə]

| or ‘I have a BMW car’ |

11 [hilarity]

Absurd as it is, “the leg of the table isn’t mine” (line 8) appears to evoke the semiotically depleted example sentences from old-school language learning manuals, and it therefore looks as if Nordin continues to illustrate, albeit ironically, his knowledge of ‘words and phrases in Berber’. Consequently, when Nordin adjoins “I have a BMW car” without much interruption this may have to be interpreted as another example of ‘Berber’. When I played this interview extract back in a later interview it turned out that Nordin’s accented phrase was based on what a Berber boy living next door had proudly told him (‘my bother has a BMW-car’). As it used in the example above, the phrase seems to imply that Berber speakers' Dutch is heavily accented, and it shows how the symbolic distinction between Arabic and Berber can be reconstructed and understood by means of invoking another symbolic hierarchy (Standard vs. non-Standard Dutch) in which these students have acquired considerable know-how.

Things become even more ‘messy’ and ambiguous when we take into account that Moroccan-Flemish students not infrequently appealed to the school language rules, which insisted on the use of Standard Dutch and ignored most of their multilingual repertoire, to maximise their discursive elbow room in class. Zacharia, for example, a Berber speaker, was regularly the butt of others’ jokes and taunting. In keeping with this, he was publicly shamed on one occasion for speaking Berber in class by Adnan, an Arabic speaker, who said “hey, talk Dutch mate!”, when the history teacher came in (the history teacher being an strong advocate of Dutch monolingualism in class). Many similar things happened with white Flemish classmates, whose contributions to classroom discussions were often openly disqualified by Moroccan-Flemish students who commented on the nonstandard or dialectal quality of the formers’ language use.

7. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, then, I have tried to show how a society’s approach to multilingualism and its linguistic ideals can provide the background for a number of humorous linguistic practices that playfully protest against this approach but at other moments reproduce the very same linguistic ideals and accompanying stigmatization for those who fail to live up to them. More in particular, I have indicated that a limited proficiency in Dutch was an extremely salient issue for both educationalists as well as for a group of Moroccan-Flemish students at a secondary school. Despite the variety in their linguistic repertoires and their undeniable, albeit non-academic, fluency in Dutch, these students were quite apprehensive about being identified
as less than a normal speaker. In other words, they had acquired a good practical sense of prevailing linguistic hierarchization processes, and recurrently put in efforts to present themselves as mainstream or normal Dutch speakers – without wanting to embrace a ‘nerdy’ standard variety. Consequently, I have illustrated how Moroccan–Flemish students ‘talked (like an) Illegal (refugee)’ on ritually sensitive occasions and in this way critically engaged with linguistic hierarchization. At other moments, though, talking Illegal involved biting ridicule that taught others a tough lesson on Flemish society and its ability to construct ‘zero-linguals’.

