Problematizing ethnolects: Naming linguistic practices in an Antwerp secondary school

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Abstract

This article argues that naming linguistic practices "ethnolectal" is a praxis with ideological consequences that sociolinguists fail sufficiently to address. It suggests that a transformation of linguistic differences into ethnolect-codes quickly falls prey to homogenizing groups and their language use, obscures speakers' styling practices as well as the relations between "ethnolect" and standard language speakers. Furthermore, "ethnolect" as an analytical concept buttresses the idea that linguistic practices are caused by ethnicity, when it is more likely to assume language use is shaped by how speakers interpret prevailing representations of ethnicity and style their language use in relation to that. As an alternative, I argue that ethnolects be viewed as representations of particular ways of speaking that do not necessarily correspond to systematic linguistic practices. Sociolinguists therefore need to investigate how local and general perceptions of ways of speaking lead to specific styling practices, and integrate these into their descriptions. In addition, they need to be aware that their own work is social action as well, which requires taking into account the concerns of who gets labeled. This is illustrated with data from a case study showing how Belgian adolescents of Moroccan background resist an ethnolectal categorization of their routine Dutch.

Key words

adolescents

Belgium

Dutch

ethnolect

identity

representation

styling

1 Introduction

Inner-city ethnic minority youth in western societies have in recent decades drawn increasing attention as a problematic and somewhat dangerous group. Dramatic instances such as the riots in Paris in the autumn of 2005 or other signs of antisocial behavior fuel this perception, as well as the related need to explain (and contain) young people's behavior. This fascination has its linguistic counterpart, visible in an outpour of research that focuses on, a.o., youth language and street language in multiethnic urban

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neighborhoods (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 1998; Appel & Schoonen, 2005; Kotsinas, 1988, 1998; Nortier, 2001; Quist (this volume); Stenström, Andersen, & Hasund, 2002), language use in ethnically populated suburban areas (Doran, 2004; Kallmeyer, 1996), and in schools (Eckert, 2000; Heller, 1999; Jaspers, 2005, 2006; Rampton, 2006) as well as leisure sites where styling and crossing practices have been described (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003; Auer & Dirim, 2003; Bucholtz, 1999; Cutler, 1999; Hewitt, 1986; Kallmeyer & Keim, 2003; Pujolar, 2001; Rampton, 1995a).

The last few years have also witnessed the description of ethnic influences in "regular" or native nonimmigrant substandard speech. There has been notice of the emergence of new urban substandards, and some concerns have been voiced about the effect of these substandards on the dominant standard language. The concept of ethnolect or ethnolectal variety is in this process carving out something of a career: young speakers with ethnic backgrounds are seen as speaking ethnolects; white speakers are observed using these varieties for styling purposes; ethnolects are stylized in the media; and these representations are consequently picked up again and reworked in local adolescent discourses. Even so, as a concept, ethnolect may not be as unproblematic as its popularity suggests (cf. Stroud, 2004).

Here, I will try to argue that an ethnolect needs to be viewed as a phenomenological category rather than an empirical reality, a variety waiting to be given a name. My purpose is to show that identifying ethnolects, or naming linguistic practices ethnolectal, is a praxis with ideological consequences that are hardly acknowledged, and that lead our eyes away from the speech practices that may help to explain something about the relation between language use and social action. After an overview of the way ethnolect is defined and used (Section 2), I will indicate a number of difficulties that occur when one uses ethnolect as an analytical concept (Section 3). Consequently, I will try to substantiate the point by analyzing data from an ethnographic case study on the linguistic practices of male adolescents in a secondary school in Antwerp (Section 4).

2 Ethnolects: Definitions

Briefly, ethnolect has a history in variationist contact linguistics (see e.g., Carlock & Wölck, 1981). It is usually seen as the product of a language contact and language shift situation where, as a result of second language acquisition processes and bilingualism, members of local minority groups speak a vernacular version of the dominant lingua franca that deviates from that standard variety in a number of phonological and morphosyntactical respects.[1] Clyne defines ethnolects as "varieties of a language that mark speakers as members of ethnic groups who originally used another language or distinctive variety" (2000, p. 86). Danesi (1985, p. 118) speaks of "the variety of a language that results when speakers of different ethnolinguistic backgrounds attempt to speak the dominant language (e.g., 'Chicano English')," and Wölck sees them as "the English of the descendants of immigrant families long after their original language is lost […] a [short-lived] linguistic variety of a majority language whose special structure has

[1] Some authors indicate that this ethnolect exists next to other host or minority language varieties (Androutsopoulos, 2001), while others (Wölck, 2002) see them as a basic monolingual variety.

developed through a history of community bilingualism" (2002, p. 164; cf. Kallmeyer, 1996, p. 454).

