The colour of Dutch
Some limits and opportunities of identifying Dutch ethnolects

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Many studies in recent years identify and discuss Dutch ethnolects. Generally this work takes linguistic phenomena as directly reflective of speakers’ ethnic identity. But if ethnicity is an inherent speaker feature, the absence of white ethnolect descriptions is difficult to explain. In this paper, therefore, I wish to judge the appeal of the notion of ethnolect against its usefulness for explaining language use. I argue that ethnolect can usefully label everyday ethnicisations of language, but that such evaluations generally compress a more complex reality in which so-called ethnolectal features are recruited for other purposes than (un)marking one’s ascribed ethnicity. Crucial to unpacking this reality is the distinction of an intermediary step, the construction of interactional stance, between the use of linguistic features and their association with common-sense identity categories.

Keywords: ethnolect, ethnicity, ethnicisation, stance, Moroccan Dutch, Antwerp dialect

1. Introduction

Many studies have in recent years identified and discussed Dutch ethnolects (see, among others, Hinskens, 2011; 2016; Muysken, 2013; Nortier & Dorleijn, 2008; Ruette & Van de Velde, 2013; Van der Sijs, 2014; Van Meel, Hinskens, & Van Hout, 2013; 2014; 2016). Characteristic of this work is that linguistic phenomena are taken to reflect speakers’ ethnicity directly: if speakers with a Moroccan background produce particular phono-lexical or morpho-syntactic features in Dutch, this is ‘their’ ethnolect, their ‘Moroccan-Dutch’. Yet if ethnicity is an inherent speaker feature, the paucity of attention to white types of Dutch is difficult to explain. In this paper, therefore, I evaluate the appeal of the ethnolect notion against its
usefulness for explaining language use across the Dutch language area. I will argue that postulating ‘ethnolects’ can reduce a more complex reality in which speakers recruit so-called ethnolectal features for a range of other purposes than (un)marking their ascribed ethnicity. Crucial to demonstrating this reality is the distinction of an intermediary step, the construction of interactional stance, between the use of linguistic features and their association with common-sense identity categories. Attending to stance shows that an overly ethnic lense on linguistic practices may hide the orientation of these practices to interactional goals and to social dimensions that are remote from ethnicity. From this it does not follow that it is wrong to speak of an ethnolect or that it is an empty signifier. Following Brubaker, however, I will use ‘ethnolect’ not to refer to discrete ways of speaking, but to ethnicisations of ways of speaking. This is based on a view of ethnicity “not in terms of substantial groups or entities but in terms of practical categories […]” It means thinking of *ethnicization* […] as [a] political, social, cultural and psychological process[…].” (Brubaker, 2002, p. 167). Such a view does not draw into question the reality of ethnicity, but it defines this reality as a type of categorisation, a way of thinking and speaking about human differences, with often real and consequential effects, which does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups as delimitable entities. That such ethnicisations are everyday is illustrated in the next section, where a particular way of speaking is practically labelled in ethnic terms.

2. Perceiving ‘Moroccan’ ways of speaking

In one sketch from a popular Flemish sketch show called *Wat als …?* ‘What if…?’ (Van Aelst, 2013) which plays out various improbable or bizarre scenarios (‘what if bullying was fun?’, ‘what if plants could speak?’), one of the other questions was: ‘what if everybody spoke like a Moroccan?’.

Example 1. *Wat als … iedereen sprak als een Marokkaan?* ‘What if … everybody spoke like a Moroccan?’

Participants: Axel, Filip, Woman1, Woman2. Setting: The sumptuous foyer of a grand theatre. Axel and Woman1, expensively dressed up, are coming out of a performance when Axel sees Filip and his wife, Woman2, equally dressed-up. On the left is the original version, the right column is the English translation. Features marked in italics indicate shibbolets of ‘speaking like a Moroccan’.

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1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsNrIBXr2Ew (last checked 3 July 2017).

HEY FILIP! FILIP! HEY GIJ

KLOETZAK!

