From Unwanted to So-Called Expertise: Ideologizing Sociolinguistics in Mainstream Media
Jürgen Jaspers
Science Communication 2014 36: 570 originally published online 27 August 2014
DOI: 10.1177/1075547014547160
The online version of this article can be found at:
http://scx.sagepub.com/content/36/5/570

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Science Communication can be found at:
Email Alerts: http://scx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://scx.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://scx.sagepub.com/content/36/5/570.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Sep 30, 2014
OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 27, 2014
What is This?
From Unwanted to So-Called Expertise: Ideologizing Sociolinguistics in Mainstream Media

Jürgen Jaspers

Abstract
This article discusses how expertise over language is reconfigured in mainstream media. Based on two different cases, it describes how journalists’ and sociolinguists’ conflicting interests can lead to unwanted attributions of expertise or to the staging of sociolinguists as so-called experts, useful as a foil for redefining what is viewed as more reasonable knowledge over language. Rather than proposing that such altercations illustrate the plight of honest scientists, however, I will argue that they offer the necessary building blocks for developing a better understanding of the transactions between experts and media in late-modernity.

Keywords
sociolinguistics, mainstream media, ideology, late-modernity, autoethnography

Introduction
We cannot know for certain whether Dr. Reza Aslan, a researcher of Christianity from the University of California Riverside with a Muslim background, had a hunch of what was going to happen to him when he agreed...
to give an interview on July 27, 2013, to Fox News about his latest, eventually bestselling, book titled *Zealot: The life and times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Aslan, 2013). But he must at least have suspected in advance that Fox News perhaps would not be entirely sympathetic toward a book the title of which already communicates a less than hagiographic point of view. It was not wholly unexpected therefore that the Fox News interviewer (Lauren Green) persistently asked why Aslan as a Muslim would even think of investigating the founder of Christianity’s life. And through her persistent asking of this question, it soon became clear the interviewer was implying that Aslan’s faith disqualified him for making an adequate analysis of Jesus Christ or, worse, that his book was part of a hidden Muslim agenda against Christianity. The interview soon went viral, brandished as another example of Fox News’s badly hidden bias. But it is surely not very different from many other interviews in less controversial media where experts frequently come to realize that their knowledge is treated with less respect than they find comfortable or had anticipated. Indeed, the general sentiment among many science communication students is that scientists and journalists often stare at each other across a gulf of mutual incomprehension. Aslan later declared that he had felt “embarrassed” during the interview, but a quick browse on the Internet about this event makes clear that the turmoil the interview created, apart from producing a range of death threats to Aslan, soon developed into a major commercial for his book that he was happy to seize the opportunity of through various new media appearances, adding to the impression that Aslan knew what he was doing when he agreed to the original interview.1 Many other experts are much less media-savvy, however, or watch impotently as their expertise and message is reconfigured into something quite different from what they had intended to say (if it bears any resemblance at all). It would not be difficult to forgive scientists for deciding that it is probably best, or certainly less frustrating, to ignore the media altogether.

Understandable as such a decision may be, it will be difficult to maintain it, for a number of reasons. Scientific expertise is not only an indispensable element in mainstream media, since it enhances journalistic credibility (Spitulnik, 1993, p. 303), invites other viewpoints, and allows for conflict that media find attractive for their audiences. But scientists are also often journalists’ first and foremost source of information given the time issues the latter are faced with (cf. Albæk, Christiansen, & Togeby, 2003; Maillé, Saint-Charles, & Lucotte, 2010; Spitulnik, 1993). In a time when scientists are increasingly required to valorize their work and strive for maximal impact on the outside world to account for the funds they receive, they regularly need journalists and their media, as they do whenever they want to share an important insight with the general public. One can argue in addition that scientists, since they are paid
out of the public purse, have an obligation to spread their knowledge (cf. Haslam & Bryman, 1996, p. 1). And certainly in my own discipline (sociolinguistics), working on language variation in nation-states that are preoccupied with standard languages, it is difficult to avoid raising social debate and to escape attention from the media, in spite of attempts to ignore them.

So it does not look as if the mutual dependency of science and journalism, and the complications that this engenders, is going to diminish any time soon. One useful way of approaching this issue is strategic and asks how scientists can avoid or minimize frustration or what guidelines they should bear in mind when they intend or have to go public. But in line with the increasing ethnographic attention for news talk and newswriting (see, e.g., Cotter, 2010; Perrin, 2013; Scollon, 1998; Van Hout & Jacobs, 2008), in this article I want to develop a more descriptive, autoethnographic approach (cf. Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). This means that I want to revisit a number of personal experiences I had with journalists and media in the past 2 years, anchored in two different cases, in order to understand the cultural dynamics that underlie the above-mentioned mutual dependency and the various interactions in which it is played out. These experiences, as will become clear below, are grounded in observable data collected in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking north of Belgium: I will, in a broad discourse-analytic approach, discuss (a) various news features that included me as an expert, (b) consecutive e-mails with journalists prior to these features’ publication, and (c) postpublication e-mails, phone calls, and other responses (e.g., letters to the editor). My intention is to show how these interactions between experts, media, and audiences allow for different kinds of expertise in a “late-modern” world.

