
Multiple meanings in interaction: Understanding language variation in urban spaces in Flanders

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Contemporary research on the social meaning of varieties insists on studying the different functions of the linguistic variants under scrutiny in performing social action (Jaffe 2009). Social meanings are thus not considered to be stable indexes, but rather as fleeting interactional moves through which speakers take stances and make ideological moves (Bucholtz 2009).

Set against this background, this contribution aims to get a better grip on the way in which youngsters from Limburg, the easternmost region of Flanders, construct social meaning in their everyday interaction through their use of a contemporary urban vernacular and on how these meanings-in-action are connected to a larger social and ideological scale. Previous analyses of survey and perceptual data (Author1 et al. forthc.) have shown that some linguistic variants of this urban vernacular have become enregistered (Agha 2007), constituting a multilayered indexical field (indexing, among others, local identity, ethnicity, social class).

This paper will complement these analyses with interactional data, in order to verify how users of the vernacular pick up different social meanings, depending on their experiences and on the larger ideological values they relate to. The data (collected between 2011-2013) consist of spontaneous interactions by 15 youngsters, focus groups and media representations.

We study how these youngsters make use of the palato-alveolarization of [s] (e.g. *stijl* 'style', pronounced as [ʃtɛil] instead of [stɛil]) and of the generalization of the masculine article *de* (instead of the neuter article *het*, e.g. *de boek* 'the book' for *het boek*), paying attention to the way these uses can be interpreted as ideological statements. To this end, a mixed method analysis is performed: we present a qualitative analysis of stances in interaction, complemented with an in-depth quantitative analysis of the distribution of the variants across speakers (relying on mixed effect regression modeling).

Our analyses reveal how youngsters are engaging in reflexive metapragmatic activities, which are considered a primary condition for the emergence and life of registers (Agha 2004) and varieties (Kiesling 2009). By integrating a variationist approach with the study of reflexive actions, we will be able to provide more nuanced insights into this process of enregisterment.

Panel Title: Urban youth as 'cultural theorists' of variation: countering hegemonic re-presentations of the "Other" in talk and text

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