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Linguistic sabotage in a context of monolingualism and standardization

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Abstract

This paper considers the way a group of Moroccan adolescents in Belgium engages with the hegemonic structures that envelop them at school by constructing playful linguistic sabotage. Much in contrast with general stereotypes about these boys' supposed incompetence in Dutch, Moroccan boys could be observed styling several Dutch varieties and employing them to wrong-foot adults and authorities in situations of increased accountability. Crucial in this practice was the concept of *doing ridiculous*, which involved play-acting, creating ambiguity and feigning enthusiasm for schoolish, research-related or other 'boring' activities. *Doing ridiculous* with linguistic varieties helped Moroccan boys to shape and negotiate their participation at school and challenge stereotyping identity categories and elbow-room limiting situations.

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1. Introduction

Schools and other modern institutions have for quite a while already been identified as sites where hegemonic learning processes and the dominant representations of reality that accompany them hold sway. It is in sites like these that ethnolinguistic minority groups encounter the hybridizing and purifying practices that reproduce

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the imperfectness of minority membership vis á vis national and modern identities, and it is there they come to learn and experience the linguistic ideologies of monolingualism and standardization that legitimise these practices (cf. Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 1999; Hymes, 1996). In Flanders, the Dutch speaking northern part of Belgium, ethnic minorities have in the last two decades increasingly been held accountable for not living up to modern and national identity requirements. Today, especially Islamic (mostly Moroccan and Turkish) minorities are confronted with an explicitly hostile but increasingly popular political discourse that indexicalizes these groups with traditionalism, religious and political fundamentalism, anti-social behaviour and inappropriate attitudes, which makes them the almost daily object of a societal debate which is generally summarized as the problem of ‘integration’ and of immigrants’ ‘knowledge of the language’ (see also Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998).

In this paper I will report on sociolinguistic-ethnographic research carried out in one secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium. And more specifically, on how a group of Moroccan adolescents ritually engaged with widespread linguistic ideologies and commonly articulated identity categories by constructing playful linguistic sabotage.¹ It appeared that Moroccan boys responded to their social entourage by what they referred to as *doing ridiculous*. *Doing ridiculous* was a practice of feigning enthusiasm or an eagerness to learn and co-operate, simulating ignorance, and creating other kinds of ambiguity and inauthenticity. In class, and in interviews with the researcher, this regularly was a cause for delay, confusion and unauthorised pleasure, and it could lead to substantial interactional trouble. Playing with language, and more specifically with different Dutch varieties, turned out to be an important resource for *doing ridiculous*. This made clear that Moroccan boys, in spite of dominant views, had acquired a varied Dutch competence that played an important role in their multilingual lives. Additionally, this practice of playful linguistic sabotage showed how these boys tried to engage with situations they perceived as ‘boring’, or how they negotiated their participation in structures that promised little more than a marginal influence on the flow of things.

2. Contexts

Language and immigration are very sensitive issues in Flemish Belgium. One reason for this has to do with the history of nationalist emancipation and the acquisition of linguistic rights. Flemish Belgium has seen in the 19th and 20th

¹ The data I draw on in this paper are part of my doctoral dissertation (Jaspers, 2004). Fieldwork lasted about 2.5 years, and data-collection involved participant observation, interviews, individual (audio) recording, classroom (audio) recording, and feedback-interviews on extracts from the audio recordings. Research focused on two groups in their last years of secondary education (35 pupils in two different groups, in each group Moroccan boys took up 2/3rds of the total amount of pupils; there were three Turkish boys, nine Belgian boys and one Belgian girl; ages varied from 16 to 21). All pupils have working class backgrounds. Research was generally ‘sociolinguistic ethnographic’ (cf. Heller, 1999) and much inspired by Rampton’s work (1995).

centuries. Productive and mobilising as this nationalist inspiration may have been, it now confronts the Flemish Community with important contradictions, as immigration, European integration, and the growing visibility of ethnic and linguistic minorities threaten the Herderian logic of linguistic identity that before always lended legitimacy to Dutch-speaking self-determination (as is the case for other Western national minorities such as in Catalonia or Québec, cf. Heller, 1999). Among other things this has led to a now also government-supported homogenizing discourse that tries to revitalize the conditions for this linguistic logic² (cf. Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998). Obligatory citizenship and language courses for newcomers (and moral incentives for Belgian citizens from Moroccan or Turkish descent to participate in them), a heavy emphasis on the knowledge of Dutch, and an active ignoring or abnormalizing of the presence of other languages on Flemish territory all serve to re-legitimise the obviousness of a Flemish monolingual representation. This is often supported by what might be called an ‘underdog discourse’, that reproduces the idea of linguistic oppression and the need for continuous Flemish-nationalist action: in the same way as Dutch was once threatened by French in Belgium, it would now be besieged by EU-multilingualism, globalization, and the growing international outlook and appeal of Brussels – all of this in spite of the firm consolidation of Dutch within Brussels, Belgium and the EU.

