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

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

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

1 Introduction

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

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

In attending to informants’ awareness of sociolinguistic fieldwork, we do not wish to prove as much as to consider it a valuable starting point that social science is always predisposed to taking as its object of study the problems that echo ‘the sociopolitical mood of the times’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 240; see also Varenne & McDermott 1999), and that sociolinguistic fieldwork practice is often shot through with pre-theoretical conceptions and ideological assumptions. There have been various accounts of this type already, proffered either by
(sociolinguistic) ethnographers analyzing fellow ethnographers (e.g., Stocking 1983), feminist fieldworkers (Kondo 1986; Henry 2003; Wolf 1996), and by self-ethnographers introspectively gauging what goes on during the fieldwork (e.g., Agar 1980; Christensen 2004; Goldstein 2002; Hintzen & Rahier 2003). It has likewise been argued extensively, at least since the 1960s, that research in the humanities, and linguistic fieldwork in particular, is inherently relational and political (Rabinow 1977; Fabian 1995; Tedlock 2003, among many others). Thus, researchers are invited to recognize that ‘the real is relational’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 232) and that their research, as a social activity, is embedded in a larger sociopolitical field where they occupy specific positions vis-à-vis their informants or objects of study.

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

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

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

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

To illustrate this we refer to the case of the Bantu language Lingala, spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly the Belgian Congo (cf. Meeuwis 2006, 2009, 2010). Lingala issued from the pidginization of Bobangi in the last quarter of the 19th century. Around the turn of the 20th century, Belgian Catholic missionaries, e.g., Egide De Boeck (1875–1944), recognized the impressive geographical spread of this pidginized language and the social efficacy with which people made use of it as a lingua franca. But, epitomizing a more general stance towards pidgins at the time, they were appalled by its restructured features, such as the highly reduced verbal and nominal inflection systems, and a wide range of lexical and grammatical generalizations, to name only a few. In response to this, they set out on a wholesale program of corpus planning, attentively designing additional grammatical rules and new lexical forms. They were, in other words, expanding the lexicon and grammatical
structures of the language from above, with the aim ‘to form ... a more correct language’ (De Boeck, in Hulstaert & De Boeck 1940: 124) and ‘to bring this “jargon” back into the grammatical descendancy of its ancestor languages’ (De Boeck 1904: 4). In regions where they held monopolies over educational and mission networks, they managed, to high degrees, to have the local populations internalize the confected language, and pass it on to following generations. This was much more difficult to accomplish outside of these regions. Especially in the capital Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), it was easier said than done to renovate the daily language behavior of a cultural vanguard, a socially self-conscious and rapidly growing urban population. There, the missionaries’ intended language change met with linguistic-ideological resistance, similar to what Joseph Errington, referring to other situations across the colonized world, describes:

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

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

We want to use this example from the African colonial context as a stepping stone for a discussion of descriptive linguistics. Descriptive linguistics has always been opposed to prescriptive linguistics, with the former seen as an emblem of good, modern, (socio)linguistic practice and the latter as a traditional, preachy grammarian custom that hindered the study of actual language form and use. Colonial linguistics, however, is one of the fields that has most acutely drawn attention to the idea that power, hierarchy, and authority are not only involved in prescriptive linguistics but may also deeply characterize the descriptive study of language. Since the 1980s and especially the 1990s, a wide range of studies (Fabian 1983, 1986; Harries 1988; Errington 2008; Makoni 2013; see Meeuwis 2008 for a succinct overview) has shown that linguistic descriptions in colonial contexts re-enacted the ideological scaffolds of colonial ruling as they were operationalized in the ethno- and geolinguistic categoriza-
tions of the colonized. Descriptive linguistics under colonialism implied the colonizer’s and missionary’s prerogative to delineate and classify speech forms, to decide which variants were worthy of description and which were not, thus creating bounded ‘languages’ (Gal & Irvine 1995; Makoni & Pennycook 2007). Moreover, as Stoler (2002: 8), referring to Hacking (1995), argues, ‘the power of such categories rests in their capacity to impose the realities they ostensibly only describe.’ Thus, the ‘descriptive’ exercise immediately allowed the colonial linguists to present the selected forms and described variants as the norm, generating qualitative hierarchies of standard (‘good’) language forms, versus lower-grade ‘dialects,’ hierarchies which in their turn were translated into hierarchies of peoples, indexically or metonymically related to the speech forms (see also Gilmour 2006: 3).