F: OOOOOEEaaah Axel janet! Da’s

die Axel van op mijn werk, da’s

die gast waarmee ik elke

woensdag op een meeting zit

A: och joenge uw moeder is een

meeting

W2: en? wa vond gij van die Mozart-

shit?

W1: ooh da’s kei-cool gast

F: ik vond da wel een sobere

uitvoering

A: ach gast uw moeder is een sober’

uitvoering

W1: [lacht]

F: serieus gast ge moet echt 'ns de

sonates van die Mozart checken

da is echt de shit gast

W1: ja welke? Die gast heeft tien

miljoen sonates geschreven

idioot!

F: die van die sjtrijkkwartet

hé

W1: [lacht] [ernstig:] hoe noemde gij

mij? hé? Hoe noemde gij mij?

F: AAAH euh, zij is rustig ik bedoel

die van die sjtrijkkwartet

W2: ah schat wij moeten echt kei-hard

doorgaan,

wij moeten die babysit aflossen

A: och joenge, uw moeder is een

babysit
Example 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>W2: AAAH! DIE ZEGT ZO OVER MIJ</td>
<td>AAAH! HE SAYS ABOUT ME MY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>F: MIJN MOEDER IS EEN BABYSIT!</td>
<td>MOTHER’S A BABYSITTER!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>W2: MIJN MOEDER IS de babysit</td>
<td>AAH YOUR MOTHER IS the babysitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>W2: wa is’t probleem</td>
<td>what’s the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>A: ah ja da’sj waar [lacht]</td>
<td>oh yeah that’s true [laughs]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>W2: waar woont uw huis</td>
<td>hey, where is your house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>W1: oulla, da’s mega-ver rijen</td>
<td>oulla, that’s a super far drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>A: moeten hé, wa is dees?</td>
<td>going, you know what I’m saying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>W2: ons huis? oullah tot morgen[,] juffrouw</td>
<td>our house? that’s in Hove oullah see you tomorrow, miss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>F: oullah toullah</td>
<td>oulla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>[Wo1 en Wo2 nemen venijnig afscheid, Wo2 en Filip gaan weg]</td>
<td>[Wo1 and Wo2 say goodbye venomously, Wo and Filip go off]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>W2: Jezus, is die zjwanger of wa?</td>
<td>Jesus, is she pregnant or what?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sketch displays a number of shibbolets of so-called Moroccan-Dutch (see Table 1 and the features marked in italics in the transcript), such as the palatalisation of the sibilant (lines 23, 25, 30, 41, 54), some grammatical particularities, Arabic interjections (lines 45, 50, 51), and on a prosodic level the actors produce quite dramatic intonation contours. One other striking feature is the characters’ propensity for insulting and offense taking (lines 8–9, 27–28, 34–37). Given all this, surely this proves that something like a ‘Moroccan Dutch’ exists and can be labelled as such?
Yet why this speech style is adequately and sufficiently called ‘Moroccan’ rather than urban, lower class, or young, is less than obvious. The joke mostly seems to be predicated on viewers’ recognition of a social contrast between, on the one hand, a ‘lower class’ or ‘street’ speech style, and, on the other, an elite setting created by the clothing, the activity, the setting, and the various hints of upper classness sprinkled over the interaction (listening to Mozart, living in the expensive suburb Hove, having meetings at work and a babysitter). Capturing, as the sketch makers do, this contrast in ethnic terms “refers to class differences without using class” (Ortner, 1998, p. 8). Linguistically, a typification of this speech style as ‘Moroccan’ is difficult to reconcile with the use of swear words like kloetzak ‘bastard’ (line 3) or janet ‘homo’ (line 4), both of which are typically Antwerp dialect, as is a substantial amount of the phonology (joenge for jongen ‘boy’) and morphosyntax (the use of the ge-gij-u(w) pronominal system rather than Standard Dutch je-jij-jou(w); the occurrence of post-verbal enclitic pronouns (noemde < noemt ge, noemde gij < noemt gij). Notice too the various intensifiers and loans regularly associated with youth language, such as Mozart-shit (lines 10–11), kei-cool ‘super cool’ (line 12), checken (line 19), mega-ver ‘super far’ (line 45) and Jesus (line 54).