Equally important and contributing to this linguistic sensitivity is the late 19th century-choice which favours standard Dutch over Flemish. Essentially, this choice was inspired by the view that the Dutch that was then spoken in the Netherlands was the product of a more authentic Dutch tradition, or a ‘purer’ Dutch that was free from the corruption of French; a Dutch also that had been ‘placed in safekeeping’ in the Netherlands after the separation of the Low Countries in the 80 Years’ War (1568–1648). Opting for Flemish or constructing a Flemish standard language would have come down to ratifying the product of a ‘bad’ history of occupation and cultural decline, so one felt, while Standard Dutch purportedly restored and revitalized an authentic Dutch tradition in Flanders. It was not irrelevant for the proponents of Standard Dutch that this would in a way linguistically re-establish the lost political unity and flourishing of the medieval Low Countries. Besides, Flemish varieties were considered to be too authentic or too traditional from a modernist perspective, and therefore unable to carry complex ideas or serve as a vehicle for unambiguous communication as was illustrated by the way French was used in the young Belgian state. Against this background, non-standard speakers have always been considered a threat to Flemish linguistic and civil emancipation, and their ‘uncareful’ speech permeated with French and substandard influences is still strongly objected to today on official

² Which is still relevant in its original Herderian form: it is only some six years ago that the Flemish Community government issued a brochure in which it wrote the following to legitimise its policy of discouraging linguistic facilities for French speakers on Flemish territory around Brussels: “A living language is inextricably bound up with a territory and with the people living on that territory. A language can only survive if it is used by a community; a community can only survive when it disposes of a territory”.

or public platforms. A contemporary brother in arms of this regime of linguistic surveillance is the Flemish public broadcasting corporation, which explicitly prescribes standard Dutch and which in 2001 attracted approving attention when it organised an anti-substandard language campaign. This linguistic regime has a paradoxical effect, however, because large groups of the ‘people’ whose oppressed language was made official are now themselves eligible for and subjected to linguistic surveillance. One hierarchy of languages has been replaced by a different one, or one in which different varieties now occupy different positions (cf. Jaffe, 1999).

Unsurprisingly, these representations of language filter through to the Flemish field of education. This is the case not only in general policies according to which pupils are supposed to “acquire a positive attitude towards switching to the standard language spontaneously when the situation so requires”, but also in specific rules Moroccan boys have to take account of at the school where I did my research:

- Evidently, we speak standard language (General Dutch) at school.
- During class the use of dialects is not allowed, and certainly not the use of languages which only a small group can understand. Everyone should always be able to understand everything.

And this same focus was also attributed to my presence as a white academic interested in the language of Moroccan boys:

Extract 1

I had just explained to Bashir why I wanted to study their language use, but when I said – without mentioning anything about Dutch – that I also wanted to record stuff, he answered: “Record our Dutch? Nobody here speaks Dutch”.
[fieldnotes]

Extract 2

When I’m noting down that two boys are speaking Dutch with each other, Samir, who was sitting next to me, asks: “Ah, they don’t speak proper Dutch?”
[fieldnotes]

Extract 3

Aziz, suddenly and provocatively at the end of math: “Are you going with us to Drama-class? Yeah that’s what you find interesting huh, to hear how well we can speak Dutch?” [fieldnotes]

In each of these extracts, being a language researcher for these boys immediately seems to imply a prescriptivist evaluation of their language use. Studying language in their view equals purifying language or registering a bad competence. Aziz’ slightly provocative question in Extract 3 indicates that not only language is at issue here, but that my research also imports a ‘we’ as opposed to a ‘you’. This means: it implies the fascination of a white Belgian intellectual with their behaviour as *Moroccan boys*.

Part of this attributed fascination has its roots in the widespread fascination in Flemish society with these boys' behaviour. This fascination is to a large extent shaped by the Antwerp-based extreme nationalist and anti-foreigner party *Vlaams Blok* (or *Flemish Bloc*),³ which today appeals to more than 30% of the electorate in Antwerp and has become the second largest political formation in Flanders. The *Flemish Bloc* has for 25 years successfully been spreading and reproducing a popular discourse on the incongruence of different cultures within the same territory and on the intrinsic inferiority and dangerousness of Islam. It has done so with serious consequences for the representation of Moroccan boys: if cultural cohesion and reviving tradition is vital for the nation's completion, the presence and visibility of Moroccan boys poses an obvious obstacle. And when these boys are seen to cause trouble, get themselves involved into (visible) yobbish behaviour or crime, or act in other ways regarded as anti-social, they are easily pictured as 'abusive' of the hospitality or tolerance this popular discourse frames their presence in, and are met with high indignation and disproportionate attention from the police. Speaking another language than Dutch or speaking it differently or with difficulty is likewise seen as a symptom of their 'deviant' cultural backgrounds, their unwillingness to integrate into Flemish society, or as proof of the impossibility of this integration. Knowledge of Dutch in this discursive regime leads to (mock) surprise:

Extract 4

I'm talking to Youssef about the project on municipal elections that was organised a couple of days ago. He laughs and tells me about the *Vlaams Blok* representative he said something to, who answered him in mock-surprise: "ah? so you speak Dutch?". Youssef: 'I could hit this guy'.
[fieldnotes]

The continuing electoral victories of the *Flemish Bloc* have encouraged other parties to incorporate parts of this popular discourse while advocating tolerance, or to take a firmer stand towards ethnic minorities and to acknowledge that they cause 'problems' (the latter is considered taboo-breaking or it is viewed as 'abandoning a misconceived cultural relativism'). In sum, Moroccan boys in Flanders are frequently stereotyped as unwilling or unable to integrate and speak Dutch; they are seen as troublemakers, they are often the victims of explicit racism in Antwerp, and the object of general worry. In other words, they are observed, criticized, evaluated, sanctioned, and over-policed, and naturally therefore popular objects of interest for the media and social research. Clearly, my own research was a local manifestation of this societal gaze, but I hope to make clear below how it was correspondingly and playfully sabotaged as one of the situations that reproduces their problematic identity.

³ It has recently (November 2004) changed its name to '*Vlaams Belang*' (*Flemish Interest*) due to the fact that three of its core supporting non-profit organizations have been found guilty of violating the Belgian law on racism. Keeping its original name, programme and structure would have made the original party extremely vulnerable, not least in terms of losing its hefty state subsidy, and has therefore led to the foundation of a 'new' party with a 'clean' programme, though its leaders emphasize that 'nothing has changed really'.