**Media and Linguistic Expertise in a Late-Modern World**

As Zygmunt Bauman (1987) points out in *Legislators and Interpreters*, the notion of the expert, intellectual, or scientist is intimately intertwined with a “modernist” conception of the world. In this view it is possible to make universally true or authoritative statements that settle disputes over knowledge, taste, and value on the basis of empirically collected, tested, and hence “superior (objective) knowledge to which intellectuals have a better access than the non-intellectual part of society” (Z. Bauman, 1987, p. 4). This makes experts “collective owners of knowledge of direct and crucial relevance to the maintenance and perfection of the social order” (p. 5), and undisputed authorities who have “a right (and a duty) to address the nation on behalf of Reason”
beside educating others and intervening in social matters as they see fit. As the example above makes clear, however, and as Bauman argues in line with other scholars of late or post-modernity (Castells, 2000; Giddens, 1991), it has become increasingly difficult for experts to act out the traditional role that modernity had cut out for them, as a result of two major shifts: the appearance of a vantage point in which modernity is itself objectified as a particular project or historical episode with a beginning and an end, next to a range of real-world developments usually comprised under headings such as globalization, democratization, and neoliberal market capitalism.2 In making clear that there exist multiple, rather than only one, “modern,” frames of reference, each with its own rationality, and that “the validity of [. . .] [a] judgement depends on the site from which it has been made and the authority ascribed to that site” (Z. Bauman, 1987, p. 137), the first shift gradually contributed to the erosion of expert authority—certainly in the humanities—and a growing suspicion of the partisan or sectarian interests that may drive those who speak to the nation “on behalf of Reason.” The increased focus on profit that the second shift implies, the growing number of public speakers in an array of new and high-profile communication sites predicated on entertaining conversation between equals rather than informative prose for learners, and the growing number of new experts related to these material shifts (consultants, popular culture practitioners, cooks, sportspeople, commercially successful artists) not only are factors in the inflation of expert authority but also distort the modern ideal of a unified public sphere where rational communication leads to enlightenment.

Contemporary mainstream media are a site where these shifts have materialized and where new relations to expertise have been developed. Clayman and Heritage (2002), for example, observe a growing trend toward more adversarial reporting as a way of avoiding that public figures use media as a platform for disseminating their own points of view. Mainstream media have become less intimidated by scientific expertise, orienting to it but undaunted (Weingart, 1998, p. 874), if not using what experts say as “fodder for the construction of news stories” (Scollon, 1998, p. 217). Journalists have no qualms about casting experts as advocates of a particular viewpoint that they can subsequently interrogate (Clayman & Heritage, 2002) or about juxtaposing expert voices with the (wo)man in the street’s perspective that is often considered just as valid, or less biased. Media coverage of the social sciences in particular has been shown to illustrate journalists’ skepticism regarding its validity (Evans, 1995). In addition, the growth of media houses and the pressure of audience ratings have led to more and more content, not necessarily for the perfection of the social order, and to more and more conversational rather than monologic discourse in which experts tend to thrive.
There is a growing perception too that what experts say is unnecessarily complicated for the audiences that journalists target and needs to be recasted in terms compatible with the norms for bringing news (cf. Weiss, 1988; Zelizer, 1993). Various studies indicate journalists’ increased autonomy and regimental power to decide how they will fit what experts say into their own stories (Haslam & Bryman, 1996; Fenton, Bryman, Deacon, & Birmingham, 1997; Milani, 2007; Scollon, 1998). Others observe that these different evolutions produce a clash of professional values between scientific and journalistic cultures (see, among others, Fenton et al., 1997; Johnson, 2001; Peters, 1995).

At the same time, however, ethnographic research on news reporting shows that journalists are fairly conservative, indeed “modern,” when it comes to language and self-identify as its protectors against the more liberal, “postmodern” views that linguists have been developing (Cotter, 2010; see also Cameron, 1995). On the basis of my own interactions with the media as a language expert, therefore, I will argue below that any representation of mainstream media today as the simple megaphone for anti- or irrevocably postmodern meanings and practices ignores to what extent these media are home to precisely the kind of tension that defines “late-modernity”—the tension between modernity and what it is not, the tension between dismissing it and recycling it—and I suggest that contrastive conceptions of sociolinguistic expertise are one of the tools with which this is discursively played out. To be sure, while the above-mentioned clash between professional values refers to how “modern” experts have more and more difficulty with “late-modern” journalism, the following two case analyses illustrate how modern journalists struggle with late-modern expertise over language and find that linguists fail to act out their traditional expert role as students of languages and guardians of “correct” usage. Before going into both cases I point out that they discuss the production of news in interactions between experts and sources, in which sources review or comment on draft versions. This may not be a universal practice. Neither is it in Belgium, where this is written, but it is not unusual on an ad hoc basis, and as an interactional process it provides insight into relations between experts and journalists that may also obtain in other national settings.

**Reporting on Urban Speech Styles**

Case 1 focuses on how I have become an expert in an urban speech style called *Illegaals* (Dutch for “Illegal”) and how I tried, in vain, to prevent that from happening. The birth of this expertise lies in an e-mail I received on September 15, 2011, from a broadsheet newspaper journalist I will call Peter:
Example 1

Dear Mr Jaspers, I would like to write a piece for this weekend’s newspaper on a still relatively new linguistic phenomenon in Flanders. I’m talking about what they describe as *Murks* in the Netherlands. The other day, I heard a couple of [White] Antwerp youth unmistakably imitate the intonation of their [non-White] peers [. . .]. One of [them] told me that her brother and his friends “talk broken Dutch on purpose” to show off. An[other boy] said he regularly had to say to his younger brother: “Talk normal, you’re a Belgian, you know.” [. . .] Do you think this points to the new, higher status of young [non-Whites], certainly compared to earlier? I’d like very much to hear from you what you know of this trend. Have you noticed this yourself already, and heard other examples?