Apart from a few notable exceptions, active state colonialism, or at least the form it took in the 19th and early 20th centuries, has by and large disappeared. But as an ideological, socio-historical phenomenon that inspired and legitimated the active exploitation and submission of populations deemed eligible for such interventions, it should not, in all probability, be seen as a hallmark of yesteryear. Errington indeed asks ‘whether ... linguists are justified in regarding their field as having left its colonial roots’ (2008: 150). It is hard to ignore the fact that from their inception, disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and anthropology have been intensely fascinated with studying non-modern, non-European, non-bourgeois others (e.g., Asad 1973; Moerman 1974; Ritchie 1993). And it is not an overstatement to claim that this trend of fascination persists today given how mundane it still is that researcher–researched relationships generally obey these historical distinctions: middle-class, white, Western members usually study working-class, non-white, developing country members, or their ‘representative immigrants’ in Western countries, rather than the other way around. Political verticality may thus not only be a characteristic of linguistic descriptions as they were carried out under the historically contingent conditions of colonialization. Increasingly, therefore, the common belief held by social scientists in the righteousness of their intentions to ‘elevate the humble’ is making room for the realization that their own scholarly descriptions of social and linguistic behavior, and the classifications of speech forms or human groups they unavoidably imply, are ‘not a benign cultural act but a potent political one’ (Stoler 2002: 8; see also Blommaert 1999: 434; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 12; Kroskrity 2010). Such acts do not necessarily have beneficial consequences: ‘[A]ny language description implies an intervention into people’s lives, and the intervention might have unexpected adverse effects on exactly those same people whose interests we think we are promoting or safeguarding’ (Makoni & Pennycook 2007: 32; Stroud 2004; see also Joseph & Taylor 1990 on
the ubiquity of ideology in description). A number of authors have therefore argued that we must attend to the possible collateral damage or detrimental consequences linguistic work may have for those who are described: ‘We should be asking ... who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why language serves as a terrain for competition’ (Heller & Duchêne 2007: 11).

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

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

3 Detecting linguistic normativity

The case study is a sociolinguistic-ethnographic investigation of linguistic variation conducted by Jürgen at an urban, multi-ethnic, lower league secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium, around the turn of the 21st century (Jaspers 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011a, 2011b). The study set out to describe the reality of
linguistic variation at school, unconcerned with the dominant linguistic ideology in Flemish Belgium that all pupils should speak Standard Dutch, and it eventually focused on the playful linguistic practices or ‘stylizations’ of two ethnically mixed senior year classrooms. Data-collection involved participant observation, individual and classroom audio-recording, interviews, and retrospective interviews on excerpts of the audio recordings. Two-thirds of each classroom spoke a variety of Moroccan Arabic or Berber at home, or both, three pupils spoke a variety of Turkish at home, and ten pupils a variety of Dutch. All pupils, except one, were male, their ages varied from 16 to 21, while their parents held working class jobs. The school had an explicit pro-Standard-Dutch policy, which is not exceptional in Flemish Belgium, where schools have played an important part in a decades-long, propagandistic linguistic standardization campaign (Jaspers & Van Hoof 2013), and where contemporary educational policy is all but obsessed with the idea that Standard Dutch, rather than dialects or other languages, will guarantee equal opportunities for all pupils. The two class groups Jürgen followed even received a document that spelled out the school language policy in some more detail, informing them that ‘the use of dialects’ and ‘certainly the use of foreign languages that only a small group can understand’ was prohibited (although teachers varied in their insistence on these rules). Pupils were thus quite aware of what variety was expected of them.

Well-intentioned as this research project was, it is fair to say that its focus was also driven by established representations of problematic groups in Belgium. Notwithstanding their Belgian passport citizenship and in line with what is customary in Belgium, a number of pupils self-identified, as they were also consistently other-identified, as ‘Moroccan’ rather than ‘Belgian,’ and this fact was hard to ignore. Young urban males of Moroccan background in Belgium, similar to other Western European countries, have come to incarnate a number of bourgeois fears and fascinations through their predominant association with violence, crime, school failure, unemployment, and speaking Arabic or Berber rather than Dutch (see Blommaert & Verschueren 1998 for a description of the general climate), and this certainly played a role in the decision to start up linguistic fieldwork with these pupils rather than with the other available class groups at school, where pupils were less predominantly of Moroccan background, and female. Since addressing the language use in classrooms with a sizeable amount of ‘problematic’ pupils would not only allow Jürgen to describe competence and skill where none is usually presumed, it would also allow him to submerge himself in a context that most middle-class Flemings would frown upon or find dangerous – a double attraction that many an ethnographer has succumbed to. So clearly, even if the case study tried to reverse common-sense
stereotyping of these pupils, by trying to point out, among other things, how linguistically versatile they were, it fundamentally shared the problematization of ethnic minority youth that prevailed at the time.