3. Doing ridiculous

The Moroccan boys I followed around were well aware of their bad image, and played with their stereotypical identities:

Extract 5

At the beginning of mechanics class: a Moroccan boy enters, from the 2nd or 3rd year, and says “DIARY SIR” while giving his diary to Mr Parmentier. Somebody from the 5th year says: “hey, *please*”. To which Mr Parmentier replies: “yeah, he’s well-bred, when he says he’s going to bring something with him he hasn’t got it [laughs]”. One Moroccan boy says, pseudo-indignant: “it’s one of those Moroccans again!”. Mr Parmentier appreciates the joke. [fieldnotes]

Something similar in fact happened outside school with some Moroccan boys I didn’t know:

Extract 6

A small group of Moroccan boys is walking around in the supermarket, I guess they’re 14 years old. They’re excited, giggly, and loud, and indeed it doesn’t take long before I can hear somebody else being outraged in another aisle. Soon after I see the group of boys, still giggling and now also with semi-frightened faces, shoot past with their shopping trolley. I hear one of them say in Antwerp dialect: “**it’s them little wogs again**”. [fieldnotes]

In both cases, we find Moroccan boys criticizing themselves ironically as problematic Moroccan boys. In Extract 5 a younger boy is mildly reprimanded for his somewhat assertive treatment of Mr Parmentier, a teacher who was considerably liked by the boys I observed, when this boy’s actions are framed as the widely known symptom of a bad Moroccan attitude. In Extract 6, Moroccan boys again provide the explanation for what has caused outrage just before. This time they also use Antwerp dialect and a common abuse term,⁴ i.e. they are ‘say foring’ here (cf. Goffman, 1981, p. 150) and providing a racist explanation in the voice and language of the Antwerpian Belgians who often complain about them in this way.

Examples such as these were actually part of a practice Moroccan boys referred to as *belachelijk doen* (“doing/being ridiculous”), which was contrasted with *serieus doen* (“doing/being serious”), i.e. behaving, being responsible, accountable and

⁴ ‘Wog’ is an approximating translation. Actually the Antwerp term ‘makákskes’ is used here, the diminutive and plural of ‘makak’, which is a common term of abuse based on ‘makaken’, viz. Dutch for cercopithecidae (apes with long tails). The Dutch entry in my fieldnotes is as follows:

In de supermarkt loopt een groepje Marokkaanse jongens rond, ik schat ze 14 jaar oud. Ze zijn opgewonden, lacherig en lawaaierig, en inderdaad, het duurt niet lang voor ik in een andere gang iemand iets verontwaardigd hoor roepen. Ik zie even later het groepje jongens lachend en met semi-verschrikte gezichten voorbijstuiven met hun winkelkarretje, en hoor één van hen zeggen: “**t zen weeral die makákskes zene**”.

sincere. *Doing ridiculous* involved play-acting in class, pretending not to understand, simulating enthusiasm or giving confusing or inappropriate answers in class as well as in interviews in order to slow things down or cause teachers to digress and pay attention to non-school subjects (cf. ‘making out’, Burawoy, 1979; Foley, 1990, pp. 112ff.; or ‘having a laugh’, cf. Willis, 1977). It was therefore considered an effective and sometimes necessary antidote to the many *serious* and boring situations school life is made up of. Further research revealed that *doing ridiculous* was not just a way of leading teachers up the garden path or of doing silly in class, it was in fact a way of rendering certain routine situations less obvious or challenging the smoothness of their organization – and it is in this context that the word *tegenwerken* (“sabotaging”) was used. When I asked Imran why he and his friends sometimes spoke pseudo-learner Dutch on the tram, he said:

Extract 7

“When we’re on the tram, and when you see they’re all racists, that’s when you act like that, that’s when you sabotage, you see, ‘cos acting normal isn’t much fun for us then, you see”.

Imran is 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, p. 271) (see also Extract 6). Imran and his friends are in other words not merely doing silly here, but making a routine situation (such as being potentially confronted with racism and stereotyping) less obvious by throwing dust in the eyes of the people who are seen to call such situations into existence. ‘Acting normal’ in such situations ‘isn’t much fun’ because it means accepting a rather unpleasant situation without demur.

‘Boring’ and ‘serious’ situations are not only schoolish situations then, but can be extended to all routine participation frameworks in which these boys experience little room for self-initiated action and are held accountable by adults (teachers, researchers, people outside school). Or, situations in which there is growing potential for evaluation, observation, critique, sanctioning, and stereotyping, such as occur on the tram, in class with unfamiliar temporary teachers, in a research interview that is felt to be awkward or intrusive, while having to wear a microphone, or when confronted with the many teacher-like questions, reproaches, warnings and commands that lead to a ‘boring’ situation that ‘isn’t much fun’ because it involves enduring Belgian, adult or teacher authority.