Ethnolect is now increasingly being applied to the linguistic practices of the urban young. Kotsinas (1988, 1998) does not use the term ethnolect in her work, but is often quoted by others as having described one, namely, *Rinkebysvenska* ('Rinkeby Swedish'), a variety in suburban Stockholm "[spoken] mainly by teenagers and young people" (1998, p. 145) of different ethnic origins and deviating from Standard Swedish in phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical respects (also see Stroud, 2004). Interaction-oriented authors define ethnolect as "a variety of the majority language (or 'host language'), which is used and regarded as a vernacular for speakers of a particular ethnic descent and is marked by certain contact phenomena," or simply, "non-native German" (Androutsopolous, 2001, p. 2). Auer regards an ethnolect as "a way of speaking (style), that is associated by the speakers themselves and/or by others with one or more non-German ethnic groups" (2003, p. 255, my translation). Moreover, following Androutsopoulos (2001), Auer distinguishes between several kinds of ethnolect: a primary ethnolect, that is, the actual language use of mostly young males of Turkish descent in ghettoized areas of large urban centers, the secondary, mediatised images of this, and a tertiary ethnolect which involves the use and further development of these secondary representations in white (adolescent) interaction (also see Nortier, 2001; Verschik, 2005). Defined in this way, the concept usually does not apply to contact phenomena such as guest worker language, foreigner talk, interlanguages or pidginized versions of the host language typical of new or first-generation immigrants (even though some of these phenomena probably serve as inspiration for secondary representations). An ethnolect is also seen as different from multiracial vernaculars such as, for example, *Mischsprache* (mixed language) or *Stadtteilsprache* (neighborhood talk) (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2001; Kallmeyer & Keim, 2003), which are characterized by (Turkish-German) codemixing and switching. Thus, ethnolects are typically seen as a variety of the dominant language (cf. *Türkendeutsch*, 'Moroccan flavored Dutch').

Of course, there are linguistic usages in young inner-city communities of practice that engage with (and are affected by) the bilingual histories of their speakers, with mediatized representations of these usages, and with the possibilities of the popular culture industry. But it remains to be seen if naming these practices "ethnolectal" is a good way of capturing them. This is because the term brings along various ideological consequences, both in terms of the speakers identified as of the variety discovered. I will substantiate this in more detail in the following section, before providing an empirical case in which I will try to show that linguistically naming a certain way of speaking needs necessarily to engage with speakers' own naming practices (Section 4).

3 Problems with ethnolects

There are three problems that I'd like to call attention to. First, ethnolect studies tend to homogenize speakers as well as the ethnolectal variety (3.1), they appear to look at varieties and ethnicity as empirical facts (3.2), and corroborate the theoretical presupposition that linguistic features reflect, or are somehow indexical of, a pre-existing social category, whereas it might be more useful to theorize this relation differently (3.3).

3.1
Unified social and linguistic worlds

As it is mostly defined and used, ethnolect as a concept tends to presuppose an "ethnos" or a discrete ethnic community that speaks the "lect" at issue, that is, a speech community characterized by reasonably stable ethnic and linguistic parameters. Yet, a great many studies have demonstrated that this stability is by no means guaranteed, since, a.o.: (i) individual speakers cannot evidently be allocated to an (or only one) ethnic group; (ii) so-called ethnic groups are actually quite plural and internally fragmented; (iii) individual speakers cannot be assumed to have been socialized to such an extent that they are locked in unalterable, mutually identical, patterns of language use; and (iv) socialization in ethnic communities is often, as elsewhere, characterized by contradictory and variable practices that disprove the idea of a unified social world where each is equally competent. Instead, people have been shown to contest their social inheritances, to bricolage for themselves new ethnicities and affiliations, and to rework and rekey existing group memberships and the patterns of language use that are seen as characteristic of these memberships. These contestations and bricolaging practices can in fact be taken as illustrations of the power relations and struggle surrounding who defines ethnicity and the variety associated with it (see, a.o., Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Erickson, 2004; Rampton, 2006). In other words, there is now a consensus that particular ways of speaking cannot obviously be related to an (externally defined) ethnic community. Consequently, inasmuch as ethnolect identifications presume a clearly delimited ethnic group of similarly speaking members, they are essentializing identifications.[2]

There are similar problems with assuming that a group speaks an, that is, *one*, ethnolect. While it might seem obvious to decide that a community "speaks/uses a certain (substandard) variety" on the basis of systematic patterns of language use, the naturalness of such decisions is being more and more disputed. Evidently, if communities are not homogeneous, attributing one variety to this community does away with internal linguistic difference and speakers' repertoires. More importantly, it looks as if the swiftness with which complex linguistic practices in inner-cities are transformed into the use of a (shared) ethnolect must be regarded as echoing a persistent trend in sociolinguistics (Rampton, 1998). That is, whenever the discipline is confronted with linguistic heterogeneity, its instinct is to unify social and linguistic worlds, and to look for pure or authentic (i.e., monolingual) interaction, formed under conditions of communicative isolation, between fully competent and co-operative individuals rather than for "the fractured reality of linguistic experience in modern stratified societies" (Pratt, 1987, p. 51). If communities turn out to be heterogeneous, sociolinguistics' natural impulse is to look for homogeneity on a lower level, attributing to subcommunities the properties of the former higher-level community. Ethnolect research appears to reverberate this: linguistic variation is turned into a new linguistic and social unity, a new code, with all the assumptions of homogeneity that accompany it. So, even while one could argue that describing ethnolects precisely charts the terra incognita of practices

[2] Certainly, Auer and Androutsopoulos allow for an ethnolect that is not related to one ethnic group. And Kotsinas' Rinkeby-Swedish is also the product of an ethnically mixed neighborhood. Still, whites are not usually seen as co-constructing but as merely adopting or copying a new variety such as Rinkeby-Swedish or "non-native German," taking it on board but not themselves developing it.

beyond standard languages (Hymes, 1996, p. 66ff.), it assigns and develops a new code on a lower, substandard level where it obscures heterogeneity in the same way as standard languages (Pratt, 1987, pp. 55–57).

