Language-ideology based pupils’ identity construction: A case study in a Dutch multicultural primary classroom
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Abstract
Current ethnographic research shows that Dutch educational policy is caught between two positions. First, it constructs pupils from immigrant minority groups as educationally disadvantaged and, as a consequence, fosters mainstream (language) education as the means for their social integration and emancipation (Bezemer, 2003). Second, it leaves Dutch primary school teachers with the challenge of dealing with the cultural and linguistic diversity brought about by their pupils (Bezemer & Kroon, 2008; Spotti, 2006). Against this background, this contribution, stemming from a larger comparative ethnographic enquiry in the Netherlands and Flanders, focuses on the analysis of the discourse of a Dutch native primary school teacher in a multicultural classroom in the Netherlands. By means of socio-culturally informed discourse analysis (Gee, 2005), it is shown that the identities of immigrant minority pupils are constructed, in the class teacher’s discourse, on the basis of language attributions that find their pivotal point in ideologies of language disadvantage provoked by the lack of Dutch language skills on the part of these pupils’ parents. Our analysis, however, indicates that at the level of the discourse that populates the classroom, the ideologies that lay beneath the language attributions through which these pupils’ identities are constructed are eroding. Such erosion might also hold consequences for the way in which immigrant minority pupils’ identities are constructed in the discourse of Dutch governmental institutions.

Introduction
The separation of people from their native culture through physical dislocation as refugees, immigrant guest workers or expatriates as well as the dissolution of colonisation processes have been formative experiences of the last century for many Western European nation-states.

In 2005, the year in which this case study was carried out, it was estimated that in the Netherlands out of a total population of slightly more than 16 million inhabitants, 3.1 million had at least one parent born outside the country (CBS, 2006). The last century’s immigration phenomena are not only tangible through numbers but also through the current Dutch political and public discourse. On the one hand, immigrant minority group members addressed as westerse allochtonen (western non-indigenous or allochthonous people), are thought to share a common European history and a ‘European’ identity (cf. Davies, 1997). On the other hand, immigrant minority group members addressed as niet-westerse allochtonen (non-western allochthonous people) – mostly Turks, Moroccans and more recently Somalis – are presented as people in need of societal and linguistic integration. From these two examples, it appears that Dutch public discourse is armored with a ‘jargon of minorities’ (Extra & Gorter, 2001:5) through which immigrant minority group members, their descendants, their cultural backgrounds and their languages hit the headlines. In so doing, the Dutch public discourse constructs immigrants and their descendants as other than the majority group, and their languages as other than the majority language (Kroon, 2003:40). These attributions of otherness are also present in (primary) education and go beyond mere jargon alone. The attribution of certain language skills (or lack thereof) to one group of pupils rather than another is endemic to all levels of educational discourse. These language attributions often remain unarticulated but are still informative. They, in fact, form the way in which pupils’ identities are constructed as learners. Particularly in contexts of immigration and globalisation, language attributions to individual pupils may appear to be difficult (cf. Gogolin & Kroon, 2000; Kroon & Sturm, 1996; Bezemer, 2007) and, at times, they may not be totally exhaustive of the language repertoires that pupils bring along and/or may employ in the socio-cultural spaces they inhabit (cf. Spotti, 2006).

Against this background this paper focuses on how a Dutch native primary school teacher constructs the identities of her immigrant minority pupils in a Dutch multicultural primary school classroom. More precisely, it sheds light on the language ideologies that lay beneath the language attributions proposed by the class teacher. The reconstruction of these language attributions indicates that, at the level of classroom discourse, ideologies of language disadvantage and low educational achievement of immigrant minority pupils are eroding. A conclusion is then advanced in terms of the possible implications that this outcome may hold for the practice of teachers in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous (primary school) classrooms and in terms of the possible connections between this teacher’s construction of pupils’ identities and the larger Dutch macro-discourse of representation of its cultural others (cf. Shi Xu, 1995, 1996).

Conceptual framework
Central to identity construction is the concept of categorization. Categorization is a process that involves “identifying oneself (or someone else) as someone who fits a certain description or belongs to a certain category” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000:17). Once made operational, categorization leads people to construct their own and/or someone else’s identity as a member or as an outsider of a given community on the
basis of the fulfillment of certain characteristics. These characteristics consist of thinking, acting, valuing and interacting, in the ‘right’ places, at the ‘right’ times through the use of the ‘right’ objects, including language, in ways that are considered appropriate for community members. In other words, the characteristics that someone ought to fulfill are the \textit{conditio sine qua non} for someone to subscribe him- or herself and/or ascribe someone else as a community member (cf. Carbaugh, 1996; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Wieder & Pratt, 1990). However, people’s judgment of what is appropriate in order to be a community member does not happen just because. Rather, this judgment relies on the basis of what Gee (1999:43) calls ‘discourse models’. Discourse models are explanatory theories, either idiosyncratic or culturally transmitted, that people hold to make sense of the world around them. They are formed on the basis of those associative networks that people have been part of throughout their lives. Discourse models are channeled through discourse where discourse is understood as the whole of possible forms of expression, e.g., oral, written, pictorial and multimodal, produced by the action of an institution and/or of an individual within a particular socio-cultural space (cf. Blommaert, 2005).