On a metalinguistic level, several interactions intimated that pupils were practically aware of this, or perhaps their, ‘problem.’ On one occasion, Aziz sarcastically asked Jürgen: ‘Are you joining us for drama class? Yeah? That’s interesting for you, isn’t it, to find out how well we can speak Dutch?’ Aziz was right in a way: Jürgen was interested. But in provocatively suggesting that the latter wanted to know ‘how good’ it was, Aziz seemed to suggest Jürgen’s interest was piqued by the idea that their skills in Dutch were problematic and that his report would only add to the pile of reports that document ethnic minority pupils’ difficulties with a particular social system and linguistic norm as characteristic of what they are. In asking his sarcastic question, Aziz was thus critically exposing what he presumed to be the researcher’s agenda, which he understood as being closely tuned to the larger-scale problematization of ethnic minority youth. Other examples made it clear that pupils intuited the fieldwork as an agent of prescriptivism. Some of them jumped at the news that Jürgen wanted to record their language use and said, without the word Dutch having been mentioned: ‘Record our Dutch? None of us speaks Dutch.’ Given that all the informants spoke Dutch quite fluently, a few exceptions notwithstanding, the implication here seems to be ‘speaks Dutch appropriately’ or ‘speaks Standard Dutch.’ Another pupil kept on asking when Jürgen would give him a collar microphone because he said, without an obvious trace of irony, that he ‘could speak Dutch very well.’ The same pupil later remarked, upon noticing that the fieldworker wrote something down in his field notebook after he saw a couple of his classmates talking, ‘ah, they don’t speak proper Dutch?’ So, despite the good intentions that drove the research, a number of these pupils were anticipating an evaluation of their linguistic competences, based on the discrepancies it displays with the prescriptive norm, i.e., Standard Dutch.

On another occasion Jürgen asked Mourad how the weather had been in Belgium, since he had just been on a brief holiday abroad. Mourad immediately replied, but Jürgen failed to understand, partly because they were walking among dozens of others in a noisy school hall. As soon as Jürgen asked him to repeat, though, he suddenly realized he had heard kloteweer ‘shit weather,’ said in Antwerp dialect. Still Mourad repeated his answer, but now said slecht weer, in uw taal ‘bad weather, in your language,’ in a less dialectal voice and replacing klote ‘shit’ with slecht ‘bad,’ as if he assumed that Jürgen did not immediately understand what he said first because of its dialectal quality and/or the slangy modifier. Mourad thus accommodated the fieldworker’s linguistic habitus and in this way also seemed to intimate the fieldworker’s higher posi-
tion in the prevalent linguistic hierarchy. But since moving from a dialectal, i.e., basilectal, variety to the standard in contexts of misunderstanding is typical of linguistic standardization, it appeared that Mourad was aware of, if not lived up to, form–function prescriptions dictating that dialect knowledge, rather than knowledge of the standard variety, cannot be presumed.

Their awareness of how the research was embedded in a larger-scale linguistic hierarchy was most clear when they were given a microphone or when an interview started. Thus, whenever they felt they were ‘under surveillance/being questioned,’ this triggered sudden, jocular shifts to Standard Dutch and to such topics as ‘how many hours they have been studying’ or ‘how much they liked maths.’ Questions about their language use were in some cases answered with mock-linguistic incompetence, that is, they started, what they called ‘talking like an illegal immigrant.’ Hence, at least at the beginning of the fieldwork and at the beginning of specific attention catching activities such as wearing a microphone or doing an interview, they responded to the research with extreme linguistic behavior that suggested emphatic compliance with expectations or emphatic inability to comply with them. All of this suggested that they saw the research or the activities it involved as in essence evaluative and judgmental, where the landmark of the evaluation and judgement was the socially ‘high’ norm of Standard Dutch. An illustration of this is the following (see Jaspers 2006 for an earlier analysis):

(1) Participants and setting: January 2000. Karim [18, with microphone], Aziz [17]. Karim has just been given a microphone by the researcher and is walking around on the playground, trying to involve his friend Aziz in a conversation. Exaggerated, that is, stylized Standard Dutch is in bold, stylized Antwerp dialect is underlined.