This was a friendly and well-intentioned e-mail, to which I responded at length (1,500 words), explaining, among other things, that there appeared to be two different things at play in Peter’s question. *Murks* (or Murkish, where M stands for Moroccan and *Urkish* for Turkish) is a term for what sociolinguists usually call “foreigner talk” by White youth, that is, a disparaging imitation by White youth of other, usually non-White, people’s accented language use (Ferguson, 1975; Nortier, 2001). Peter, however, seemed to want to apply the term to a phenomenon with a much more positive ambience, namely, what has been described as the converging adoption of other people’s accent features (to, among other things, illustrate one’s attempted affiliation or friendship with somebody; or to “show off” with it because it is seen to be cool; a typical example is the adoption of Black English vernacular features by White youth in the United States; cf. Cutler, 1999). I explained that Peter would be ill-advised to use *Murks* if he wanted to refer to the positive adoption of linguistic features by White youth of their non-White peers that he seemed to be mainly interested in, and had better use something like “mixed language use” or “informal urban language use”—see Cornips, Jaspers, and de Rooij (in press) for a fuller discussion of linguistic labels in public discourse. In addition, I avoided saying that what these youth were doing was anything similar to using a new, urban variety: Linguists do not (by far) consider the adoption of other people’s accent features (or other linguistic resources) as sufficient for speaking of a “new” language, and there are more and more sociolinguists saying today that thinking in terms of languages unnecessarily obfuscates analysis (Jaspers, 2008). Linguistic adoptions, moreover, are typically implicated in temporary friendships, allegiances, and attendance of specific venues (e.g., schools), complicating the declaration of a new language. Neither did I use the term *illegal*. The prepublication piece,
however, was titled *Het Illegaals* “Illegal.” The accompanying e-mail (September 18) went as follows:

**Example 2**

Dear Jürgen, Here is the story as I’d like to publish it tomorrow in *De Morgen*. It goes without saying that I very much like to take your feedback into account. I have called the language use at issue *illegaals* “illegal”—this sounds very stigmatising, I know, but apparently the speakers themselves name it in this way. With best wishes, Peter.

This e-mail illustrates that Peter was going to use a label that he himself presented as potentially “very stigmatising,” even if he half apologized for it through suggesting that the label was already in circulation. It also implied that my own expert opinion about the suitability of labels for language use—not to mention my avoidance of any suggestion of a “new” language—had been flatly ignored for a label that Peter and his (sub-)editor must have found hard to resist: “Illegal” is a lot more attractive than “informal urban language use.” This did not bode well for the rest of the article. After reading it though, I was very pleased to notice that Peter had often literally quoted what I had written to him, which is exceptional rather than common (cf. Bell, 1991, p. 209) and that he had maintained a positive tone about urban ways of speaking throughout. By and large, I felt respected as a sociolinguist. So I wrote back to him:

**Example 3**

Dear Peter, In attachment you find the article back, with only a couple of remarks. Many many thanks for so closely copying what I had e-mailed, I very much appreciate it. Concerning “Illegal,” I suggest in one comment to add something that makes clear I’d use a different term than “illegal” myself. It looks like a great article! Best wishes, Jürgen.

In that comment I suggested that he write that I prefer to speak of “informal urban vernacular.” Which Peter inserted into the piece. The article eventually appeared quite prominently on the newspaper’s inside cover, attracting attention with a large picture (of ethnically mixed youth before a school building) and a catchy title (*Hier spreekt men Illegaals* “Here one speaks Illegal”) that referred to an older 1960s/1970s prime time language purification broadcast (*Hier spreekt men Nederlands* “Here one speaks Dutch”) in which Flemings were reminded of the fact they were supposed
to speak Standard Dutch rather than a Flemish dialect. In fact, this reference—which may well have been the subeditor’s work rather than Peter’s—in combination with the picture gives a somewhat dystopian ring to the whole page, suggesting that inner-city schools have become sites of broken rather than Standard Dutch, flouting decades of standardization efforts at school and in the media. Underneath the picture, a “small dictionary” was added, listing some Arabic words (e.g., shmetta, sahbi, and khouya) and their translations, almost echoing the colonial practice in which elementary word lists were drawn up for Europeans to use in their interactions with African or Asian workers (cf. Fabian, 1986)—as if translations of “Illegal” words are helpful for White European readers in the now urban jungle. Nevertheless, it was a well-received piece. And it put me in the picture as an expert of “Illegal Dutch” whose expertise was consequently solicited by various interested parties in the days and months after the piece appeared. One radio journalist phoned me a couple of days later to ask if I didn’t want to collaborate in making a feature of how ethnic youth in Flanders speak. The organizers of teacher refresher courses invited me to come and give a talk about “Illegal,” “because we have noticed you are the expert”; I was e-mailed by students from other universities who wanted advice for their paper on the language use of ethnically mixed youth, “since you are the expert”; and I was asked by a journalist from a web-based youth newspaper if I didn’t want to discuss “the new special youth language called ‘illegal,’ because I understood you have done research into that.”