Identifying a multiethnolect or a multiethnic vernacular avoids the problem of essentialism, but it still establishes a code which is putatively shared and orderly used. From a social constructionist point of view, however, "using a vernacular" is a somewhat ham-fisted description for what actually takes place. If we assume that people are constantly reconstructing their social worlds in close relation to the constraining normativity that produced these worlds (Giddens, 1976), this implies we have to focus on social actors' performances: it is on their constantly renewed performances that habitual social dynamics fundamentally depend. Giddens holds that these performances are not produced *in vacuo*, but are restricted and influenced by routinization and predictability. This means that performing social actors need to take into account the older performances and practices that already exist (i.e., are frequently performed), and that while performing, they are visible for other social actors as unavoidably (dis)affiliating with existing routines, that is, as (in)appropriate performers. In short, social action can to a large extent be viewed as a (dis)affiliation with local and wider-scale social dynamics, histories, and their representations, though the power of routines makes actors experience much of what they do as natural and fixed. In the same way, all language use can be seen as a question of (dis)affiliating oneself, or of *styling*, that is, at every moment creatively and reflexively selecting — in a socially consequential way — from a range of available linguistic resources that have (routinized) social meanings, and often, names.[3] In this way, language use can be seen as a site where people deal with their fractured realities and the different styles that matter around them.

Transforming the appearance of contact features, even if they are systematic, into the use of a variety, thus obscures or simplifies the styling acts behind this "use." More particularly, it obscures what repertoires speakers have; whether their linguistic performances are conventional or flamboyant, competent or less than that; what local and general social and linguistic histories speakers are taking into account and are (re)constructing; what desirable or stigmatized routines and language names they are affiliating with; and with what consequences for which others in the vicinity at that moment. Thus, basically, positing the use of a variety draws attention away from the relationality of styles within a system of alternative varieties (Irvine, 2001; Pratt, 1987, p. 59) and contributes to picturing the social world as consisting of separate rather than interpenetrating spheres (McElhinny, 1997).

One can argue of course that in linguistics, code-establishment and a certain abstraction is unavoidable if one wants to describe the systematicity of linguistic practices. This is true, but it remains to be seen if reasoning along code lines allows insight into why practices are as they are. And if it is linguists' only intention to describe systematic practices, to establish a code for practical reasons, the selection of variables that make up an ethnolect and the name for it have ideological sources and consequences that are

[3] Language can perhaps be viewed, like class, as a "sensed difference that people and groups produce in interaction, and there is struggle and negotiation around exactly who's up, who's down, who's in, who's out, and where the lines are drawn" between language names, ways of speaking, and between acceptable and unacceptable linguistic behaviors (cf. Rampton, 2006, p.274).

hardly attended to in ethnolect research. Does this mean that it is wrong, or perhaps politically incorrect, to talk about ethnicity or identify people as ethnic? Or worse, would this imply there is something wrong with identifying and naming varieties? In both cases, my answer would be that it is not wrong to do so, but that it has significant effects of which (socio)linguists need to be aware, and that it limits our understanding of interaction among or with western inner-city youth. I will try to make this clearer in the following paragraphs.

3.2
Ethnicity and varieties as natural facts

Ethnolect studies usually do not make explicit why ethnicity is given priority as an explanatory factor to the detriment of numerous other identity categories such as class, gender, region, generation, profession, or religion (cf. Rampton, 1995b). This holds for most variationist approaches, but also for the view that secondary and tertiary ethnolects are practices where perception plays a role, whereas the ethnic (i.e., Turkish) character of a primary ethnolect would appear to be the result of objective description. This is not to deny that there *are* certain first-order language practices which deviate from regular (sub)standard language practices and which are consequently picked up and stylized by others (or by those who are seen as ethnolect speakers). But linking these primary practices exclusively to speakers' ethnicity reduces all other identity work to one superordinate ethnic identity, and begs the question why ethnicity is more conspicuous than other factors. In fact, the absence of any motivation for this often seems to imply that speakers' ethnic identity is natural, or that some people are, inescapably or definitively, ethnic such that their language use can be called ethnolectal. This, however, cuts against how a number of researchers in cultural theory, feminism, and educational anthropology have been trying to point out how both the naturalness and the importance of certain identity categories are strongly associated with the social and political relations around who is labeled in a certain way. The essence of much of this work is that natural "facts […] are like empty sacks until they are filled with 'reason and sentiment' that transform facts of nature into *social* facts" (Varenne & McDermott, 1999, p. 142), and that these social facts and categories are structural for a culture and help rationalize its workings. This is not to deny natural facts. The point is that they only assume importance for social "reasons and sentiments" (cf. Cameron, 1997, p. 24). This insight converges with methodological reflection on researcher-researched relationships in anthropology and interactional sociolinguistics, which recognizes how these disciplines' historical interest in traditional speech and practices implied the traditionalization of what they described in opposition to a modernity they thus constructed (cf. Bauman & Briggs, 2003). In other words, your interests are guided by where you (are) position(ed) yourself. And if ethnicity is a social fact, a category for who is *made* ethnic and wedged into the corners of western social structures, taking it for granted in an academic inquiry reproduces a marginalizing identification and serves the existing status-quo in which academics usually fare well.

In the same way, the specific linguistic features that are in focus in ethnolect research are not important by themselves, but need to viewed as interesting because they deviate from standard language expectations, and from the logic that knowledge of the standard

variety is necessary to obtain equal access to societal resources and status. Consequently, if one is not alert to this, the analysis risks situating itself within the structures where "ethnolectal" language use already is a sign of deviance or underachievement. As a result of this, even with best intentions, one reproduces the identification of such linguistic uses as nonmainstream or traditional, which rationalizes the exclusion of "ethnolect" speakers on the public floor which is reserved for standard language use (Stroud, 2004, and see Calvet, 2006, p. 241ff.; Rampton, 2006, p. 16). The description of inner-city heteroglossia, therefore, needs to take into account both sides of the coin, and draw "nonethnolect" or mainstream speakers into the light without which the practices of ethnolect speakers are incomprehensible (see 3.1).