1. Karim: en [.] hoeveel hebde gij gestudeerd vandaag? [.] hoeveel hebde gij ‘and [.] how much have you been studying today? [.] how much have
2. gestudeerd vandaag? been studying today?’
3. Aziz: wablieft? voor eh voor elektronica heb ik vier uurtjes gestudeerd ‘pardon? for uh for electronics I’ve studied for four little hours’
4. Karim: vier uurkes ja ‘four little hours yes’
5. Aziz: en [.] om de kwartier nen aftrekske hé ‘and every 15 minutes a little jerk off eh’
6. Karim: een aftrekske [.] en on wie dochte? ‘a little jerk off? [.] and who were you thinking of?’
Karim asks Aziz a quite schoolish and evaluative question, to which Aziz replies in the best possible way: he admits to having studied for four hours already, saying this in Standard Dutch, the variety these pupils are expected to use at school. Neither Karim nor Aziz really excelled at school and would rather be caught dead than found talking Standard Dutch to each other in a serious way, so we can interpret Karim as animating the fieldworker’s role through asking questions about school-related matters, something that Aziz immediately plays along with through doing ‘being the interviewee.’ So much is also clear when we see how the exchange is reframed in line 5, where Aziz juxtaposes what he suggested before in both form and content: he now admits to indulging in sexual rather than, or alongside, intellectual pleasures, and he says this in a stylized Antwerp dialect, the variety that is diametrically opposed to Standard Dutch. The result is a multi-layered process of destabilization: through sexually thematizing the fieldworker, Aziz 1) breaks through and ‘down-keys’ (Goffman 1974) the frame of the exchange that Karim initiated (in which Karim impersonated Jürgen); 2) talks about sex and taboo sexual fantasies at school; 3) reverses the gaze that the fieldwork imports (see also extract 5 below) and tackles the powerful figure of the fieldworker on his own turf (the recording); 4) denaturalizes, even if temporarily, the fact that he is being recorded and observed, and so negotiates his inclusion in a research frame that he took to be representative of a wider social and linguistic hegemonic order of norms; 5) complicates the retrieval of scientific knowledge that the researcher was hoping to collect through recording them (also see extract [5]).

Fleeting and playful as these signs of metalinguistic awareness may seem, later in the fieldwork, during retrospective interviews in which Jürgen replayed extracts for the recordings, it would appear that metalinguistic awareness of the fieldwork and its possible outcomes was less innocent or inconsequential. As is illustrated at length in Jaspers (2008), pupils repeatedly disagreed with the use of linguistic labels that would earmark their own regular speech as somehow special or remarkable, in spite of the obvious and hearable differences they noticed themselves. This means that at least some of these pupils passionately rejected white teenagers’ imitation of (some of) their speech features as pathetic attempts to ‘act Moroccan’ from ‘slimeballs’ who want to ‘kiss ass.’ As one pupil said: ‘Belgians who talk Dutch with a Moroccan accent just want to show to other Belgians “hey I’ve got Moroccan friends,” but then talk “serious”
again with other Belgians.’ What is implied is that in imitating some speech features that are associated with youth of Moroccan background, white teenagers are only seen to dip into urban street culture since they actually speak a variety of Dutch that stands above ‘urban Dutch’ in the wider spread linguistic hierarchy. During other retrospective interviews pupils also repeatedly resisted the fieldworker’s use of the label ‘Moroccan Dutch’ as a label for the target of mock-incompetent speech, all the while suggesting that what they were imitating was ‘Polish,’ ‘Kosovarian,’ or ‘illegal.’ This resistance to research driven linguistic categorization is hard to understand without reference to larger-scale linguistic hierarchization processes that only meagerly reward a category of ‘Moroccan Dutch.’ Thus, categorization is a problem when metalinguistic sensitivities are taken into account (cf. Cornips et al. 2014). These sensitivities were also couched in a broader set of fieldwork(er) representations.

4 Metascientific awareness and representations of fieldwork

Various authors have already argued that who fieldworkers are, and are taken to be, is a crucial process in fieldwork research that may not only define access and inclusion, but also help fieldworkers to understand the local structure they are assigned a particular place in (Christensen 2004; Daniels 1999; Henry 2003; Venkatesh 2002; Wertheim 2006). In the case study we discuss here, Jürgen presented his research project to his future informants as follows: ‘I want to describe multilingual behavior and linguistic variation, I am interested in the various ways in which you speak.’ He explained this in class, asking whether the pupils would be interested in participating. After gaining their consent, to Jürgen’s surprise, the question ‘why he was there’ kept coming back, and he frequently found himself struggling with spelling out the reason for this, as pupils quickly gave up listening and found it quite hard to imagine why anyone would be interested in doing such a thing at all, let alone getting paid for it. Some said they wanted to start studying languages (rather than electromechanics) if you could make such easy money with it. He also found that this descriptive interest was often couched in terms that implied a less voluntary co-operation and a relationship that was not as egalitarian as he had hoped. Especially at the beginning but also throughout the whole research period, Jürgen was frequently (even if often quite jokingly) seen as somebody from the police, a police informant, a secret service spy, or somebody doing surveillance work for the head of school, and there were comments about the fact that he
had access to the teacher’s room and that he could come and go to school as he pleased. But while these references to being somebody who was checking up on them for other reasons than he seemed to be admitting wore off as Jürgen’s presence at the scene grew, some representations were much harder to shed. Though he repeatedly suggested being called by his first name, which some certainly did, others continued calling him ‘sir’ through the fieldwork, as if he was a (temporary or trainee) teacher and certainly not ‘one of them.’ In his field notes, Jürgen regularly noted that he was attributed elite cultural qualities (in terms of dress or music) and high intelligence. One example is:

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

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

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

(3) *Participants and setting.* February 2001. Interview with Mourad (20), Adnan (19) and Moumir (21) (simplified and abbreviated transcription).
Mourad: Jürgen, do you know—do you want to understand us? Do you really want to understand us? [...] Because you guys are never going to really understand us. Just drop by one of these days, at a pub, and then you’ll see how we sit there. [...] No, Jürgen look, among your, I’m not exaggerating or anything, but crime among your kind that’s ... taboo. But we grew up with it. Look where we were raised, on one corner there was a restaurant of the Albanian mafia itself, and we know all the pubs, we know all the dealers, these are all friends of ours, are we going to report them to the police or something? That’s just impossible, we grew up with it. Just come and have a look, you’ll see it all—everything happens in front of you, and we just laugh with it, it’s become a habit, we grew up with it. Have you ever seen kilos [of drugs]!?

Some pupils also seemed to find that the fieldworker was prudish, or at least they seemed to want to test how easily he could be shocked by sexually offensive references. So they frequently mentioned sexual activity, presuming not to know anything and wanting advice on very specific sexual acts that Jürgen would have to be expert in given that he was a couple of years older. One or two pupils were quite inquisitive and asked him about his own sexual activity, offered to give him interesting videos and tried to hook him up with girls at school. Here is one example:

(4) During practical mechanics class, Aziz and Saïd are talking about ‘the Bazaar’, a pub supposedly next to the large hotel on Antwerp’s Astrid Square, where Aziz pretended to work as a male prostitute. I am invited to come and take a look. Aziz then asks whether I am gay, ‘because you can be honest about it, with the Millennium and all’ (‘The Millennium’ was used throughout class as a legitimation for noteworthy or remarkable deeds and confessions). A bit later Aziz and Saïd return, continuing their conversation about sex, now asking whether I have had sex yet, if I never hire prostitutes, how long it has been since I have had sex, how often a day I perform masturbation, and so on. (I remember that on another occasion Karim wanted to know if I had performed oral sex on a woman and ‘whether that tastes good’). Saïd then goes on to tell me that Karim – who isn’t at the scene – has experienced a trauma because he has been abused by his neighbour, called ‘John,’ when he was little (which is patently untrue). He says that Karim came to school crying and that the only reason he could mention was ‘John.’ Aziz adds: ‘yeah, but that was the first time I heard about him, I didn’t know about him then.’ A couple of minutes later Saïd tells me that his classmate Neal
got bad marks for a test, a 3 out of 10, and that he went to Mr H, receiving more marks in return for sex. ‘3 out of 10? BAM!,’ Saïd says, thrusting his pelvis forward. ‘4 out of 10, BAM!, 5 out of 10.’ Saïd: ‘In all he got an 8 out of 10.’ (fieldnotes)

For these pupils, suggesting that others were gay was a much-beloved and frequently practiced way of calibrating their own masculinity, reconciling male friendship with a dominant heterosexual norm and excluding other classmates (such as Neal in the example above). In this sense the example is quite typical. But through their probing questions, Aziz and Saïd not only seemed to be putting Jürgen to the test as a heterosexual male, but also as a fieldworker, knowing that if he were to take offence, fluster, or be shocked, he would either harm the convivial relations that he hoped to maintain as a basis for obtaining information or risk making himself look ridiculous. In these various representations of the fieldworker as a high-cultural, intellectual, prissy middle class white, it does not seem far-fetched to say these pupils were reproducing a broader ideological dichotomy that characterises much of western culture (Bourdieu 1991; Rampton 2006; Stallybrass & White 1986). They were juxtaposing high vs. low, refined vs. vulgar/broad, sophisticated vs. uneducated, reason vs. emotion, and mind vs. body, each time by and large positioning themselves on the right side and Jürgen on the left side of these oppositions.