I declined almost all of these requests. Those who were interested were invariably White middle class, and their questions often seemed to be inspired by an interest in the “dark” side of urban life that as an expert I was supposed to explain, frame, and perhaps even domesticate. As a White middle-class academic, I felt that making a name through this “expertise” in non-Whites’ ways of speaking would only reproduce existing socio-ethnic hierarchies in which White authorities and experts usually exoticize or control non-White behavior. Not to mention that, in the eyes of most socio-linguists today, “Illegal” is a questionable label for practices we cannot understand well enough through suggesting they are signs of a new kind of language.

One year later I agreed to another interview about youth language in a different broadsheet newspaper, this time together with a colleague. But this again led to conflict over names for language use. One part of the prepublication piece was this:
Example 4

Kebab-Flemish. Illegal or Kebab-Flemish. Sociolinguists Jürgen Jaspers and Heleen Mercels are investigating the language of Antwerpian youth [...] ‘We prefer to speak of informal urban language use rather than the stigmatising “illegal,”’ Jaspers says, “it is a variety that is up and coming in many urban centres in Flanders.”

Although the journalist had included our reservations toward using “Illegal,” we objected to this formulation and e-mailed back that we never use a label like Kebab-Flemish, neither in fact did the non-White youth that the journalist had interviewed herself in the frame of this news feature. We also said we would prefer to see “Illegal” deleted from the article clear and simple, and we drastically revised the text to our taste, to which the journalist replied as follows:

Example 5

Wow, this must be this year’s top three in terms of text-editing;-) [...] I’ve cut Kebab-Flemish, but I’ve kept “illegal.” I didn’t use it very often though in the text and I never attributed it to you, but it is the basis of the article and moreover De Morgen already did an elaborate piece on it, so I don’t really see why it shouldn’t be allowed in this piece . . .

I wrote an e-mail back to say I did not think this was a valuable argument nor a justifiable practice, and I later heard from my colleague Heleen, who knows this journalist from when they were students together, that the journalist found my e-mail aggressive. Which I, in my turn, was upset to hear.

Apart from illustrating some of the points made above about journalists’ increased autonomy and regimental power (cf. section “Media and Linguistic Expertise in a Late-Modern World”), these interactions also demonstrate that rather than the authority whose expertise was reported on, I was the expert commentator “on knowledge produced outside of the university” (Albæk et al., 2003, p. 937), by journalists acting as amateur linguists interviewing young people about language. In addition, my attempts to revise the text and the journalists’ varying resistance to that were signs of a “struggle for authoritative entextualization” (Silverstein & Urban, 1996, p. 11; cf. Blommaert, 1999, p. 9) over how, in this case, linguistic reality ought to be represented. Indeed, as Blommaert quotes Mehan arguing, “[t]he process of lexical labeling is itself an entextualization process. Complex, contextually nuanced discussions get summed up in . . . a single word” (Mehan, 1996, p. 253, cited in
single words such as “Illegal” that reproduce a specific kind of linguistic expertise—knowledge of a separate new language—I was hoping to avoid. My presumed aggression and my disturbance over this only seemed to substantiate the above-mentioned clash between scientists’ and journalists’ professional cultures.

That I failed to keep “Illegal” out of the media, however, could not surprise a sociolinguist like John Rickford (1999), who has noted that “breaking into [leading media sources] can be difficult if the views you represent do not correspond to the mainstream view. In matters of language, they often do not” (pp. 270-271). But as I want to show now by looking at a second case, breaking into them can be quite easy when experts offer a nonmainstream view, since this generates debate and more news.

**Disseminating Expert Views on Nonstandard Dutch**

The second case revolves around the publication of a coedited book on nonstandard Dutch called *De manke usurpator* “The lame usurper” (Absillis, Jaspers, & Van Hoof, 2012). The book’s title is a direct reference to one of the labels that Flemish language purists have developed for naming nonstandard Dutch, a colloquial way of speaking that cannot be called dialect or Standard Dutch because it is a mixture of these two (more or less comparable with Estuary English in Britain, which holds the middle between Cockney, the traditional London dialect, and Standard English). Nonstandard Dutch by and large is an unplanned variety: Flemings are traditionally supposed to leave their Flemish dialects behind in favor of speaking Standard Dutch. But while dialect usage has waned considerably across the past five decades, this has been replaced not so much with Standard Dutch usage but often with a way of speaking that combines features of Flemish dialects and Standard Dutch. Since this nonstandard Dutch has over the past two decades become an immensely popular way of speaking, especially in “light” TV genres and fiction series, language purists have come to portray it as a lame usurper, suggesting in this way it is a linguistic kind of Richard the Third, colonizing the public sphere to the detriment of the rightful heir Standard Dutch. Various other labels circulate, produced by linguists, educators, journalists, policy makers of all stripes, and literary authors who call nonstandard Dutch “lazy Flemish,” “rotten Dutch,” “crooked language,” “hamburger language,” “soap Flemish,” and so on. As a way of countering the traditional stigmatization of nonstandard Dutch and approaching it as an object for scientific analysis, together with two colleagues (Sarah Van Hoof, a sociolinguist, and Kevin
Absillis, a literary expert) we decided to bring out a book that analyzed this way of speaking from various disciplines (language pedagogy, dramaturgy, literary studies, sociolinguistics, among others), all the while acknowledging the usefulness of a lingua franca, though perhaps one that is less conducive to exclusion than Standard Dutch often is now (see, for fuller discussion, Jaspers & Van Hoof, 2013, in press).