In addition, ethnolect discoveries are often guided by the empirically realist stance that varieties are identifiable entities in the outside world. This is in contrast with how the notion of *a* language has been recognized as a problematic concept. As Calvet argues, "languages do not exist; the notion of language is an abstraction that rests on the regularity of a certain number of facts" (2006, p. 9); "the notion of language is a model, simultaneously useful and reductive" (ibid., p. 22). Languages or codes can still be "useful fictions," but their perceived use should not be confused with communication (Haugen, 1972 in Calvet, 2006, p. 9). Languages are purified objects, the objectified result of teasing out linguistic actions from the social world or stripping them from their social indexicalities (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). In principle, therefore, "linguistic analysis does not require the assumption that there are languages" (Harris, 1998, p. 50; Hymes, 1996; Mühlhäusler, 1996; Silverstein, 1998), and what holds for languages naturally applies to related concepts such as variety, vernacular, and "lects." In short, one does not merely discover languages or lects but constructs and labels them in a specific way that others in different social positions would not necessarily agree with.[4] Claiming to be only stating the facts when identifying ethnolects thus actively hides the social origin and political consequences of such an identification.

3.3
Theorizing the relation between language and identity

Bearing all this in mind, it can still be quite tempting to assume there's something of a causal connection between certain linguistic features and (what is called) "ethnicity." After all, it is hard to neglect systematic correlations as well as the observable new or different inflections of the standard language in daily city life. A similar temptation in fact comes up with respect to gendered language use, where the argument could be that if sociolinguistic research shows there are many correlational links between linguistic variables and (wo)men, surely it makes sense to imagine "genderlects," or to name certain recurring patterns illustrations of a "women's language"?

Deborah Cameron has, however, suggested that such concepts and names are problematic for several reasons. Empirically, similar difficulties crop up as mentioned above: women and men do not form separate communities, but live in the same key

[4] Compare sociolinguistic common knowledge that linguistic grounds or structural arguments are not enough to decide the question of what is a language or a dialect, not to mention what name it will carry (cf. Hudson, 1996, p.36; Romaine, 1994, pp.2–18).

social institutions where they occupy different positions. But much more important than the empirical counterevidence, she says, is the theoretical postulation couched in a genderlect. That is, the prevailing view in research on gendered speech is that sexual/biological differences are somehow the foundation on which gender-related behavior is built. This also holds for the so-called difference model, which locates the origin of linguistic variety in different socialization practices rather than biology, but eventually sees these differences as arising out of living in a largely separate and distinct (largely homogeneous) community. In this way, Cameron comments, women pre-exist the language, and are portrayed as subjects locked into their social identities, producing women's language because they are women. Alternatively, she points out that a number of voices are proposing a radically different conception. These voices argue that it is more helpful to see obvious divisions such as the male/female dichotomy as itself a social-historical construct in which "gender constructs sex, not vice versa" (p. 23), and they advocate a perspective which reveals speakers as actively perceiving their circumstances, interacting with them and (re)constituting them (cf. Varenne & McDermott, 1999). This implies a radical shift, for it suggests a very different relation between linguistic and social variables than is common in orthodox sociolinguistics. In this view, Cameron holds, a linguistic variety (such as women's language) is

> no longer seen to be derived indexically from the social identity of those who use it ('women'), but has become an "ideological-symbolic" construct which is potentially *constitutive* of that identity. "Being a woman" (or a man) is a matter, among other things, of talking like one. Subjects produce their own linguistic behavior, and judge the behavior of others, in the light of the gendered meanings attached by the culture to particular ways of talking (1997, p. 28)

Consequently, gendered patterns are not to be seen as caused by being male or female, but by how male and female speakers deal with ideological-symbolic constructs, that is, how they interpret, interact with and (re)constitute widespread conceptions of gender, and how men and women reciprocally style their linguistic products with respect to this. The advantage of this view is that it can explain different empirical findings, since actual behavior can diverge from what is normatively expected. In a genderlectal view, this is impossible to explain (or it would require the postulation of new subgroups).

If we apply this way of thinking to ethnolectal patterns, this entails that the ethnic/nonethnic dichotomy must be considered a social-historical construct. In that case, researchers have to find out how speakers perceive this dichotomy and judge others' linguistic behavior in relation to it, and investigate how the notion of an ethnolect is at least partly constitutive of an ethnic identity. The implication is, hence, that sociolinguists should not only describe linguistic practices, but must also investigate how these practices are informed by local beliefs, representations, and ideologies, how the latter attach meaning to particular ways of talking and lead to different styling practices.