In class, *doing ridiculous* moreover was a practice which allowed Moroccan boys to construct centre stage positions at the expense of their Turkish and especially Belgian classmates. The latter ones were often interactionally silenced by the *ridiculous* performances of Moroccan boys or the participation structures they made themselves star in. The resulting silence and non-participation of Belgian classmates (which was additionally discouraged by frequently being made the butt of jokes) could then be interpreted as typical for Belgians who are always *doing serious*, just like their teachers. What made things worse was that *doing ridiculous* was a crucial part of a cultural semiotic in which Moroccan boys would be

naturally predisposed to have such positive characteristics as a welcoming open-heartedness, a fun-lovingness, a preparedness to embrace the absurd or improbable and a certain pride and unruliness when opposing curtailing regimes. The rather reticent participation of Belgian boys in setting up *ridiculous* performances, and the fact that they were also perceived as naive and solitary meant that Belgian classmates took up rather untrendy positions in this local semiotic market, and were attributed studious attitudes in spite of their bad marks and visible school fatigue. Quotes as “It takes years before they loosen up”, and “they don’t want to adapt themselves [laughter]” were quite elucidating in this respect: they pointed to a supposed cultural deprivation Belgian boys were suffering, which is a complete inversion of the prevailing representation of Belgian–Moroccan relations and of the dominant view in which ethnic minorities ‘don’t want to adapt’, and of course, Moroccan boys found this very amusing.

It was no coincidence that Antwerp dialect was used in Extract 6, and learner Dutch on the tram (Extract 7). Linguistic varieties appeared to be popular resources for putting other people on the wrong track, and it was no coincidence either that in both extracts these are varieties of Dutch. In feedback-interviews, playing with languages was systematically interpreted by Moroccan boys as *doing ridiculous*, and exaggerated performances of Dutch varieties were explicitly related to inauthenticity and juxtaposed to ‘talking *serious*’, which was what one did when talking with teachers or with the girls one was interested in. Dutch varieties, however, were certainly not the only relevant varieties for Moroccan boys, and took up only part of their daily multilingual repertoires.

4. Linguistic competences

The school where this research took place had an official Dutch status, and it had an exclusively Dutch speaking teaching staff. In practice however, the student population was highly multilingual, and Moroccan boys were not the only ethnic minority at school. Multilingualism within the two classrooms I frequently sat in consisted of varieties of Arabic (related to Moroccan cities such as Tanger, Tetouane, Oujda), varieties of Berber (Tamazight, Tarifit), varieties of Turkish, and Dutch varieties. I could also regularly hear phrases in English and French, often in combination with the rap or hip hop in these boys’ cassette-, CD- or minidisc-players. “We mix everything” was a frequent answer when asked about their linguistic competences. Still, and in spite of dominant stereotypes about these boys’ language use, and of the prevailing view that multilingualism threatens the use of Dutch, there was a marked preference for Dutch, even in their frequent code-switching routines. According to Bülent, a Turkish classmate, Moroccan boys would only speak Dutch with one another, which is a strong exaggeration, but it does point to the naturalness of Dutch in the daily repertoires of Moroccan boys. According to themselves, their language habits also did not change drastically between school and home: “at home, even with my brother, nobody watches me and I’m speaking Dutch” (Imran). Or Jamal says:

Extract 8

“my dad doesn’t like it either that we’re talking Dutch all day. He doesn’t like that because he wants to understand and participate, you see? and that’s why he says uh: [talk] Moroccan”. [Interview]

Of course, Arabic and Berber appeared quite often, but mostly to give word to insults, exclamations, directives, imperatives, or to produce utterances which were significantly shorter than the Dutch these boys produced. On the playground one could find more home language use than in the classroom, and, as can be expected, Arabic and Berber were popular in collusive communication (cf. Goffman, 1981), for instance when trying to pass on information during a test or when talking about teachers. This predominance of Dutch was quite different from the language habits of Turkish boys, and from how the latter were generally perceived:

Extract 9

Imran: “Turks can’t speak Dutch! [. . .] And when they do this has something artificial about it, as if we [Imran and JJ] would be talking English with one another”. [fieldnotes]

An analysis of individual recordings of Turkish boys indeed showed that even though they had quite the same background history in Antwerp as Moroccan boys, they predominantly spoke Turkish with one another, and also experienced considerable difficulties with speaking and writing Dutch in class. Because of this they were very often the object of ridicule and were sometimes addressed by Moroccan boys in foreigner talk – which was something Turkish boys could hardly do anything about as their competence in Dutch was far from fluent enough to dumbfound anyone trying to have them on. Turkish boys knew that they had a bad sociolinguistic image (“they think we’re tourists”), but they explained their different home language use by referring to the language situation in the Moroccan community where not only Arabic but also Berber is spoken, as opposed to the Turkish community that ‘only has one language’.

4.1. Competences in Arabic and Berber

The higher frequency of Dutch interaction among Moroccan boys might be linked up with their competences in Arabic and Berber. Not every Moroccan boy seemed to be an expert speaker in his home language, and speaking their home language with one another was not always very helpful: some Moroccan boys had an Arabic-speaking background, most of them a Berber-speaking background, while both are not mutually comprehensible. Very often this ‘problem’ was minimized by glossing what they spoke as ‘Moroccan’, or by saying:

“We learn Arabic *and* Berber at home” (Bashir, Berber)

“We understand one another” (Driss, Berber)

“Most of us understand both, more or less. When they’re using terms of abuse I definitely understand them” (Jamal, Berber)

“Everybody who’s a Berber knows Arabic too” (general remark by Berbers)

Nonetheless, boys who could not speak Arabic were significantly stigmatised. Some Berber speakers reported a good competence in Arabic, but were ridiculed for that by Arabic speakers, and generally, Berber speakers were not thought capable of conversing in Arabic. The different status of Arabic and Berber and the need to express competence in Arabic is influenced by the symbolic hierarchy that exists between these two varieties in the Maghrib world (Faiq, 1999; Tilmatine and Suleiman, 1996). Even though Berber historically precedes Arabic in North Africa, it is no match for Arabic in the existing religious and pan-Arabic political frameworks, and the fact that Arabic is usually spoken in cities as opposed to the rural areas where Berber can be mostly found adds to this different appreciation. The majority of the Moroccan minority in Belgium does actually speak Berber, but that does not seem to have an effect on how both varieties are evaluated within Belgium. In one interview, Nordin (a speaker of Arabic) explained to me that Berbers are “the lowest layer of the population”, and he suggests jokingly, paraphrasing the extreme rightwing discourse on immigrants, they be sent back to their own country. Speakers of Arabic in their turn varied in what they could comprehend of Berber:

“Berber is like Chinese for me” (Youssef)

“I can understand Berber, but I don’t speak it. Imran speaks Berber with me” (Faisal)

Mourad could allegedly swear very well in Berber, and Nordin once said he knew the Berber for “the leg of the table isn’t mine”, a sentence that seemed to evoke silly sentences from language learning manuals and therefore seemed to illustrate the exotic and therefore useless character of Berber. Arabic speakers minimalized their insufficient knowledge of Berber by emphasizing, as also Berber speakers did, the importance of Arabic. Or, by signalling a token expertise in Berber (terms of abuse) some Arabic speakers seemed to suggest that if they were making a visible effort to speak it, this could then be reciprocally demanded of Berber speakers.

All of this could imply that the Moroccan boys in my data are taking part in a process of language shift from Arabic/Berber to Dutch. But there are significant factors which in this case successfully seem to preclude such a shift (cf. Kulick, 1992). One factor was that Dutch did not (yet) seem to take up a prominent position in the discursive practices of Moroccan family life and in intergenerational contact.⁵ Another factor was that speaking Dutch exclusively, or speaking it very idiomatically, was sanctioned as ‘too Belgian’ or as ‘boring’, in other words, as

⁵ At one point in my research I set up a small and informal exploratory survey in which I asked every pupil about the (different) language(s) they could speak, the ones they spoke at home with their parents and siblings, and with their friends, which language they thought they could speak best and which they liked the most. A few boys parodied the survey, and the difference between ‘knowing a language’ and actually using it was of course quite ambiguous. Nevertheless, this survey helped to produce a general impression of language use at home: Moroccan boys systematically replied that parents were usually addressed in Arabic or Berber, whereas with siblings they preferred to speak Dutch or a code-switched Dutch-Arabic/Dutch-Berber variety.

serious or as evoking social horizons Moroccan boys could not link up with the expression of positive aspects of the self. This did not mean, though, that the acquisition of Dutch was unpopular or uninteresting, nor that this competence in Dutch was irrelevant for social positioning within the Moroccan group at school.

4.2. Competences in Dutch

From an academic perspective, it was very easy to notice a lot of difficulties in Moroccan boys' routine Dutch. Especially formal written discourse was problematic, with boys sighing that "Dutch is difficult" and teachers complaining about these boys' lack of expertise: "The texts they jot down, they're really horrifying, you wouldn't believe how these sentences are jumbled together" (maths teacher). Moroccan boys indeed had a lot of trouble spelling correctly, they struggled with reading aloud, and they made consistent morphological and syntactic mistakes by inflecting adjectives incorrectly, using gender-inappropriate articles and inappropriate demonstrative pronouns, and they mixed the article-systems of Antwerp dialect and Standard Dutch. In formal public speeches Moroccan boys frequently acquired a failing identity in contrast with the wit and ease they communicated with in Dutch in more informal situations in class and on the playground.

Moroccan boys nevertheless repeatedly made it clear that they considered themselves *competent* speakers of Dutch, especially when compared to their Turkish classmates and to 'illegal' and recently immigrated citizens. Even in comparison with their Belgian classmates. Zacharia at one point says "I dare to say my Dutch is better than what some Belgians speak", which is echoed by the head of school, who says that "the allochthons [i.e. the Moroccan boys] [...] speak better Dutch, or at least I have that impression, they speak better Dutch". This may sound surprising if we take into account the abovementioned linguistic problems of Moroccan boys. However, the conditions in which this statement can still be true most likely pertain to the pronunciation of Moroccan boys' Dutch, which is less influenced by Antwerp dialect than the speech of their Belgian classmates and hence perceived to be 'better' in a context of standardization. Other conditions are the relatively lower frequency with which Moroccan boys used dialectal morpho-syntax, and their avoidance of highly idiomatic dialect words. Some of this is illustrated in the following example:

Extract 10

Participants and setting: Interview with Mourad [20], Adnan [19] and Moumir [21]. February 2001. (simplified and abbreviated transcription)

Mourad: look, especially as a Moroccan, if you, you see, if you start talking to Belgians with a language like pam-pam then they'll say then they'll think [Antwerp dialect:] **man, this wog doesn't know any Dutch** but, but when you're like us then – then they'll think [Antwerp dialect:] **freakin' hell! they speak better Dutch than us dash it how's this possible?**

JJ: [laughs]

Mourad: hey

JJ: but does that happen often?

Mourad: with, yeah like-look, where was this again?

Adnan: [quickly:] () we can speak better Standard Dutch than whatchacallit eh, because them they speak deep Antwerp dialect at home or so but we (often) speak ordinary Dutch at school, in class you've got to [do] stuff right, you can't simply () we're used to whatchacallit

Dutch original:

Mourad: zie, zeker als Marokkaan hé, als ge, snapte, als Belgen begint te praten me- zo'n taaltje van pam-pam dan zeggen die dan denken die [Antwerps:] **amai joeng die Makak die kan geen Nederlands** maar, maar als ge gelijk ons zé dan z- dan denken die [Antwerps:] **amai joenge! die kennen beter Nederlands dan ons potverdoeme hoe komt da?**

JJ: [lacht]

Mourad: hei

JJ: maar komt da vaak voor?

Mourad: met, ja gelijk zie hé, waar was da na weer?