Still, it is fair to say that the sketch builds on existing knowledge of metapragmatic stereotypes that the sketch makers assumed would be shared widely enough for an audience to appreciate the joke. There is something ‘out there’, then, in the way that particular people speak that descriptions such as ‘speaking like a
Moroccan’ set out to capture. The next section shows there is much research in Dutch sociolinguistics that takes the same view.

3. Identifying Dutch ethnolects

Much work that investigates Dutch ethnolects bases itself on Michael Clyne’s (2000) definition. For Clyne, ethnolects are “varieties of a language that mark speakers as members of ethnic groups who originally used another language or distinctive variety” (2000, p. 86). This definition, however, defers the question of what an ethnic group is, while the word ‘originally’ is elastic: it can include those who learnt a majority language as additional language to their first at home, as well as their (grand)children whose first language is the majority language. These problems reappear in largely similar definitions such as this one:

An ethnolect is a variety of a language (usually the majority language) that was originally spoken by a group with a specific ethnic or cultural background. In our case this means people with a different mother tongue than Dutch as well as their descendants.  

(Hinskens, 2016, p. 23, my translation)

Van der Sijs’s definition displays a similar flexibility. If ethnolects are “variants of Dutch that have emerged through language contact, when people with a different mother tongue or home language speak Dutch” (Van der Sijs, 2014, p. 120), all learners of Dutch must be seen as ethnolectal speakers. But the ethnolects she discusses are, on the one hand, Moroccan Dutch and Turkish Dutch, and, on the other, varieties such as Surinamese Dutch, Antillean or Indonesian Dutch.

Van Meel et al. (2014, p. 47), following Muysken (2013), understand Moroccan, Yiddish and Turkish Dutch as “immigration varieties” while Surinamese, Antillean and Indonesian Dutch, among others, are seen as “colonial varieties” which, in contrast to immigration varieties “emerged outside the Netherlandic area proper” (Muysken 2013, p. 741). Interestingly, Afrikaans is never identified as a colonial variety, while there is no mention of Polish Dutch or German Dutch as immigration varieties, although there must be many speakers of Polish or German who have learned Dutch as a second or third language, with ample descendants (cf. Van der Sijs 2014, p. 128).

Ruette and Van de Velde in their turn approach Moroccan-Dutch “merely descriptively or ‘phenomenologically’, without passing judgement on the status of

2. Neither is Belgian Standard Dutch, although this variety too could be argued to have emerged as the result of exporting Netherlandic Standard Dutch to Belgium in the 19th and 20th century, after which Flemings further appropriated it.
the ethnolect” (2013, p. 458) and suggest that, since Standard Dutch is “its own outcome of different periods of language contact in the past […] each variety of Dutch historically speaking is an ethnolect” (2013, p. 466). This is correct. But it begs the question why only some varieties are eventually called ethnolectal, and why one tends to refrain from approaching other (say, observably gendered) ways of speaking in merely descriptive terms (‘women’s speech’).

It would seem then that not all traces of language learning and contact are identified as ethnolectal, and that not all speakers of Dutch with (grand)parents speaking other languages are categorised as belonging to ethnic groups. Ultimately, ethnolect definitions appear to be based on the fact that some sets of speakers are conventionally identified as ethnic. This would explain the absence of ‘white Dutch’ in the literature, since whiteness is not conventionally understood as ethnic but as neutral or mainstream – although, of course, it is customary within this mainstream whiteness further to categorise, and present as marked, ways of speaking along class (‘lower class’), age (‘youth language’), or regional lines (‘dialect’).

This conception of ethnicity, however, is a practical, common-sensical, rather than analytic one. Using ethnicity in the latter sense implies that if some people have ethnicity, others must have it too (or if they do not, this is the marked case requiring further examination). It would not make much sense either to assume that only some people, but not others, have gender or class. So to the extent that sociolinguists recruit a practical ethnicity concept to decide whether a particular way of speaking is ethnic, their use of ethnolect risks “adopt[ing] for analytical purposes a category of everyday experience and political practice” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 10) and thus to conflate the level of social and sociolinguistic understanding.