In contrast with the case above where I responded to journalists’ questions, we had this time taken the initiative to spotlight the book and had contacted two broadsheet newspaper journalists. One of them (Peter, see above) was quicker to respond than the other and agreed to an interview. We were subsequently allowed to revise a first and honest version of the interview, Peter accepted our comments and treated us as experts, and we did not really experience a clash of professional values, even if what we said turned out to be quite controversial. More important, we made it to the front page (though below news that was deemed to be more pressing), and inside readers could find a full-page interview with a nice picture of the three of us. So operation exposure was certainly a success, although it is not irrelevant to point out the date at which our interview came out, that is, August 29, 2012. This is just before the traditional start of the new school year in Belgium on September 1, when the collective mind is slowly adapting again to duty and pain rather than pleasure, and this may have contributed to how much we were put into the picture as it also seems to explain the framing of our interview.

After all, while the interview touched on a number of issues pertaining to nonstandard language use (its stigmatization, current and historical language policy in Flanders, among other things), the journalist and/or the subeditor seemed to be mainly interested in what we argued after the journalist’s mentioning of research results in our book that showed that even teachers used nonstandard Dutch in class:

Example 6

The minister [of education] rejects reality out of hand. In practice you notice indeed that teachers use different registers interchangeably. When they explain a theory, their language use is often relatively close to the standard language. When they want to clarify that theory with an example from pupils’ lifeworlds, they switch to nonstandard Dutch or dialect. The question is if you have to fight against this mechanism. It seems to turn out well in practice. (Van Hoof)

[I]f you’re standing in front of a classroom, your intention is to make pupils identify themselves, to express a particular emotion. And nonstandard Dutch appears to be highly efficient for this. (Absillis)
Of one thing we can be sure: The moment at which everyone will speak Standard Dutch in all situations will never arrive. This is Utopia [. . .] (Jaspers)

Rather than “Linguists ask: Stop stigmatization of nonstandard Dutch” or “Linguists criticize Minister of Education,” what we said in Example 6 was picked up and recruited for the following headline: “Antwerp Linguists Plead for More Linguistic Freedom in Education.” Under that headline we were quoted in a larger font, saying, “Nonstandard Dutch in class is very efficient.” This framing of our message, just before the new school year, was undoubtedly conducive to the media storm that our interview unleashed, and it led to a thorough reframing of our expertise.

The next day already, the newspaper contained two full pages of letters to the editor, 90% of which were utterly negative. We were called, among other things, “inexperienced” and “young” and were asked “whether we had to study for so long to say only this.” What we had said was also seen as “absolute horror,” “remarkable,” “dangerous,” “it makes one’s hair stand on end,” “grotesque,” and, symptomatic of the wider spread antagonism between inhabitants from Antwerp and Flemings living in more rural areas, “typical for Antwerpians” who think they speak Standard Dutch while they are simply speaking their city dialect (all three of us worked at the University of Antwerp at the time). Interestingly, the newspaper also included a reaction from the critic whose label we had used for the title of our book. He had decided to respond in nonstandard Dutch, not only literally saying that we were silly (“You don’t understand the difference between norm and reality,” “You’re like cops who want to abolish speeding limits because people drive too fast anyway”) but also illustrating how silly our presumed advocacy of nonstandard Dutch was if you started writing in it (through using what linguists call a phonetic or literal spelling, although Standard Dutch is not spelled phonetically either, just as Standard English is not).

This was only one broadsheet newspaper. The other broadsheet we had contacted, which had been slower to respond, was frustrated that it had missed an important scoop (so we noticed after being called up by an irritated journalist asking why we hadn’t waited for her response), and it introduced the issue already with a different tone: “Non-Standard Dutch Occurs at All Schools. Even Teachers Speak It. That’s Ok, Antwerp Linguists Say. Really?” Another, more popular, newspaper reported, “Why Not Simply Allow Teachers to Speak Non-Standard Dutch? Linguists Keen Supporters of Non-Standard Dutch.” Both leads made clear that our advocacy for less stigmatization of nonstandard Dutch had been transformed, just 1 day after the interview, into advocacy for nonstandard Dutch full stop. Some pieces did not make it into the press. A popular men’s magazine tried, “Experts
Encourage Nonstandard Dutch at School. Language Norms Simply Evolve.” A tabloid newspaper suggested as lead for the article:

Example 7

Research shows: pupils understand subject matter better in their own way of speaking. UA academics plead for more nonstandard Dutch. It’s hardly imaginable but a teacher addressing his pupils in nonstandard Dutch, [. . .] wouldn’t actually be that inappropriate, three young academics from UA say.

In the last two cases we had received questions from both journalists that we had taken the time to answer through e-mail, sending them back and forth among the three of us. But having become slightly apprehensive on account of our earlier experiences, we had explicitly asked that to avoid further misunderstandings, we would be sent a draft of the article. We were aware that such requests are not self-evident since they encroach on journalists’ autonomy, but the two journalists in question agreed to this. When we got their draft features back, however, we were appalled to see what had become of our expertise, since what these journalists said was plainly untrue (we do not advocate nonstandard Dutch at school, nor do we have evidence that pupils’ understanding improves through being taught “in their own way of speaking”) and blatantly dismissive of what we had to say. Consequently, we tried to regain control of the entextualization process through sending e-mails with revisions and through a couple of phone calls, which led to what at times was a vicious struggle in which we were accused of down-toning what we were saying (“You’re making it VERY SOFT now,” one of these journalists wrote back to us) or of “tuning answers to make them look better,” while we were obviously editing their undeniable distortions of our ideas. These difficult negotiations made us decide to object to publication, which the two journalists were entirely free to ignore but somewhat to our surprise quickly agreed to, since, so they said, it was not an interesting story anyway if it was formulated in the way we wanted.