Adnan: [snel:] () wij spreken beter Algemeen Nederlands als dingé hé want, z'hun die spreken thuis plat Antwerps of zo maar wij spreken (vaak) gewoon Nederlands op school, in de les moet gij dingé hé, kunde gij moeilijk () wij zijn gewoon van dingé

Mourad is saying here that when Moroccans produce sloppy or bad Dutch, this would provoke racist utterances ('this wog doesn't know any Dutch'). In Mourad's somewhat swellheaded view, he and his friends would be speaking Dutch so well that Belgians would have to assert astonishedly that it's better than what they speak themselves. Mourad illustrates this difference here by imitating Belgians in strong Antwerp dialect, which contrasts with his own routine voice, which is less dialectal and hence much less vulnerable to linguistic sanctioning. Negative Belgian comments on the Dutch competence of Moroccan boys are in other words undercut in this example by invoking the ideology of standardization in which dialect speaking Belgians have an incompetent identity themselves. A somewhat similar argument is made above by Adnan. The "them" he is talking about are the Belgian boys in their class, and Adnan distinguishes between their own routine way of speaking ("we (often) speak ordinary Dutch at school", "we're used to whatchallit") and the very dialectal language use of his Belgian classmates. A brief look at their Belgian classmates' language use would indeed immediately reveal its closeness to Antwerp dialect.

It is difficult, however, to call what Mourad and Adnan speak 'Standard Dutch'. Mourad and Adnan are using words and morpho-syntactic constructions that are unmistakably related to Antwerp dialect:⁶ pronominals such as *ge* instead of Standard Dutch *je* [you] and *z'hun* [them] instead of *zij* [they]; 'to be' is conjugated in

⁶ I have underlined relevant features in the original Dutch version of this extract.

Antwerp dialect as *zé* instead of Standard Dutch *bent* [are, 2nd pers. sing.]; Standard Dutch *nu* [now] is pronounced as *na*, dialectal t-deletion occurs in words such as *da* [that] and *me-* [with], and also the dialectal *kunde* *gij* is used instead of Standard *kan* *jij* [can you]. Adnan's claim that "we speak better Standard Dutch than whatchacallit" remains valid, though, as long as one focuses on the routine pronunciation of their Dutch and on the relatively lower frequency of dialectal morpho-syntactic constructions and specific lexis. Moroccan boys are "used to whatchacallit", i.e., routinely produce a Dutch that is less eligible for linguistic surveillance which in the first place focuses on dialect pronunciation and 'incorrect' words.

This practice matches with what Moroccan boys say in interviews about the relation of Antwerp dialect and Standard Dutch to their own way of speaking, and it corresponds with how they supervise each other's language use. Antwerp dialect was considered in interviews as 'Belgian', 'racist', 'anti-social', and unsophisticated. Using idiomatic Antwerp dialect features without being explicitly ironical about it was therefore sanctioned: when Zacharia (who frequently was the butt of other people's jokes) at a certain point got very angry and used an Antwerp dialect word for 'stolen' (viz., *gejoept* instead of Standard Dutch *gestolen* [stolen]), he was publicly ridiculed for that. In one interview Brahim says he starts parodying and imitating other Moroccan boys when their language use gets too close to idiomatic Antwerp dialect.

In the same way, Moroccan boys' routine Dutch was hard to confuse with Standard Dutch, and they also themselves did not consider their Dutch 'perfect' or as approximating Standard Dutch quality. Standard Dutch was pictured in interviews as the language of authority, co-operation, and as an important asset in later life. In practice, however, Moroccan boys used Standard Dutch in a way that illustrated how inauthentic and other-wordly it was for them (see below). To situate their own Dutch competence they sometimes referred to the symbolic hierarchy that exists between different types of secondary schooling in Flanders. Pupils in the academically oriented trajectories of secondary education were described as speaking 'perfectly' and outdoing them, but their own Dutch would still be miles away from the low levels of proficiency pupils in vocational secondary education were attributed or from the near-foreigner talk these pupils would be speaking (vocational education generally being considered as 'below' their technical educational pathway). Jokingly it was said that "there are classes there [in vocational education], they all get headphones when they're in class, everything's translated [laughter]". Furthermore, trying to be a 'perfect' speaker was not a very cool thing to do: it would imply learning the language of authority without protest, or being obedient, nerdy or 'boring'.

Hence, Moroccan boys routinely produce a Dutch that must not be confused with Antwerp dialect, neither with Standard Dutch, or only with the latter variety when that helps them to distinguish themselves positively from the 'uncareful' and dialectal speech of Belgians. In contrast with general perception, Moroccan boys in my data clearly attach great importance to being perceived by others as competent speakers of Dutch, and can be seen to construct a Dutch competence by (1) emphasizing the

dialectal character of what whites and Belgians speak – in this way engaging with the general demand that ‘they should learn Dutch to integrate themselves’ while exploiting the paradoxical fact that many Flemings themselves are not speaking ‘proper Dutch’; and (2) by distinguishing their own Dutch from foreigner talk or what they tended to call ‘talking Illegal’, i.e. talking as somebody who’s very recently (and illegally) immigrated.

Antwerp dialect, Standard Dutch and incompetent Dutch or ‘talking Illegal’ thus seem to conjure up social destinations and practices that are hard to reconcile with the positive self-aspects Moroccan boys strive after when *doing ridiculous* and sabotaging. Except of course when these varieties were used inauthentically to project images and practices they could ironically distance themselves from, and it is to one example of such theatrical or stylised use of Dutch varieties that I now wish to turn.