But while a number of these representations seemed to be entrée rituals, part of being a newcomer, which eventually waned as Jürgen’s newness subsided, some pupils never seemed to be very enthusiastic about the fieldwork. Practically speaking, this solved the problem of dealing with a group of 35 pupils that one cannot possibly be equally conversant with while in the field. Some pupils just avoided too much contact or refused to wear a collar microphone, but others were less restrained. One pupil in particular, Aziz (see also extracts [1] and [4]), on various occasions almost specialized in producing personally directed, unmitigated verbal abuse through the individual collar microphone that Jürgen gave to some of Aziz’s classmates. On one occasion Jürgen had just asked Chakib, one of Aziz’s friends, if he wanted to wear the microphone during recess and in the upcoming French class. Chakib agreed, but immediately warned Jürgen ‘that he must not get excited if he were to hear strange sounds on the tape.’ Later, Jürgen heard that this was the prelude to the making of sexually tinted panting, immediately followed by Aziz who said: ‘Hey Jürgen boy you really have a nice ass when you walk eh? I would really like to take you in the ass boy!!,’ a little while later adding: ‘If I get my hands on you in Prague boy, I’ll stick my dick into your nose!!.’ Aziz and Chakib then
decided to use the microphone, from the playground all the way up to their classroom. Once they had arrived in the classroom, they continued as follows:

(5) **Participants and setting:** January 2000. Chakib [19, wears microphone], Aziz [17], Saïd [18]. In class just before the start of French class. Chakib and Aziz have been using the microphone to make orgiastic and other sounds with Jürgen as an imaginary lust object. The teacher now starts up the lesson, but Chakib and Aziz continue to speak into the microphone. Boldface is Antwerp dialect. Berber is underlined:

1. Aziz: **tipgever joeng wacht as ‘k aa pak joenge op awe fiets [.] ik rij aa= ‘grasser boy just wait till I get you on your bike [.] I'll simply run=
   =gewoon omver tipgever [.] ‘k weet aa wonen hé Jürgen =you over grasser [.] I know where you live hey Jürgen’
2. Chakib: |alle- ik ik heb= | ‘right- I’ve =
3. Aziz: ([ge zé naar |(‘you went to
dei flikken gegaa na joenge to the cops boy
4. Chakib: =gehoord da gij een schattige kontje hebt [.] ik heb gehoord da gij= =heard that you have a cute little ass [.] I’ve heard that you have=
5. Chakib: =ne kale kale glutte kontje hebt en euh [.] =a bald bald soft little ass and uh
6. als ‘k aa pak Jürgen euh ik meen dat hé [0.2] echt ge ga zo- als ‘k aa pak Jürgen euh ik meen dat hé [0.2] echt ge ga zo-
   =if I get my hands on you Jürgen uh I’m serious eh [0.2] really you’ll=  
   =if I get my hands on you Jürgen uh I’m serious eh [0.2] really you’ll-
7. Aziz: (meju) blauw oegen joeng (with your) blue eyes boy’
8. Chakib: jaja ma ne- ik pra- [.] ge ga z- [kuchje] gegazo gegazo echt zo ‘yes yes but no I spea- you’re going to [cough] you’ll really like
9. Aziz: | meju blauw | ‘with y’r
10. oegen hé
    blue eyes eh’
11. Chakib: een blauw oog amai amai amai wooooow a black eye really really wooooooow
12. [0.2]
13. Aziz: [zuchtend:] okee [sighing:] ok
14. Said: [falsetto:] POEPEN ‘BANGING’
15. Chakib: | jaa [starts laughing] | yeah
16. Aziz: | hilarity |
17. Aziz: da kán na gewoon nie meer hé ‘that can’t be true eh’
In this example and in the preceding interaction, we find an abundance of fieldworker representations. Jürgen is presented as a police informant (line 1) who ‘went to the cops’ to grass on them (lines 4–5 and 29–30), a detective (line 25), as a gay sex cruiser in Antwerp’s city park (which was renowned for this at the time) (lines 21 to 24), as a sexual object (Chakib in lines 3 to 10), as a bicycle owner (lines 1 and 25), as a dirty bastard (line 28), and as somebody who has blue eyes (lines 9 and 11–12). Jürgen is also threatened in various ways: Aziz promises to run him over (lines 1–2), says that he knows where he lives (line 24), Chakib mentions a black eye (line 3, but he misunderstands Aziz, thinking he means giving Jürgen a black eye [which is ‘blue eye’ in Dutch]), and not least, if Jürgen were to join them on their school trip to Prague, Aziz has an extravagantly violent sexual act in mind (rape through the nose, mentioned just before extract [5]).