Apart from this, in the course of the following days, various literary authors wrote op-eds in broadsheet newspapers to criticize us; we wrote an op-ed back and were reinterviewed by Peter; chief editors from other newspapers, even if they did not have a feature about the issue in their own medium, commented on our interview in their editorials; we were invited to the national radio, as were our critics; a couple of other linguists rose to our defense in new op-eds; various politicians were asked to comment on the whole debate; and the Flemish regional parliament even devoted a discussion to our book in its session of November 29, 2012, inviting the Minister of
Culture to respond to MPs’ concern about the “further deterioration of the standard language and the inadequacy of the means recruited to go against this.” In other words: we had ourselves become the news. And the further we got away from the initial interview and the more our ideas were picked up by more popular media, the more sensationalist the whole issue became and the more our expertise was presented as quirky, out of touch, ivory tower nonsense. We were all but heretics (cf. Laforest, 1999, p. 278), or sitting ducks for those journalists who wanted to take a shot at us. After the media circus had moved on, we felt bewildered, exhausted, frustrated, and suspicious. Such developments throw into relief how volatile expertise can be in the course of only a couple of days. As Milani (2007) suggests, “The expert should not be viewed as a pre-given and static social position [. . .] but as a complex discursive construction which is constantly produced and challenged through language” (p. 102). Such was clearly the case for us: While the initial interview constructed us as experts, we quickly, the next day already, became “so-called” experts. These developments were also testament to the fact that journalists want good stories that scientists find hard to reconcile with what they want to say. Journalists are usually looking for instant answers, for a good story to get past their editor before other journalists do it, which may lead to a certain dramatization, simplification, and distortion. Scientists, in their turn, try to answer with the appropriate caveats and qualifications, insist on using labels that journalists see as “jargon” or “technical language” that will only confuse readers or make them lose interest. Moreover, as scientists are given voice, the above illustrates that “newsmakers [i.e., those who are seen as newsworthy] are evaluated or characterized in the process of giving them voice” (Scollon, 1998, p. 217): When a reporter writes that “nonstandard Dutch occurs at all schools,” adds that linguists say “This is okay,” and immediately questions this by asking “Really?” we are told by the reporter, as Scollon argues, “not only that someone has said something, but [also] how we are expected to respond [. . .] we are shown how the journalist is positioning herself in respect to both the newsmaker and the reader” (p. 223; see also Fairclough, 1992). This evaluation arguably was not very positive in our case: Broadsheet and tabloid reporters immediately questioned our expertise as they were reporting it. Not least, the sometimes spiteful struggle we had with journalists over how things ought to be formulated illustrated that (a) journalists are committed to retaining the authorship of words, while (b) they are equally committed to delegating responsibility over these words to news makers. As Scollon (1998) puts it, “[The reporter] retains responsibility for saying who said what and otherwise lets the newsmakers stew in their own juices of principalship” over these words (p. 239).
Discordant Voices?

At this point it would be easy to castigate journalists for their malicious or ignorant treatment of academics and sociolinguists in particular. I think it is important, though, to avoid associating journalists and their audiences with a prescientific, premodern way of thinking about scientists’ objects of expertise and seeing ourselves as modern, clairvoyant, evenhanded vehicles of rational thought (cf. Wynne, 1993). For in maintaining such a deficit view, we risk “deprovincializing” ourselves, that is, presenting our own perspective as the universal truth for all (Chakrabarty, 2000). Such a view is difficult to reconcile with the fact that scientists are often quite uninformed of what is true for journalists: they often “know little or nothing about the function, structure, requirements, constraints, and processes of the news media” (McIlwaine, 2001, p. 171), they regularly forget that “journalists are not in the education business” (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 95, cited in McIlwaine, 2001, p. 172), if not that, as one journalist drily noted, “just as ghost stories are not for ghosts, so science writings in [a] simple way are not for scientists” (Bardhan, 2000, p. 311, cited in McIlwaine, 2001, p. 172). In other words, in dismissing out of hand journalists’ motivations as irrational, we miss opportunities to understand them.