This does not mean that ethnolect as a concept is off-limits for sociolinguistics. But before showing how it could be profitably used I wish to point out two other problems that the recruitment of ethnolect usually invites. The first is that it creates a new lect; the second that it focuses on ethnicity as a natural fact.

4. Problems with ethnolects

Creating a lect, as Nortier (2008, p. 4) points out, “presupposes a fixed set of more or less stable or static linguistic norms”, that is, it reifies a particular way of speaking. This is “a problem shared by all denominations such as varieties, styles or all the types of -lects, which tend to represent language as a fixed rather than as a fluid entity” (Gadet & Hambye, 2014, p. 189). Such reifications can be a necessary evil or, as Einar Haugen said, a “useful fiction” (1972, p. 325) on the basis of which the systematicity and complexity of linguistic phenomena can be demonstrated. But the peril of such fictions is that they reflect a view of ethnolects as a closed set
of forms with inherent pragmatic values (cf. Agha, 2004; Nortier, 2008), or, that they conjure up the idea of a “discrete system indexical of ethnicity alone” (Eckert, 2008a, p. 26).

Secondly, suggesting that ethnicity is primordial compared to other dimensions of identification like one’s favourite football club, political conviction, class or gender, and that it can therefore self-evidently lend its name to particular lects, postulates ethnicity as a natural fact. Much research has in the past decades been insisting however that “the choice of salient distinction is not simply given to us by nature. It is itself a social act” (Phillips, 2010, p. 54); that “it is not easy to determine when a group of people should be classified as “alike”, nor is it obvious on what grounds such a classification should be made, given the infinitude of ways in which individuals vary from one another.” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 370). Indeed, it is unclear why people of Moroccan descent would have a single ethnicity, given the substantial differences between Arabic and Tamazight speakers. And even if it can “be assumed that people with a Maghrebian background do share cultural features, […] it does not follow that because of these shared roots, they have similar ways of clothing, speaking, living, similar values or beliefs. In other words, even if they really share a culture, this does not necessarily mean that their ethno-cultural background is the driving factor of this common culture” (Gadet & Hambye, 2014, p. 190; see also Jaspers, 2008).

Naturally, people commonly categorise others or themselves as ethnic. But while such ethnicisations are everyday fare in daily life, and useful on a scientific level when we categorise things for all practical purposes, there is always the danger of (1) overgeneralising and assigning to all members within the group the same type of characteristics; or of (2) reifying the category and taking it as a protagonist in social life (cf. Brubaker, 2002; Phillips, 2010).

Students of ethnolects have not been insensitive to these dangers. Ruette and Van de Velde (2013), for example, rightly argue that postulating ethnolects and collecting data from their alleged speakers can serve to falsify their existence if the data fail to show sufficient stability or regularity. It stands to wonder, however, if in the inverse case – finding stable linguistic patterns – we can speak of a separate, ethnic, variety; the observable and regular differences between male and female styles of speaking do not usually, or not anymore, lead to postulations of male and female types of Dutch. Others, following Clyne (2000), speak of ‘multiethnolects’ so as to avoid the link to a specific ethnicity and to highlight the fact that people from different ethnicities borrow features from each other or “use it collectively to express their minority status and/or as a reaction to that status to upgrade it” (Clyne 2000, p. 87). While this term avoids referring to a single ethnicity, it retains the priority given to (a now more variable) ethnicity and at the same time raises the issue of its difference from other ways of speaking that are shared by speakers
who are conventionally categorised in various ethnic groups, such as, for example, Standard Dutch.