Both pupils knew that everything would be on tape and were convinced that the fieldworker was going to listen to this (they knew where the pause button was), so they seemed to be enjoying themselves knowing that Jürgen would be noticing this on the tape afterwards. Presumably this is also why these pupils did not, for example, sabotage or simply break the recording equipment. (For certainly Aziz was not to be taken lightly: a couple of months later he got arrested for three armed robberies and was sent away to a juvenile
detention center. He never came back to school, but most of his classmates were impressed with his radically increased street credibility.) All in all, the interaction retains quite a jocular quality through the sheer abundance of representations, the joking portrayal of how the fieldworker would be playing tapes at the police station (lines 29–30), through their impromptu collaboration (mention of the city park leads to a focus on one specific tree, ‘tree 43’), and because of the fact that they knew their classmates were noticing this too.

It is clear though that many of these threats are assaults on physical integrity. Given that the fieldworker, through the recording device, suddenly obtains immediate and unmediated access to their ‘territories of the self’ (Goffman 1971: 38 ff), it may not be unreasonable to suggest that the fieldworker’s representation, among other things, as a sexual object can be read as a symbolic compensation, indeed as a re-penetration and degradation for being put in a vulnerable position now that their private spheres are exposed to the ruthless electronic ear of the fieldworker. Schwalbe & Wolkomir, discussing the peripheries of interviewing Western men, similarly argue that ‘[t]o open oneself to interrogation is to put oneself in a vulnerable position, and thus to put one’s masculinity ... at risk. It is not uncommon ... for men ... to try to exert a sort of compensatory control over the ... situation’ (2002: 207), and they mention ‘sexualizing’ as one of the ways in which this is done: ‘[t]his can take the form of flirting, sexual innuendo, and remarks on appearance. Although some of this behaviour might be construed as innocent and harmless, it can also be aimed at diminishing a woman’s legitimacy and power as an interrogator’ (2002: 208). Transposing this to Jürgen’s fieldwork, putting profuse sexualizations on a fieldworker’s tape is surely a powerful way of ‘getting back’ at him and undermining his legitimacy: the researcher is represented as gay, as a gay who supposedly recruits his fieldwork for ulterior motives, or, worse, within a hetero-normative frame, as a gay sexual object. In doing so, Aziz and Chakib are in fact exposing that social scientific research ‘often involves violence, born of the pursuit of referential information ... [driven by] salient metaphors ... of penetration and withdrawal’ (Kondo 1986: 83). At the same time, their contributions are a successful way of making their voice quite well heard and appropriating the fieldwork: Aziz and Chakib are thwarting the fieldworker’s plans to keep a low profile or stay anonymous in the data through making his presence, and the evaluation of it, loud and clear, engaging in a struggle around who is objectifying who, and who has the power to represent the other.

These informants are, in other words, challenging what scientific knowledge is, or resisting the organization of social science altogether. Through producing highly offensive utterances on a recording that they know will be of potential scientific interest, they are 1) knowingly and willingly ‘filibustering’
through filling up valuable recording time with what they presume is going to deliver useless data; 2) insulting, ridiculing, and threatening the authority figure of the fieldworker and his interests (even if out of earshot during the actual recording); and 3) they are doing all this within the confines of an institutional setting that has allowed the research to take place on its premises and that strongly disapproves of the production of such anti-authoritarian discourse and of non-cooperation with an officially ratified activity such as a linguistic ethnography.

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

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

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

5 Discussion and conclusion

We started this article by arguing that language users’ metalinguistic awareness often stands in the way of institutional prescriptivism: language users’ own ideas of appropriate language use often leads official language prescription in unintended directions, as we have illustrated through our discussion of the evolution of the language Lingala in the Belgian Congo. Subsequently, and in line with Errington’s (2008: 150) question ‘whether ... linguists are justified in regarding their field as having left its colonial roots,’ we have argued that while most contemporary linguists would now frown upon the overt political and ideological drift of prescriptive linguistic work and express their loyalty to a
descriptive, disinterested approach of language use, it would be premature to ignore how much current descriptions of language are shot through with power, hierarchy, and authority, perhaps not much less than during earlier periods. So much at least is clear if we attend to how easily language users suspect and/or detect linguistic normativity and scientific authority behind research projects that are organized for their own well-being and with their own consent. We have attempted to show how critically aware, on a metalinguistic and metascientific level, informants were of the prescriptive potentials and premises of a well-intentioned sociolinguistic-ethnographic research project, and how, to a certain extent, these informants embodied prescriptivism themselves through their stylizations of Standard Dutch, Antwerp dialect, and incompetent Dutch.