Evidently, this explicit mocking of ‘bad’ and other language speakers bolsters the forces of linguistic convention and stigmatization and takes the existing linguistic hierarchy, topped by Standard Dutch, as an implicit ‘correct’ and unfunny state of affairs (cf. Billig, 2005). Plainly put, it shows how those who are at first sight the ‘victims’ of linguistic oppression are happily oppressing and victimizing others, recursively (cf. Gal and Irvine, 1995) using the linguistic tools and symbolic distinctions afforded by existing social and linguistic stratification to help shape and construct a dominant position on the classroom floor. Naturally, describing the ridiculing practices of these Moroccan–Flemish students is not to say that they do not deserve any critical or concerned attention, neither is this to make light of the linguistic and educational regime I have pictured above and the disadvantages this brings along for these students. But taken together, the critical load of talking Illegal (in section 5) as well as the more belittling and oppressive effect of it in the previous section may not only illustrate the enduring impact of wider-scale social and linguistic hierarchies; but it may also demonstrate what a number of ethnographers have seen as the unavoidable ambiguity, complexity and contradiction involved in being different from or engaging with the hegemonic ideal, and how this involves both altering and maintaining, protesting as well as accommodating (cf. MacLeod, 1992:535; Erickson, 2004; Grahame and Jardine, 1990; Hirst, 2003; Rampton, 1995:67–91, 2006). After all, these students are not completely embracing the ideal social and linguistic destinations held out to them – indeed, some of their uses of talking Illegal effectively de-authenticate these prevailing conventions and introduce a short-lived carnivalesque and disordered ‘time out’ (cf. Blackledge and Creese, 2009). One can perhaps even discern some triumph over these conventions in beating ‘real Flemings’ on the basis of their own rules by speaking less dialectal Dutch than their white Flemish classmates do. But this victory in itself demonstrates an acceptance of the linguistic hierarchy it is based on, similar to how these students’ disparagement of others who are worse off than they depends on an acknowledgement of that structure (see Talmy, 2009, for a similar argument). And most of the genial or sympathetic rogue-like quality of their actions disappears when we consider how they eagerly employ, or clutch at, virtually any existing linguistic hierarchy (between standard language and dialect, native and learner language, between Arabic and Berber, or monolingual Dutch versus bi- or multilingualism) as a resource for passing the buck of linguistic incompetence and uncoolness to others, and for consolidating their own discursive dominance at a bottom-of-the-league school which gives out onto less than victorious state of affairs (cf. Billig, 2005). Plainly put, it shows how those who are at first sight the ‘victims’ of linguistic oppression are happily oppressing and victimizing others, recursively (cf. Gal and Irvine, 1995) using the linguistic tools and symbolic distinctions afforded by existing social and linguistic stratification to help shape and construct a dominant position on the classroom floor. Naturally, describing the ridiculing practices of these Moroccan–Flemish students is not to say that they do not deserve any critical or concerned attention, neither is this to make light of the linguistic and educational regime I have pictured above and the disadvantages this brings along for these students. But taken together, the critical load of talking Illegal (in section 5) as well as the more belittling and oppressive effect of it in the previous section may not only illustrate the enduring impact of wider-scale social and linguistic hierarchies; but it may also demonstrate what a number of ethnographers have seen as the unavoidable ambiguity, complexity and contradiction involved in being different from or engaging with the hegemonic ideal, and how this involves both altering and maintaining, protesting as well as accommodating (cf. MacLeod, 1992:535; Erickson, 2004; Grahame and Jardine, 1990; Hirst, 2003; Rampton, 1995:67–91, 2006). After all, these students are not completely embracing the ideal social and linguistic destinations held out to them – indeed, some of their uses of talking Illegal effectively de-authenticate these prevailing conventions and introduce a short-lived carnivalesque and disordered ‘time out’ (cf. Blackledge and Creese, 2009). One can perhaps even discern some triumph over these conventions in beating ‘real Flemings’ on the basis of their own rules by speaking less dialectal Dutch than their white Flemish classmates do. But this victory in itself demonstrates an acceptance of the linguistic hierarchy it is based on, similar to how these students’ disparagement of others who are worse off than they depends on an acknowledgement of that structure (see Talmy, 2009, for a similar argument). And most of the genial or sympathetic rogue-like quality of their actions disappears when we consider how they eagerly employ, or clutch at, virtually any existing linguistic hierarchy (between standard language and dialect, native and learner language, between Arabic and Berber, or monolingual Dutch versus bi- or multilingualism) as a resource for passing the buck of linguistic incompetence and uncoolness to others, and for consolidating their own discursive dominance at a bottom-of-the-league school which gives out onto less than victorious positions in the social hierarchy. Such conflicting examples may invite us to be sensitive to ways in which unequal social structures can be made worthwhile or surferable, or to how ambiguous practices can provide alleviation from what is expected for everyone involved: for those in charge as well as for those occupying less beneficial, subordinate, positions. Attending to such practices may inform descriptions of ‘living in hegemony’, and help explain why subjects of domination as well as dominating but critical agents often help reproduce the structures that function to their (dis)advantage.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Michael Meeuwis and two anonymous referees for their useful comments. All remaining shortcomings are my own.

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