5. Linguistic sabotage

Antwerp dialect, Standard Dutch and learner Dutch were interesting resources for Moroccan boys, since by using one of these varieties the speakers immediately evoked and responded to stereotyping and linguistic evaluation, and conjured up social worlds Moroccan boys felt were not theirs. It also allowed them to create ambiguity and inauthenticity, and playing with these varieties was a major aspect of poking fun and establishing performative dominance within the classroom and in school corridors. In my data, *doing ridiculous* with these varieties was typical in situations when there was an increased potential for reproach, stereotyping, evaluation, and sanctioning. In Extract 6 for instance, we could see how Moroccan boys criticized their own behaviour as symptomatic of their ethnic identity at precisely that moment when other customers in the supermarket might have come up with their own explanations and critique. In the same way in Extract 7, Moroccan boys reported speaking in learner Dutch when they experienced enhanced ethnic animosity in their immediate surroundings.

Moments such as these can be termed ‘ritually sensitive’ moments, i.e. moments at which actual or potential rips show up in the routine fabric of social life, or “moments at which habitual assumptions about common-sense reality and normal social relations loosen their hold” (Rampton, 1995; see Goffman, 1971, 1981, p. 16). It is at such moments that one finds ritual action, that is, symbolic action geared to showing respect for the social order and the personal identities it protects, and designed to remedy potential transgressions. As Rampton (2002) also indicates, it is not unusual that in such cases linguistic material is used that has a “special significance above and beyond the practical requirements of the here-and-now”. This label is clearly relevant in this case for a variety such as Antwerp dialect, which from the point of view of Moroccan boys referred to Belgians, racism, and non-modern unsophisticatedness. Similarly, learner Dutch or ‘talking Illegal’ was a special variety or a way of speaking with a wider indexicality, and this also holds for Standard Dutch. In the next example I will

try to point out how Standard Dutch was playfully used to suggest extreme co-operation in a situation that involved explicit observation and questioning, viz. a research interview:

Extract 11

Participants and setting: Feedbackinterview with Imran [19], Jamal [19] en Faisal [19]. April 2001. We've just been listening to one extract. JJ asks them why Nordin would be shouting 'racists!' in the school corridor. I have clipped a 30-s digression between lines 10 and 32.

- 1 JJ: but eh why eh [.] why would he do that [.] or does that happen often
 2 that you think there are racists about?
 3 Faisal: | no no we just say-
 4 Imran: no no Nordin (sometimes) just says some of these words
 5 Faisal | **no no it's actually about | it's actually**
 6 **about f-it's actually about femi-feminism**
 7 Jamal: [laughs]
 8 Faisal: [laughs]
 9 Imran: no no no [.] that was [.] dunno ()
 10 Faisal: no we had this kind of banal feeling and uh [.] ()
 [. .] [30.0]
 32 Jamal: no but uh [.] sometimes
 33 they just say things isn't it [.] you shouldn't really try to analyse
 34 that and all 'cause- he just says that-
 35 JJ: to provoke other people or to make them feel=
 36 Jamal: well yeah something like that
 37 JJ: =annoyed?
 38 Faisal: **it's actually about the obs-observation** [laughs]
 39 Jamal: [laughs]
 40 Faisal: no no [.] just wi-
 41 Imran: | ()
 42 Faisal: | for example for example look huh [.] w-we are
 43 sometimes together all of us uh [.] we're saying something strange
 44 dunno 'blue' or something [.] that's [.] simply
 45 Imran: it doesn't have anything to do with our culture or stuff

Dutch original:

- 1 JJ: maar eh waarom eh [.] waarom zou die dat doen [.] of gebeurt da veel
 2 da gulle vindt dat er racisten rondlopen?
 3 Faisal: | neenee wij slagen
 4 Imran: neenee Nordin zegt (soms) van die woorden
 5 Faisal: | **neenee 't gaat eigenlijk om | 't gaat eigenlijk om**
 6 **het f-'t gaat eigenlijk om het femi-feminisme**
 7 Jamal: [lacht]
 8 Faisal: [lacht]
 9 Imran: neeneenee [.] da was [.] 'k weetnie. ()

- 10 Faisal: nee wij hadden zone banaal gevoel en eh [.] ()
 [. . .] [30.0]
- 32 Jamal: nee maar eh [.] soms
- 33 zeggen die van die dinges hé [.] ge moet da nie echt proberen te
- 34 ontleden en zo want- die zegt da maar
- 35 JJ: om ander mensen wat te provoceren of zo om die wat ambetant te=
- 36 Jamal: awel ja zoiet
- 37 JJ: =doen voelen?
- 38 Faisal: **'t gaat eigenlijk om de obs-observatie** [lacht]
- 39 Jamal: [lacht]
- 40 Faisal: neenee [.] gewoon me-
- 41 Imran: | ()
- 42 Faisal: | bijvoorbeeld bijvoorbeeld zie hé [.] w-wij zijn
- 43 soms met samen allemaal hé [.] wij zeggen ineens iets raar 'kweenie
- 44 blauw' of zo [.] da's [.] gewoon
- 45 Imran: da heeft niks me-ons cultuur te maken of zo

Pragmatically speaking, what Faisal says in lines 5–6 could be a possible answer to my question in line 1. But this possibility is clearly not taken into consideration by Imran and Jamal (lines 7–8). Imran makes this explicit in line 9, and tries to formulate something more suitable, which also Faisal tries to do in line 10. A bit later Jamal gives his explanation and tells me not to spend too much attention to other people's foolishness. The interview seems to be on track again, but in line 38 Faisal produces another answer that is structurally identical to what he said in lines 5–6: again he uses an intellectualist word that features the same stuttering repetition of its first part, and which this time is even less plausible in terms of content. Again Faisal's contribution is not taken seriously (lines 39–40), and it is Faisal himself who provides a more genuine answer in his routine Dutch in lines 42–44.