The first conclusion we wish to draw from all this is that informants in linguistic fieldwork are meta-scientifically reflexive, and that this is not the sole privilege of fieldworkers conscious of the possible impact of their work. Secondly, our analysis demonstrates that what researchers find descriptively interesting and ideologically well-intentioned is not always perceived as such by those who end up being drawn into linguistic-ethnographic research, and that it cannot be taken for granted that what linguists find worth describing will be seen as equally interesting by those who are described (cf. Heller 2007). Informants’ meta-scientific associations of descriptive linguistic fieldwork with prescriptivism – whether these associations hold true or not – probably ought to make researchers aware of how their work is inescapably situated in a sociocultural landscape that is by and large, and certainly with regard to issues of language, prescriptive. This prescriptive backdrop may eventually re-inscribe itself on the data and the analysis. What is described as different from the mainstream, or from what the mainstream considers normal, can over time come to stand for, in a prescriptive light, deficit (cf. Brettell 1993; Varenne & McDermott 1999). We feel this is a point worth emphasizing, given that linguists’ preoccupation with being ‘descriptive, not prescriptive’ has resulted in the fact that most representatives of the discipline find it hard to imagine, or simply deny, that their descriptive work may be read as prescriptive anyway. Finding out whether informants perceive linguistic fieldwork as beneficial to their interests or not is a prerequisite for gauging its effect on informants and its potential resonance in larger discourses.

In addition to this, and thirdly, meta-scientific reflexivity produces describable sociolinguistic practices whose importance has not perhaps been fully appreciated in linguistic-ethnographic research (but see Rampton 1995). While there is a growing conviction that non-routine, spectacular, observer-paradoxed data also merit description in sociolinguistics, there are not many accounts of language use, spectacular or not, that explicitly take issue with the linguistic
fieldwork and that push the paradox to its limits by making the observer become the observed. Such accounts may, however, demonstrate that doing linguistic fieldwork is a describable sociolinguistic event where fieldworker(s) and informant(s) simultaneously position themselves vis-à-vis each other and engage in meaningful interaction through which they, at least partially, reproduce, subvert, or reconfigure the existing sociolinguistic order. Meta-scientific data, moreover, provide considerable insight into informants’ overall reflexivity:

_How_ the informant interprets and represents the persona of the anthropologist (or sociologist) is revealing of the interpretive properties and resources available to the informant. That is, part of ‘their’ world is presented and transmitted to the researcher via the informants’ images of the fieldworker and the research study. (Venkatesh 2002: 106, emphasis in original)

Venkatesh goes on to argue that different fieldworker images and points of view can be reflective of the different structural positions informants have within the social ecology at issue. Aziz’s vituperative comments above on the fieldworker were in this sense reflective of his central, dominating position in class compared to the silence a number of his classmates preferred.

Fourthly and finally, attending to members’ meta-scientific reflexivity provides a way of engaging with issues of power, voice, and representation. Describing what informants find of the research project, and making room for this in the texts that are produced about it, gives voice to these informants as well as representational space to what is often unduly overlooked. Inasmuch as social research ‘tends to reduce human beings to “data bearers” who provide us with “information”’ (Kondo 1986: 83), such representations may have a humanizing potential and broaden the basis from where knowledge is defined. It allows for criticism, and demonstrates that initial consent is not always something that informants are completely free to decide, given that as a researcher, one is as privileged as teachers, officials, or managers. Certainly, as an act of reciprocity, giving voice to informants’ meta-scientific reflexivity does not fundamentally counter the power differentials inherent in fieldwork research, nor does it shift the balance of who eventually gets to represent and objectify whom (see, among others, Chakrabarty 2002; Patai 1994; Spivak 1988; Wolf 1996). Including representations of fieldwork is still the researcher’s privilege. We need to be skeptical about assuming that the informants in our case study appreciate that the above representations have made it into an academic article they will not read, may not even understand and probably find quite doubtful as an effective tool in redressing wider-scale inequalities. The representation of their voice in this paper does not equal their continuing ownership of it (cf.
Ritchie 1993). But just as prescriptivism remains a powerful backdrop of descriptive linguistic research, it would be unwise to ignore that most academic research conceives of itself as disinterested, beneficial, and neutral. Thus, while this article changes little about the verticality between ethnographer and ethnographees, it is necessary to point out that this hierarchy exists, that ethnographees are aware of it, and that sociolinguistic ethnographic research needs to take this into account.

**Bionotes**

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