Another option has been to see ethnolectal language use as a question of style, for example for speakers who are fluent in the standard form of the majority language but on some occasions decide to express their ethnic identity “as a totem around which the group assembles” (Hinskens, 2016, p. 25, my translation). In such case ethnolectal language use is not a matter of inability but of intention. This view, however, maintains that ethnicity is fundamental, and that it is either accentuated when speakers set out to dance around their totem, or attenuated when they decide it is irrelevant to the matters at hand. It also maintains that features earmarked as ethnolectal have a singular social meaning: they flag ethnicity. This makes “movement away from ethnolectal features” by those seen to be conventionally ethnic only analysable as “a move away from ethnicity” (Eckert, 2008a, p. 27) however temporarily. And it implies that the adoption of ethnolectal features by others becomes a claim to the ethnicity marked by those features.

Alternatively, such an adoption has been analysed as a gesture of bravado, as a move through which the adopters construct a temporary toughness. This is argued for example by Nortier and Dorleijn (2008) in their discussion of Moroccan Flavoured Dutch [MFD]: speakers who adopt MFD lay claim to Moroccanness because it equals toughness or streetwiseness. While this usefully draws attention to non-ethnic social meanings of linguistic features, this adoption appears to be only one-way: ethnic features can be adopted by whites for stylistic purposes, but when non-white speakers adopt white, lower class urban dialect features, these features are already seen to be part of these non-white speakers’ ethnolect. One example of this is given when Nortier & Dorleijn refer to the diphthong [ei] which in Amsterdam city dialect is realised as a monophthong [e] or even [a:] and which is “also part of MFD” (2008, p. 131), without however explaining why the diphthong at issue has now become a ‘part of MFD’, a straightforward ethnic feature rather than a lower class one. Van Meel et al. (2014) similarly describe the increasing adoption of this lower class urban diphthong by youngsters with Turkish and Moroccan background from Amsterdam as a process in which a sociolect marker is (becoming) an ethnolect marker.

The baseline thus seems to be that linguistic features have one social meaning. When whites adopt a non-white feature it retains its meaning in a stylistic, if not theatrical move; when non-whites adopt white features these white features transform into ethnolectal ones and can subsequently be used only to mark one’s own ethnicity rather than, in a similar stylistic move, evoking the streetwiseness associated with linguistic features customarily categorised as lower class.
5. Multidimensional indexicality and stance

A more useful way of approaching the adoption of linguistic features, both in its more spectacular and more routine versions, may be to start from the insight that features have multiple social meanings. As Coupland suggests, “the social meanings of linguistic varieties are complex and multidimensional […] [and] contextual factors impinge crucially on which social meanings are attributed to varieties” (2010, p. 62). Cameron and Kulick concur that “no way of speaking has only one potential meaning; the meanings it conveys in one context are not necessarily the same ones it conveys in another, and it may also acquire new meanings over time” (2003, p. 57). Eckert talks in this regard of the field of potential meanings that a variable can index:

the meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings – an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable.


This does not mean that forms can mean anything. Which set of associations, broad or narrow, a particular feature can evoke “will be determined by the extent to which the people using it have narrow or broad experience of it” (Rampton, 2006, p. 308). It is in addition important to distinguish the meanings that a feature “potentially indexes […] [from those that a feature] “actually indexes in a particular instance of use […] Not all […] meanings are necessarily entailed” (Ochs, 1996, p. 418, cited in Rampton, 2006, p. 303; cf. also Cornips & De Rooij 2013). Which meaning is entailed is thus for speakers to find out as they compare potential meanings with the one that is relevant to an aspect of the interaction.

The capacity of linguistic features to evoke social meanings makes them highly usable for producing what has been called ‘stance’. This can be broadly understood as a type of contextualisation through which speakers provide clues about how much they invest in the form or content of what they are saying and what type of relationship they are, by means of this investment, constructing with other interlocutors (Jaffe, 2009; Snell, 2010, p. 631). Thus speakers using a standard voice (in combination with other semiotic resources) and investing in what they are saying often lay claim to an expert status and likely construct a relation of authority with their interlocutors; using that voice halfheartedly can be part of an ironic stance that helps construct interpersonal solidarity.