Faisal's two special contributions are not in his routine way of speaking but in a 'Standard Dutch':⁷ he uses careful pronunciation, no dialect-vowels, and 'expensive' intellectualist words. Faisal is *doing ridiculous* here, and the fact that his two contributions are interactionally adequate but deviate from what is expected in this interview in terms of content and indexicality, provides an argument for interpreting what he does as a case of *upkeying*, an unauthorised adding of meaning layers (Goffman, 1974, p. 366), which could potentially make the researcher hold a different conception of the situation than the one which is entertained by Faisal. The latter is trying to parody the interview in other words, or he's getting over-involved by giving answers which, considering my status as a researcher from the university, are extra good (1) because of their Standard Dutch quality; and (2) because of their intellectualist and therefore 'interesting' content. In any case the effect of this is frame trouble: even while he's very ready to provide remedy by denying what he said (lines 10 and 40), Faisal is creating a situation in which all information he gives is potentially

⁷ That is, "Standard Dutch" in the view of Moroccan boys themselves.

ambiguous and insincere. The more Faisal does this (and this example was only one of the several occasions he used Standard Dutch in this way), the more the researcher does not know which frame applies or the more he has to be suspicious about everything Faisal says. Inasmuch as Faisal interprets this interview as an occasion in which he's being requested to provide authentic information, he is effectively sabotaging it by constructing inauthenticity or actively resisting a request for authentic information on his ethnic experience.

In ritual terms, the interview is taking an ethnic turn (lines 1–2) and creating heightened sensitivity around the different ethnic identities and structural positions of the participants in this interview and the potential problems that might bring along. But more importantly, interviews were not unremarkable happenings and involved a significantly different participation-framework than the one I usually took part in. Generally, in class, I was a marginal bystander, with Moroccan boys or their teachers taking up dominant positions. When I organised an interview all of this changed: suddenly I was the one who took up a dominant position as a turn-allocating and question-asking authority, even though I did try to keep interviews pretty informal. Suddenly, also, I was asking Moroccan boys explicit questions, which was not something I often had the opportunity for on regular days, when I felt such questions tended to be found somewhat inappropriate. Interviews thus brought along an explicit asymmetrical participation structure as opposed to the more routine symmetrical relationship I had with these boys when I sat with them in class, and technologically and organisationally, interviews presented themselves as a visible and explicit research situation that confronted Moroccan boys with a microphone and the awareness that everything they said would now be on tape. Faisal's reaction in stylised Standard Dutch can therefore be seen as a ritual response to an unusual situation, viz. one in which my access to their 'territories of the self' (Goffman, 1971, pp. 38ff.) suddenly increases. He is using 'special' linguistic material that one mostly uses when under schoolish evaluation or when being questioned or interviewed, and he is living up in the best possible way to expectations he perceives as heightened. But this emphatic co-operation precisely undermines the flow and the goal of this interview because it involves pseudo-intellectual abstraction and inauthenticity. Faisal is thus negotiating the conditions of his participation in a setting in which he finds he has little influence on how things go, and in this way he also preserves his personal ritual territory while forcing the interviewer not to take answers at face value or miss out on their ambiguity. Moreover, inasmuch as his actions can be seen as a response to a representative of the *serious* world Moroccan boys feel they hardly have any leverage in, Faisal is not only sabotaging this interview but also engaging with the wider structures that have led to the organisation and focus of this interview in the first place, i.e. the contexts that were described above.

6. Concluding remarks

The data above show that Moroccan boys actively deal with the curtailing and hegemonic regimes they perceive as a part of their daily school lives, and show

how these boys are integrated into an unequal society that reproduces itself partly via language use and linguistic evaluation. By *doing ridiculous* with language, Moroccan boys are in a sense continually making the linguistic statement that they have acquired a practical insight or a linguistic mastery of their socio-linguistic environment (Gal, 1988).

These cases of linguistic sabotage and the locally grounded self-conception they emerge from (cf. Kulick, 1992) are not very conflictual, however. They cannot be said to lead to far-reaching changes in Moroccan boys' position or representation in Flanders – except on the local semiotic market of the classroom, where usual ethnic relations were clearly reversed. Moroccan boys in fact deployed a great deal of conflict-management when something got too much out of hand in class, and were unmistakably oriented to eventually getting their secondary school degrees (all minus one eventually graduated). In terms of actual or successful resistance, it would be difficult therefore, in most cases, to see the visible short-term effects of this sabotaging as very consequential in the long run (cf. Willis, 1977). The lasting problems these boys will be having with academic and written Dutch in areas where standardization surveillance is at its highest is perhaps an illustration of this: full expertise in Standard Dutch is seen as *serious* and boring, but rejection of this expertise leads to a reproduction of their vulnerability on the wider linguistic market. Even then, the above description of the varied Dutch competence of Moroccan boys in this setting sociolinguistically deconstructs prevalent stereotypes of these boys' linguistic competences: their routine Dutch is not only inspired by wider Flemish patterns of social stratification; their stylisations also point to their linguistic versatility in Dutch. Additionally, the ways in which these boys stigmatise others' linguistic problems are obviously very Flemish and influenced by monolingual and standardized representations. All of this clearly points to these boys' integration into Flemish society. In contrast with widespread perception, finally, Moroccan boys appear to be proud of their Dutch competence, and in contrast with fears that other languages threaten the existence or proliferation of Dutch, the data in this article show that a lively Dutch competence is a crucial part of these boys' multilingual lives.

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