Moreover, in emphasizing the deep rift between scientists and journalists, we would be overlooking what they have in common. In the second case above, it is difficult to claim that we were simply sharing our expert knowledge of linguistic variation with the wider public: We were trying to make a point and sought publicity for our book, and in this sense we were equally intent on sensation as some of the journalists we were dealing with (even if the collateral damage was entirely to be suffered on our side of the fence). In addition, serious journalists and scientists often share a common ground in that they both want to provide an “honest, useful description of the world we share” (Goldstein, 1986, p. 86, cited in Maillé et al., 2010, p. 71; see also Fenton et al., 1997; Haslam & Bryman, 1996, p. 10; Weiss, 1988), and this is a project for which journalists may engage in data collection and reporting practices that are not unlike ethnographic fieldwork (Bird, 2005; Cotter, 2010; Weiss, 1988). In some cases journalists can become formidable allies for scientists. When the latter are confronted with authorities who dislike their criticism of, for example, megalomaniac, cost underestimating building projects, or environmental pollution, “working with mass media can be an extremely cost-effective way to increase the impact of research on policy and practice” (Flyvbjerg, 2012, p. 118). Related to this, we must not forget that Peter, who set up the interview with us that sparked the eventual media storm, consciously helped us bring out news that he was aware was going against the
grain, in line with his newspaper’s generally progressive positioning, and tried to bring out more news that was in line with what we had been trying to argue. In particular, Peter managed to make various politicians admit on record that they do not (always, or perfectly) speak Standard Dutch themselves, in spite of their insistence that this variety is vital for citizens’ emancipation and employment. Thus, even if journalists are clearly not subservient anymore to scientific authority, Peter illustrated that not all journalists are antiscientists either and that the relationship between them has not become entirely asymmetrical or unprofitable (cf. Dunning, 1996). Another illustration of this is perhaps that during the above-mentioned media storm, all journalists gave us the opportunity to edit, and thus they at least gave us a fair chance in the entextualization battle.

Furthermore, and as a way of drawing ourselves as experts more clearly into the picture, a simple opposition between journalists’ and scientists’ professional cultures does not entirely explain the moral panic about nonstandard Dutch that emerged after our controversial interview. Various features about language appear in Flemish mainstream media every year. One Flemish broadsheet newspaper, De Standaard, even publishes a regular column about language besides one weeklong supplement about language per year (for which various linguists are invited to write a brief feature) that focuses on various aspects of language, ranging from style issues and spelling to the history of language and speech technology, including features on the use of non-standard Dutch. But this news about language (typically quite middle of the road) usually causes only a ripple on the surface of public discourse. That we reaped the whirlwind sown by our interview thus cannot simply be attributed to a contemporary science-media standoff, and I want to argue here that it probably needs to be related to a more fundamental, older, conception of what it means to be an expert, and a linguist in particular, in contemporary Western nation-states.

Aligning themselves with Z. Bauman’s (1987) view of the expert as a symptom of modernity (see the section Media and Linguistic Expertise in a Late-Modern World), linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (2003) argue in their Voices of Modernity that the role of language has been unduly neglected in analyses of modernity and that ideas about language have instead played a vital part in the modernization and traditionalization of social practices, places, and people (epitomized in the imagination of a modern, standard, later national, language). R. Bauman and Briggs call attention to the fact that linguistic experts in particular have been charged with a heavy burden. As guardians of transparent communication and later as engineers of the vehicle with which national Volksgeists were to travel from the past into modern social sectors, they have been “charged with the
metadiscursive responsibility for the purity and cultivation of the nation’s poetic legacy” (p. 193) and are “expected to be purists, to define and describe autonomous languages in technical ways that render invisible their social and political embeddedness” (p. 305). This understanding of the linguistic expert is widespread among reporters:

'The key reasons that experts with sociolinguistic or anthropological training may be overlooked or overtly devalued in news stories . . . is not merely an oversight or wilfulness on the part of the reporter. Rather, it is because of a journalistic understanding of what an expert is supposed to do. (Cotter, 2010, p. 221)

This is to be a legislator of language, in line with journalists’ self-identity as protectors of the language (Cotter, 2010, p. 187).

From that angle, what we said was highly irresponsible. Not only did we contest the stigmatization of a hybrid, impure, nonmodern way of speaking in a sacrosanct modernist greenhouse as the school, but we also tried to expose that the promotion of a pure Standard Dutch creates more, rather than less, sanctionable differences among speakers and so reproduces rather than alleviates social inequality (which is a widely shared view in current sociolinguistics). Not least, given that the standardization of Dutch in Flanders is traditionally seen as the principal way in which Flemings have tried to emancipate themselves from the historical supremacy of French speakers in Belgium, our words seemed to draw into question this traditional self-conception, and even to call up the specter of stigmatization by French speakers for Flemings’ nonmodern language use (Jaspers & Van Hoof, 2013). In other words, as we got onto the public stage as experts of language, we did not play our role. We were not keeping the nation linguistically healthy and pure, we did not define the standard language, and in deserting so outspokenly from our post we touched a sensitive, deeply entrenched societal nerve (as many other linguists in a range of countries have also experienced).

I suggest that this explains why some reporters immediately acted as tribunes of the people, resorting to judging rather than questioning or to using experts as “a foil for the more ‘real’/sensible views of the audience” (Ussher, 1996, p. 132). To be sure, as Clayman and Heritage (2002) demonstrate in their analysis of TV news interviews, reporters only occasionally adopt this stance, mostly in circumstances they describe as transparently hostile, for example, when an interviewee’s opinions are widely considered to be beyond the pale and require journalists to produce explicit tokens of negative evaluation if they wish to avoid that their more neutralistic questioning is taken as an implicit approval of these opinions. Over and above the usual skirmishes
between news makers and reporters, then, our interview did not just challenge reporters’ professional investment in the idea of a standard language, but it also tripped over a broader, commonsensical cultural wire in the sense that it seriously disturbed deep-seated convictions about the role of linguistic experts in modern (Western) nation-states, as a result of which what we had to say was not considered expert knowledge at all (cf. also Cotter, 2010, p. 227). It is quite possible that explanations of urban ways of speaking (Case 1 above) were much easier to reconcile with a traditional, modern vision of what linguists are supposed to do, inasmuch as these explanations maintain that Illegal is the language of the Other and that it should be known, explained, or controlled as something exotic.