The usefulness of stance resides in the fact that it draws attention to the linguistic construction of a range of fleeting interactional effects and demeanors (assertiveness, sophistication, (un)certainty, irony) that are prior to, and independent of, the expression of more durable social identities like social class or ethnicity. The
link between linguistic features and social identities, in this perspective, is indirect rather than direct. This link may eventually be seen as direct, however. Research into stance has argued, firstly, that people can take up particular stances habitually to the extent that these come to be seen as a style of behaviour rather than a repeated stance taking. These styles are, secondly, always interpreted as corresponding with or deviating from established identities like gender, class and ethnicity (Ochs, 1992). A classic example is the female CEO who habitually takes up an assertive, authoritative stance at work but who sees her resultant professional style negatively interpreted against the backdrop of gender discourses that require women to be considerate and to facilitate others rather than having the last word. The linguistic and non-linguistic means for constructing ‘CEO-ness’ (directives, falling intonation, a hard gaze, a lower or loud voice) are then seen to be directly reflective of masculinity rather than as first and foremost constructing a decisive stance.

This may throw an important light on ethnolect research. And I want to argue this by briefly reconsidering some data from ethnographic research I have carried out at a secondary school in Antwerp between 1999 and 2002 (see Jaspers, 2005; 2011). This research focused on adolescents with Moroccan backgrounds who generally experienced Antwerp dialect as the voice of white racists. In other words, they saw Antwerp dialect as an ethnolect, a white speech style. This emerged from their various explicit comments about this dialect and its speakers, which were rife with references to racism and the, at the time highly successful, political extreme right. Consequently, Antwerp dialect was greatly usable for signalling a non-investment into what one was saying. Mostly this took the form of loud mock-criticism of someone’s ostensible transgression, and this often invited laughter and created positive affect with those who were criticised (see Jaspers 2011, p. 504–510).

Yet, Antwerp dialect features also occurred in other stance takings, in which speakers were highly devoted to what they were saying and created negative affect with the addressee. This was clear from their use of such features when they disagreed with a teachers’ reprimand or with the fieldworkers’ organisation of an interview, or when they were sketching a streetwise, knowledgeable, and local persona in contrast to a naïve Moroccan newcomer in the city. They were, in other words, assertive on those moments, sometimes in combination with manifesting a local, native identity, underlining this by means of Antwerp dialect. This is partially illustrated in Example (2) (see Jaspers, 2011 for further discussion).

Example 2. Not a small child anymore
Participants: Ms M (40+), Nordin (17). Setting: January 2000. At the end of a very difficult English class, in which Nordin arrived very late, Ms M calls Nordin aside to tell him, as she had already done earlier, that he
will not be allowed in class if he is so late again. This does not go down well with Nordin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms M: wat ik daarstraks gezegd heb [.]</td>
<td>what I told you earlier [.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>da meen ik wel hé</td>
<td>I mean that you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa?</td>
<td>what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms M: volgende keer kom jij nie na(ar) de les</td>
<td>next time you won’t be allowed in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NONO hey MISS I COME IN HERE [1.0] I’m not allowed to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hier nie meer binnen of wa?</td>
<td>come in anymore or what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ik zeg maar gewoon dat ik het meen en</td>
<td>I’m only saying that I mean it and next time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volgende keer ben je samen=</td>
<td>you’re together with the=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= met de rest in de klas [.] ja?</td>
<td>= rest of the group [.] okay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en DAN? [.]</td>
<td>so WHAT? [.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>als er iemand anders nu te laat komt euh dan zoude gewoon</td>
<td>if anybody else came in late uh you’d be saying just nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[yəwən] niks zeggen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>euh Nordin [.] de</td>
<td>uh Nordin [.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volgende keer ben je op tijd da’s de vrijdag [.] ja?</td>
<td>next time you’re on time that’s this Friday [.] okay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2.0] [2.0] tezz [.] ’k zen kik geen klein</td>
<td>shit [.] I’m not a small child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[yen klæ’n]kind niemeer ze</td>
<td>anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2.0] [2.0] [Nordin loopt naar buiten, JJ blijft in de klas]</td>
<td>[Nordin walks out, JJ stays in class]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en nu achter de rug roddelen</td>
<td>and now talking behind the back</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this fragment both interlocutors interrupt each other several times in mid-speech (lines 5–6, 8–9, 11–12, 13–14, 17–18), suggestive of the conflict and disalignment between them. When Ms M eventually manages to formulate her expectation in the clear (lines 18–20), Nordin produces a silence (line 21) that indicates his surrender and acceptance of Ms M’s authority. During that silence, teacher
and pupil each go their own way. However, that Nordin still disagrees is clear from the fact that in lines 22–23 he displays his resilience and negative affect with the addressee, complaining that he has been unfairly addressed, in his eyes, as a small child (although his behaviour in class certainly invited doubts over his maturity). This rebuttal is partly constructed, or enhanced, by using Antwerp dialect features, notably with a diphthong that was not part of this routine Dutch (lines 22–23). An earlier sign of that strategy, again with an unusual diphthong for his regular speech style, emerges in line 16. In contrast to these speakers’ habit of recruiting Antwerp dialect to flag ‘I am speaking like somebody else’ and to create humour, Nordin is arguably serious here about what he says, and uses Antwerp dialect features to underline his assertive stance while and after being told off, putting in this way, at least in Nordin’s view, each interlocutor on a more equal footing.