3.4
Ethnolect as phenomenological category

It therefore looks as if in a lot of cases, it could be much more useful to consider the notion of ethnolect as part of the data than as an analytical concept. That is, ethnolect

can be viewed as a metalinguistic concept or second-order construct,[5] or a term used by members of whichever community (including the linguistic one) for the perception of a particular way of speaking. What needs to be investigated then is: Who attributes what to whom? Who says that whose way of speaking is ethnolectal? When, and for what reason, do we or others give a name to linguistic behavior? In this context, it is necessary and illuminating to identify self- and other-representations of linguistic behavior and the names that go with them, as for example, Kotsinas has done (*Rinkebysvenska*), as well as Auer and Androutsopoulos (*Türkendeutsch*). In some cases, linguists may find reason to construct a variety or ethnolect for strategic purposes: Labov's construction of African American Vernacular English as a grammatical and therefore legitimate variety is a case in point (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 402), and in contexts where linguistic standardization weighs heavily, it can be relevant to uncover diverse nonstandard practices and call these "(multiethnic) vernaculars" as a way of making these speech practices comprehensible for nonprofessionals. But a direct correspondence between a name and an actual or a systematic set of linguistic practices cannot be presupposed (cf. Androutsopoulos 2001, p. 3). In some cases, there might even be no correspondence at all, as when speakers attribute a variety to a group of people when this attribution is not entirely informed by observable facts.[6] Still, as a second-order construct, this attribution would be an "ethnolect," which as a representation could exert a real influence on linguistic practices. This also holds the other way around: a linguist might be able to describe observable linguistic differences, which are, however, meaningless for participants. Inventing a name in this case is the linguist's intervention, a social act which will have real social consequences for the speakers involved, and of which we can ask if they are acceptable.

To sum up, the notion of ethnolect is not unproblematic. It tends to fuel a sociolinguistics concerned with language/community rather than speech/interaction; it does not recognize current practices of othering and exclusion in western societies nor linguists' own social position; and it advances a problematic theoretical relation between language and social identity. Instead, we may choose to look at ethnolects as representations of language, and see how these (and, for that matter, other categorizations relating to class, gender, region, profession, sexuality, etc.) are relevant for participants and influence their social practices. The present discussion has hitherto mostly consisted of raising theoretical objections, so here is an empirical case study in which the presence of certain linguistic features seems to imply that inner-city adolescents use an ethnolect. Yet this linguistic notion clashes with the adolescents' own perceptions of language and linguistic competence. The point I'll try to make is that these adolescents' perceptions are not to be treated as either true or false, but as sociopolitically motivated. If so, they need to be critically integrated into a sociolinguistic description of the setting.

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[5] In the same way as "language," "variety" and so forth remain useful as "emic" constructs and as short-hand linguistic descriptions.

[6] See, for example, literary caricatures of immigrant/minority speech in the theater, or in film (as with "Micky," the Irish "gipsy boxer" impersonated by Brad Pitt in "Snatch" (Guy Ritchie, 2000).

4 Moroccan Dutch in Antwerp?

In data that I have assembled (Jaspers, 2005, 2006), there seems to be reason enough to baptize Belgian-Moroccan adolescents' vernacular Dutch as ethnolectal, similar to, for example, the Moroccan (flavored) Dutch that Nortier and Dorleijn (this volume) have identified. Although there were considerable individual differences between these adolescents' linguistic competences, their daily language routines were characterized by typical ethnolectal features such as, a.o., generalization of the definite article *de* (*de boek* instead of regular neuter *het boek* [the book]); strong instead of weak flection of the adjective with a neuter noun (*een goede boek* instead of Dutch *een goed boek* [a good book]); incorrect flection of demonstrative pronouns (*deze boek* instead of correct *dit boek* [this book]); deletion of articles (*moet gij gsm kopen?* [do you want to buy cell-phone?]); and home language-influenced phonology and prosody (with, for Dutch-speaking Belgians, extreme rising and falling intonation patterns). Moreover, in interviews adolescents mentioned that non-Moroccan adolescents at times attempted to imitate what was in the latter's view an attractive Moroccan accent. In interactions among relatively young middle class whites in my own social life, stylizations of this Moroccan (flavored) Dutch are also quite common. Nevertheless, despite of all this, Belgian-Moroccan adolescents did not perceive their Dutch as ethnolectal or Moroccan, took offense at others' attempts to imitate or style aspects of their speech, and consistently categorized their own speech as competent and plain Dutch. So to what extent can we speak of an ethnolect here?

The data that I draw on are the result of two and a half years of fieldwork in one secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium (between May, 1999 and April, 2002). Data-collection involved participant observation, interviewing, individual (audio) recording, classroom (audio) recording, and feedback-interviews on extracts from the recordings.[7] The research focused on the ways in which students of Moroccan background experimented with different (perceived) varieties of Dutch and in this way often sabotaged the rhythm of school and research activities.[8] It is notable that many of these adolescents saw themselves as having an abundant linguistic *repertoire* rather than as (native) speakers of one particular variety or lect. When asked to sum up their linguistic competencies, most mentioned skills in a variety of languages going from standard or vernacular Arabic, Berber, or (varieties of) Dutch, to such exogenous varieties as English, French and Spanish.[9]

Though these adolescents were quite proud of their multilingualism, throughout my observations, recordings, and interviews, constructing a competent Dutch speaker identity recurred as one of their most important concerns. This needs to be seen in relation to the strong emphasis that is placed on the knowledge of Dutch in the wider

[7] The corpus consists of 35 hours of individual audio-recording and 35 hours of (simultaneous) classroom recording, and 45 hours of interviewing. The fieldwork concentrated on two classes in the last years of secondary education (35 pupils in two different groups; in each group Moroccan students took up two-thirds of the total amount; there were three students of Turkish descent, and 10 Flemish ones (of which one was female); ages varied from 16 to 21; backgrounds were working class, all but two were Belgian-born).

[8] The focus on "Moroccan" adolescents is strategically important (cf. Bucholtz, 2003): Moroccan adolescents are a heavily stigmatized group in Flanders.