This second case thus shows that sociolinguistic expertise in contemporary mainstream media, apart from being the outcome of stiff entextualization battles, is seriously conditioned by a formidable modern legacy of ideologizing linguistic expertise and the linguistic profession in general.

Late-Modern Collaborations

Contemporary mainstream media, not to mention tabloids or Fox News, are often accused of being one of the driving, centrifugal forces of the evolution from modernity to late-modernity. But on the basis of my own interactions with the media as an expert, a more complicated picture seems to emerge. It is true that mainstream media generally have less respect for scientific expertise, but the data above illustrate that it is likely they will continue to stage the image of the trustworthy, modern expert because it enhances the credibility of news, helps describe a particular and interesting piece of reality, or facilitates the writing of sensational news. Moreover, in associating a researcher with his faith as the Fox News interviewer did, and in suspecting what research can come of that, the interviewer, and the channel she works for, might be said to yearn for a lost age in which we could still trust experts when they said something and to try to attract viewers on the basis of such sentiments. My analysis also shows that when it comes to language, certainly the written press can be deeply characterized by modernist language ideologies. But some reporters’ lust for news may at the same time offer opportunities for highlighting types of expertise that go against the grain and that disrupt traditional thinking about language—even if such disruptions may in their turn open up the gates of discursive hell, when other media provide a platform for some old-fashioned intellectual rage and condemnation about nonstandard language.

This makes the interactions between sociolinguists and media not just an interesting ethnographic object for checking the pulse of late-modernity. As
also Sally Johnson (2001) argues, basing herself on Scollon (1998), these interactions can become the starting point for exploring the different types of transactions that occur between experts and media in this day and age. Such transactions may be quite “old-school,” when media help get expert messages more or less safely across to the general public (as Peter did in Case 2 above). In other cases, this may be much more difficult, and scientists may see their message repackaged and distorted to attract audiences. And as the second case above illustrated, there are times when one’s input is less required and where one’s initial message may ricochet from one medium to another, and it “become[s] part of a spectacle for others to watch” (Johnson, 2001, p. 606).

On a descriptive level, mapping these differing transaction types and understanding how one evolves into the other contributes to a conceptualization of contemporary media not as a homogeneous actor in public discourse but as a many-headed player characterized by constant internal interaction and competition. This competition moreover fractals all the way down from tensions between written and audiovisual media, to tensions between different newspapers or broadcasters, and to tensions and strife between reporters working for the same medium or between reporters and management. Obviously, such tensions also characterize contemporary academia, where universities, departments, and individual scientists are increasingly obliged to vie for funding and perform well in quality assessments, partially through the amount of positive media attention they receive. Apart perhaps from the death threats, but faced with the ever more intimidating output targets and valorization requirements, many scientists would probably love to be in Dr. Aslan’s shoes for a day or two. To complicate matters even further, the audiences targeted for science communication often firmly disagree, continue as they were doing, or simply ignore what scientists and media are trying to say to them (using newspapers for wrapping fish in, and putting on the TV for background ambience).

Insights such as these help underline that one would be painting it with much too broad a brush to suggest the “mass mediation of expert knowledge” is a process in which experts (should) use media to transfer their expert information to a preintended audience. Instead, and following Cotter (2010) and Scollon (1998), it would probably be more useful to see news products as the mutually constituted result of an interaction between different, internally heterogeneous, communities (of experts on the one hand, of journalists on the other), consumed by audiences in a vast number of ways that do not necessarily have much to do with “receiving information.” On a strategic level, developing such an understanding may allow to determine how media can be of use, and which media can be usefully recruited, for entextualizing a particular
point of scientific interest in public discourse—if one is willing to accept that such communication, as the second case above illustrated, may backfire in unintended and spectacular ways. But even when the backfire is spectacular and the end result may lead to frustration more than anything else, such cooperations between scientists and media may briefly create the disruptions of established discourses (e.g., that a standard language is vital for emancipation and employment) that are the basis of their critical observation (through exposing that politicians do not entirely live up to that image). In light of universalizing master narratives that significantly curtail the autonomy of journalists and scientists alike, such as the narrative of profit, both parties may have good reasons for trying to traverse the no-man’s-land of incomprehension between them and find out what disruptions they may profitably create together.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a grant from The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS).

Notes
1. His regular appearance in The Daily Show and other programs precludes any naïveté as to what Fox News is or can be.
2. Z. Bauman (1987) mentions a third shift that contributed to experts’ dwindling influence: nation-states’ increasing reliance on their own bureaucracy for the legitimation of their existence and authority (pp. 122-124).
3. This is a translation from the original Dutch. Here, and elsewhere, when the specific language of the utterance is not relevant for the analysis I will provide only the English translation.
4. For examples in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom with similar accusations of linguists’ desertion, see Cameron (1995), Rickford (1999), Heller (1999), Laforest (1999), Johnson (2001), and Grondelaers and van Hout (2012).

References


**Author Biography**

Jürgen Jaspers is a sociolinguist and assistant professor of Dutch linguistics at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. His research interests include sociolinguistic ethnography, linguistic standardization, and language policy.