That Antwerp dialect was usable for constructing such a stance would seem to be at least partially related to its longer-standing reputation as a vernacular, and to the fact that such vernaculars in a standard-language culture are usable for flagging non-conformism, resilience or indifference to expected ways of speaking, reason why they have been popular among lower-class and male speakers. It is not impossible that other linguistic features, such as interference phenomena and Arabic interjections are likewise usable for flagging a stance of defiance or indifference to ‘proper’ ways of speaking and contribute to an assertive, masculine stance. In any case, the more adolescents with Moroccan backgrounds construct assertiveness – and, on other occasions, nativity as a way of distinguishing themselves from newcomers and refugees – the more these regular stances may congeal into a typical disposition or speech style. And to the extent that this disposition is subsequently associated by others with ‘speaking like a Moroccan,’ the linguistic features used can come to be seen as directly reflective not of the repeated stance but of a Moroccan ethnicity, that is, as symptomatic of an ethnolect. The sketch show fragment above indeed would seem to suggest that such a disposition is now identified as Moroccan, and it would explain why Antwerp dialect features can be part of a ‘typically Moroccan’ style. Clearly though, such an ethnicisation obfuscates the actual interactional work, that is, it fails to capture the resilience and maturity Nordin seeks to construct in Example (2), or the staged, relatively aggressive, negotiation of knowledge (‘check the sonatas from this Mozart guy’), authority (‘I thought it was a sober performance’) and status (who can say what to whom) in Example (1) (cf. Snell, 2010).
6. Conclusion

Ethnolect studies rightly point to observable phenomena that it is in our interest to describe and explain. The occurrence and provenance of these phenomena would be difficult to determine without the valuable efforts that have been carried out in this regard. But the current use of ethnolect as a scientific label also invites a number of difficulties. The implicit assumption that ethnicity is fundamental to speakers’ lives, and that linguistic features have one rather than a field of potential meanings may, as I have tried to argue, complicate the explanation of why such features come to be adopted, for which interactional purposes, and how these features may spread across populations.

Ethnolect remains a legitimate term, however, if at least it is applied to how speakers themselves categorise and reify particular ways of speaking as ethnic. Such a perspective draws attention to “the agents that do the [ethnicising]”, and “it does not presuppose that such identifying [… ] will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded[ness]” that a lect would seem to suggest (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 14). Such an approach could also draw a range of hitherto unexplored ethnicisations of language into the picture, as a way of completing our knowledge base, such as perceptions of white ways of speaking that are labelled *hockeychicktaal* ‘hockey chick language’ or *kakkertaal* ‘hoity toity language’.

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