[9] Actual skills could differ significantly from what was claimed.

debate about immigrant integration and emancipation in (Flemish) Belgium, where adolescents such as the ones I studied are heavily stigmatized and widely regarded as unable or unwilling to speak "proper" Dutch (cf. Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998). Their awareness of the expectations surrounding the use of Dutch and of the stigmatizing consequences of an observable incompetence in it was manifest on the numerous occasions when they evaluated other speakers' Dutch skills. Basically, in their view a lot of people spoke Dutch less well than they did. This was especially the case for their Turkish classmates, who they would often openly ridicule for their difficulties with Dutch, and for pupils in vocational curriculum tracks (vocational trajectories being regarded as symbolically lower than their own technical curriculum track in Belgium). They also took immense pleasure in identifying the speech of their white Flemish classmates as too dialectal and thus as bad Dutch according to prevailing standard language ideology. In interviews, they were aware of the difficulties their parents have with Dutch and of the differences between their present fluency in Dutch and their linguistic skills as a young child, when they were in the midst of a bilingual learning process.[10] Although they themselves encountered serious difficulties with standard Dutch requirements at school, they systematically regarded their own present Dutch as competent, if less than academic. But this was okay, in their view, since being perfect at school jarred with the casual image they aspired to.

For a while at least, a popular category Belgian-Moroccan adolescents used for people who had real difficulties with speaking Dutch was "illegals," short for illegal refugees, which comprised all those who spoke (various kinds of) imperfect or learner Dutch, such as recent immigrants, political refugees, older immigrants such as their parents, young ethnic-minority children, East-European guest workers, but also French-speaking Belgians. "Talking Illegal (Dutch)" was their name for the particular ways of speaking of specific (usually socially marginalized) groups, and for their own stylizations of this way of speaking in their daily interactions. Here, in other words, we find an ethnolect (but not their own) as described in the sense above, as a second-order construct or lay representation. Consequently, Moroccan adolescents sometimes mockingly "talked Illegal" to their Turkish classmates, stylized this ethnolect among themselves, and masqueraded in it when in the presence of unfamiliar adult whites to try and trigger public moral indignation at their supposedly deficient Dutch (cf. Rampton, 2001, p. 271) — all quite comparable to some of the stylization practices that whites produce.

Initially, I did not know how to categorize this stylization practice. I was somewhat confused when I observed that their own parents, recent Moroccan economic refugees, and young Moroccan-Belgian children, all members of their own "ethnos," also sometimes inspired them to "talk Illegal." I thought perhaps I was hitting on some kind of "stylized Moroccan Dutch" (cf. Rampton's "Stylized Asian English"). So in feedback sessions on the recordings I had made, I repeatedly proposed "Moroccan(-like) Dutch" as a name for the target of their stylization practices. Some adolescents indeed acknowledged the "Moroccan" characteristics of their Dutch and said they sometimes laughed about this themselves. But others, usually more Dutch-fluent adolescents,

[10] A substantial proportion of immigrant children in Belgium do not attend nursery school nor day care centers, which implies they enter primary school with an insufficient knowledge of the instruction language at school.

explicitly disagreed and rejected "Moroccan" as an appropriate name for a particular way of speaking. In fact, they consistently recategorized anything that even hinted at some kind of imperfect or learner Dutch as "Illegal," or as "Kosovarian" or "Polish," and so forth, making it clear they saw their own routine Dutch as light years away from the linguistic problems such "illegals" wrestled with.

Another way in which they resisted my (and each other's) categorization of their speech as Moroccan surfaced in their reaction to styling practices of white speakers. It is worth noting that participation of Flemish classmates in the practice of "talking Illegal" was very limited, since such speech could always be interpreted as the racist foreigner talk Moroccan adolescents sometimes encountered outside school walls. Neither, however, did Moroccan adolescents appreciate styling efforts by those who, a.o., copied Moroccan adolescents' prosody as a way of showing their appreciation for the latter. Rather, they found it condescending, as this example shows:

> *Setting:* April 2001. Interview with Imran [19], Jamal [18], and Faisal [19]. Faisal has just been warmly mentioning a Flemish adolescent in his neighborhood who has just converted to Islam, and with whom Faisal sometimes speaks "Moroccan," or rather, Faisal says, "half Moroccan half Dutch" or "Illegal Moroccan." Jamal, however, says he does not really appreciate such efforts made by whites (or "Belgians," as Moroccan adolescents call them). "He" in lines 16, 19, 22, is the boy Faisal has just mentioned. (Simplified and abbreviated transcription. Stylizations are in bold-face, unmarked text is routine Dutch).

1. Jamal: nee zo sommigen zo die willen zo precies slijmen zo
2. JJ: door-door veel Marokkaanse woorden te zeggen?
3. Jamal: nee, en die spreken geen Marokkaanse woorden die spreken gewoon
4. Nederlands [lachend:] met een voos accent
5. Imran: jaaah
6. Jamal: zo '**hé kom we gaan naar daar**'
   [héː kə̀m və ɣɒnɒr ˈdɒ̰r]
7. Imran: ja
8. Jamal: zo zeggen die Belgen … ja *oulla oulla* [Ar: ik zweer het ik zweer het]
9. Faisal: JAAA! hé kom we gaan naar daar, die willen-
10. Jamal: hé ik zweer het, weet gij hoeveel da wij der- ja
11. Faisal: zo die willen zo Marokkaan ( )
12. Jamal: die willen Marokkaan maar die maken zo … belachelijk
13. JJ: ma-ma bedoelde- w- '**hé kom we gaan naar daar**'
14. da is dan Neder- da's dan Marokkaans of wa?
15. Imran: die denken da
16. Jamal: die kent geen Marokkaanse woorden, die spreekt gewoon Vlaams,
17. maar illegaal Vlaams
18. Faisal: onze taal allee-

19. Jamal: op- nee gewoon- V- da's nie Marokkaans, die spreekt gewoon Vlaams
20. maar met fouten derin
21. Imran: wij spreken zo nie
22. Jamal: (die spreekt) me fouten wij spreken helemaal nie ( )
23. Imran: toen wij in 't lagere school zaten okee t-toen, toen misschien toen
24. spraken wij toen spraken wij misschien zo van die rare, raar accent en
25. dan eh onthouden die da
26. Jamal: die hebben gewoon zo'n voos accent '**hé Hamid! gade gij mee naar**
[heː ˈhámɪ̀t ɣɑːdəɣɛ meː nɑːr]
27. **daar joenge!**' [smile voice:] die denken dat da Marokkaans is
[ˈdáːr iúŋˈə́ˋ]
28. Imran: '**ikke nie gedaan**' [lacht]
29. Jamal: '**akke niks gedaan**'
[ɒkə]
30. JJ: ja, maar gulle- maar dat is nie zo leuk zegde gij soms dan voeldu ( )
31. Imran: nee nee
32. Jamal: da's nie nee da's z-z-zo slijmbal, nu hé alleen maar slijmballen doen da
33. Faisal: ja ja da is
34. Jamal: da's nie cool of niks, da's een Belg, die (doet) Marokkaan
35. JJ: maar ge zijt er nie door beledigd mochten ze da zeggen zo?
36. Jamal: nee, dan maken wij die gewoon zo uit 'hé slijmbal bakkes dicht joenge"

Translation

1. Jamal: no like some people some they seem to want to kiss ass or something
2. JJ: by-by saying a lot of Moroccan words?
3. Jamal: no, and they don't speak Moroccan words, they just speak Dutch
4. [laughs] with a silly accent
5. Imran: yeaaah
6. Jamal: like '**hey come we go over there**'
7. Imran: yeah
8. Jamal: that's what those Belgians say … yeah *oulla oulla*
[Arabic: I swear I swear]
9. Faisal: YEAH hey come we go over there, they want
10. Jamal: hey I swear, do you know how many we- yeah
11. Faisal: like they want to like Moroccan ( )
12. Jamal: they want Moroccan but they make like … ridiculous
13. JJ: bu-but do you mean w- '**hey come we go over there**'
14. that's Dut- that's Moroccan then or what?

15. Imran: they think so
16. Jamal: he doesn't know any Moroccan words, he just speaks Flemish,
17. but Illegal Flemish
18. Faisal: our language jus-
19. Jamal: on- no just F- that's not Moroccan, he just speaks Flemish,
20. but with mistakes in it
21. Imran: we don't talk like that
22. Jamal: (he speaks) with mistakes we don't talk at all ( )
23. Imran: when we were in primary school okay t-then, then maybe then
24. we spoke then we spoke perhaps like a strange, strange accent and then
25. uh they remember that
26. Jamal: they just have like a silly accent: "**hey Hamid! Are you coming with**
27. **us man!?**" [smile voice:] they think that's Moroccan
28. Imran: '**me done nothing**' [laughs]
29. Jamal: '**me done nothing**'
30. JJ: yes, but you- but that's not funny you say sometimes you feel ( )
31. Imran: no no
32. Jamal: that's not noo- that's s-so slimeball, now, right? only slimeballs do that
33. Faisal: yeah yeah that's right
34. Jamal: it isn't cool or nothing, that's a Belgian, who (does) Moroccan
35. JJ: but you're not offended by it should they speak like that?
36. Jamal: no, then we just call him names: "hey slimeball shut it man"

What we see here is that Jamal objects to whites' accommodating efforts to "act Moroccan" (line 12), which he describes as "kissing ass" (line 1), "ridiculous" (line 12), and "what slimeballs do" (lines 32, 36). He especially objects to the "silly accent" this apparently brings along, which he exemplifies in lines 6 and 26 by using an extremely jumpy intonation pattern (lines 4, 26). Moreover, Jamal interprets the styling efforts of the friend Faisal has been mentioning (lines 16–17) as "Illegal Flemish," and in this way makes it clear how different he thinks his own way of speaking is from the Moroccan style that Faisal's friend is, in his view, trying to copy.[11] It is this Moroccan style, however, that Faisal views as "our language" (line 18). Imran and Jamal firmly disagree with this idea in lines 19 to 22, where they identify this style as "Flemish with mistakes" and explain that they "don't talk like that at all," something which Faisal does not observably dispute. Imran does acknowledge that there might have been a time when they spoke in a "strange" accent, namely, in primary school, but in doing so he indicates that these days are now long gone and that they have outgrown such an accent. In fact, the suggestion

[11] Faisal and Jamal are probably not talking about the same thing, though. Faisal seems to mean that his friend incorporates Arabic or Berber words into his Dutch when they interact, but Jamal interprets what Faisal's friend does as an instance of a wider practice of styling a Moroccan-like Dutch (with no traces of Arabic or Berber words).

that their routine Dutch is different or can be called Moroccan in lines 28–29 leads to stereotypical apologetic utterances like "me done nothing," which invoke the negative context of foreigner talk. White adolescents who style their Dutch qua pronunciation or intonation towards Moroccan adolescents' speech are in other words regarded as inauthentically downgrading their own Dutch. On another occasion, Imran suggests that whites who talk with a Moroccan accent "just want to show to other Belgians like hey I've got Moroccan friends," but then talk "normal" again when interacting with these Belgians. Their styling efforts are, put simply, viewed as condescending, and it should hardly be a surprise that a linguist's explicit identification of Jamal's mocking stylization as "Moroccan" (line 14) does not really go down well with these adolescents.

If theoretically speaking, linguistic practices are not to be viewed as simply caused by ethnicity, we can see here, practically, how a name that invokes this causal relationship ("Moroccan (Dutch)") can be the object of discord. In spite of observably different linguistic elements to which others subsequently orient, the Moroccan students I observed are not enchanted by the suggestion that their Dutch is different (though they sometimes have different ideas about this among themselves). What they speak (when they do not codeswitch) they generally see as plain and competent Dutch.[12] Thus, some of these students are making a statement about their (repertoire of) linguistic representations, and are actively positioning themselves in their social environments. In the presence of a linguist studying them, they seem to be keenly aware of the inferiority that existing social relations transfer upon a specific "Moroccan-flavored" variety, and seek to avoid any suggestion that their Dutch is less than competent. Here and on other occasions in my data, they are in fact rejecting the linguist's classificatory interest,[13] themselves classifying what they speak as a variety that guarantees a certain prestige.

As a linguist, I've decided partly to adopt these adolescents' own classification, and to refrain from a name such as "Moroccan Dutch." This might be seen as blinkered in the face of what is observable also to these adolescents (see Imran's acknowledgment about their learner Dutch in primary school in the example above). But such an objection would construct the bottom line of this article as only revealing a clash between adolescents' beliefs and a linguist's factual knowledge. Whereas the point is that linguists have beliefs of their own that influence their work, and that also these adolescents have (albeit practical and less systematized) knowledge of social and linguistic categorization. In that case, going solo as a linguist is less a scientific decision than an exercise of power. Indeed, linguists do not always mercilessly describe and name linguistic differences either. Most Flemish linguists, for example, have been actively ignoring the visible (and lasting) differences between the supraregional Dutch spoken in Belgium versus that in the Netherlands for more than a century, because the issue mattered to them politically: The more Flemings were seen as speaking Dutch rather than different Flemish dialects, the more they spoke a "real," "modern" language for which it was legitimate to claim linguistic rights within the (at one time Francophone) Belgian state. This in effect invokes a wider methodological issue on truth and relevance (Hammersley, 1992).

[12] This routine Dutch is itself a product of active styling (cf. Jaspers, 2005; 2006).

[13] They also did this on other occasions, as when one of them provocatively said: "yeah that's what you're interested in, isn't it? In how well we can speak Dutch."

But for our purposes here, it is relevant to indicate that, with the same kind of political agenda invested in them, lay perceptions as formulated by the adolescents above are not simply to be discarded as uninformed and irrelevant. On the contrary, since they influence actual linguistic practices, they need to be explained and integrated into the linguist's description of that particular linguistic reality. And as lay concerns inform (selective) perceptions, what is of interest is knowing what phenomena are left unnoticed by these concerns, and describing these inasmuch as it is relevant for a linguist to do that. Depending on the purpose of a description, there may be various reasons involved, from digging up such data because they explain something about human behavior in general, over deconstructing dominant perceptions that have (typically negative) effects on the perceived object, to confronting certain groups or societies with possible truths they might for ideological reasons not wish to observe. In this specific case, given Moroccan adolescents' precarious position in Belgian society and their vulnerability for being stereotyped, and given their quite fluent levels of Dutch, I have found it appropriate to follow them to some extent in their claims about the labels applied to what they speak ('Dutch'), to refrain from using the one label they seek to avoid ('Moroccan Dutch'), and to acknowledge that their Dutch is competent, while noticing and describing their difficulties with academic Standard Dutch. This view, and the names that go with it, may of course in a different situation be criticized for what it leaves out.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show that working with ethnolect as an analytical concept is fraught with problems. As it is used, it installs fixedness and homogeneity, it threatens to earmark ethnolect speakers as nonmainstream, and it undergirds the idea that linguistic actions are by-products of social identities while it is more helpful to see these actions as constitutive of social identifications. The point is not that code-establishment and naming as such should be frowned upon, but that they limit our understanding of inner-city social and linguistic practices, and that they have ideological consequences sociolinguists should take into account. As an alternative, I have advocated that ethnolect be regarded as a useful term for speakers' perceptions of particular ways of speaking (and of course, some scholars of ethnolects are already attending to perceptions of this kind), with the understanding that speakers' perceptions, and the names they develop for them, do not necessarily correspond to systematic linguistic differences (and vice versa). This implies that sociolinguists need to incorporate subjectivity in their descriptions, consider ethnolectal representations in relation to other representations of language, and investigate how the local and general cultural meanings attached to particular ways of talking inform the styling practices of both standard and substandard speakers.

In this frame, I have demonstrated how Belgian adolescents of Moroccan background in Antwerp resist ethnolectal categorization of their own routine Dutch — at least when explicitly prompted to react to this — even though it is quite easy to describe linguistic characteristics that could legitimize a name such as "Moroccan Dutch" from the outside. I have found it appropriate to adopt these adolescents' categorization, with some restrictions, to make clear that linguists' naming practices are social actions, with potential consequences for who is labeled in a certain way, and that in light of this, a position of (scientific) disinterestedness is difficult to maintain: linguistic analysis (and the

names it develops) should take into account lay perceptions and concerns, and compare these explicitly with the interests that have guided the data-selection and analysis, in order to determine to what extent these perceptions, including those of ethnolects, can be helpful, illuminating, or obscuring.

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