The array of discourse models that people may hold is wide. Discourse models, in fact, may range from the rituals that someone should follow for having a cup of coffee in a certain socio-cultural space to why certain gestures are applicable and other are not when engaged in a PhD viva with an opponent. In relation to language, the discourse models people may hold about the language or languages someone speaks supply a means through which identities are constructed and negotiated, along with membership of certain communities. Ideologies of language and identity guide the ways in which individuals use linguistic resources to index and/or conceal their identities as well as to attribute the use of linguistic practices to others. The discourse models that guide the analysis presented in this paper hold a metonymic function, i.e., they are the \textit{pars pro toto} of larger language ideologies that lay beneath the language attributions through which identities are constructed.

The study

The present study has adopted a sociolinguistic-ethnographic perspective (Erickson 1986; Rampton et al, 2004). The ethnographic perspective is best described as wanting to investigate “[...] what people are, how they behave, how they interact together. It aims to uncover their beliefs, values, perspectives, motivations, and how all these things develop or change over time or from situation to situation. It tries to do all this from within the group, and from within the perspectives of the group’s members” (Woods, 1986:4). Within this ethnographic perspective, the study has aimed at understanding the construction of immigrant minority pupils’ identities in the discourses of a Dutch-medium primary school teacher, in terms of these pupils’ cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic belongings. Further, it has sought to shed light on how the identities constructed through the teachers’ discourses about her pupils’ language attributions can be understood in relation to the meso-discourses held at school level and to the Dutch macro-discourses of cultural, ethnic and linguistic otherness. The study was designed so to produce a ‘cultural ecology’ of the classroom (Rampton et al. 2004:2) and at the same time, to adopt a critical perspective, i.e., a perspective that questioned the normative nature of the macro-discourses in which the investigated classroom was inserted. From the outset of the study, care was taken to comply to research ethics. Pseudonyms were used for the school, the class teacher and the pupils so as to preserve confidentiality, informed consent was sought from the parents of all participating pupils, and all interview transcripts were authorised by the interviewees.

The fieldwork started on February 15th, 2005, when the first author visited St. Joseph Catholic Primary for the first time and explained the purpose of the study to the school Head and to Miss Sanne, the class teacher of Form 8a. After gaining their approval, one month was spent in the 5th Form as a (non-participant) observer. In order to establish a working relationship with the teacher and allow the pupils to get used to the presence of a stranger in the classroom, this month of fieldwork was gradually built up from two days a week up to a complete school week. In that month, audio recordings of classroom events were made for a total of 46 hours and 35 minutes. Following the writing up of the field notes in the form of a synopsis, supplemented by the transcription of all the audio-recorded classroom events, interviews were carried out with Miss Sanne. The main interview with the class teacher was based on the model of the long open-ended interview (McCracken, 1988:9). This was done to explore the class teacher’s biography and her primary schooling experience and professional career. In this way a body of knowledge was gathered that would permit us to identify the associative networks that had populated the class teacher’s life. Altogether, four interviews were carried out with Miss Sanne. These were all audio recorded and, soon afterwards, they were transcribed and made available to the teacher for confirmation of content and accuracy of transcription. Once authorised, the transcripts were analysed, using Gee’s (2005) socio-culturally informed discourse analysis. The aim was to identify, in the teacher’s discourse, those discourse models that contributed to the construction of her pupils’ identities. This analytic work was done by means of a continuous sifting process. This involved reading the interview transcripts several times, and then identifying and coding those sections where the teacher’s discourse models and language ideologies were most clearly manifested.

In 2005, Form 8a of St. Joseph Catholic Primary counted for eighteen pupils in total, eight boys and ten girls. The age of the pupils ranged from eleven to thirteen years due to some pupils repeating the school year. Thirteen pupils had attended St. Joseph Catholic
Primary since Form 1. Following the school register, all pupils of Form 8a were assigned an educational weight of 1.90 which means that because of their socio-ethnic backgrounds they are as ‘heavy’ to be taught as almost two 1.0 pupils, i.e., a pupil from autochthonous educated parents. The 1.90 measurement applied to all pupils beside Walid, son of highly educated parents both born in Morocco, who was registered as having an educational weight of 1.0.

**Identities constructed on the basis of language attributions**

In the reconstruction of Miss Sanne’s discourse models we first present the cases of two pupils whose language attributions marked the opposite ends of the category ‘immigrant minority pupil with a language disadvantage’. Miss Sanne started off with telling about Mohammed a pupil of her previous Form 8, who came from Somalia to the Netherlands when he was eight years old. In her discourse model Mohammed, to whom the rest of the pupils of Form 8a are compared, appeared as the example *par excellence* of the immigrant minority pupil with a language disadvantage due to parental language practices. He had come to the Netherlands when he already mastered Somali and, following Miss Sanne’s discourse, it is because of Somali that he encountered syntactical and vocabulary limitations in Dutch. Further, he was not sufficiently exposed to ‘good Dutch’ because his father speaks no Dutch and his mother’s spoken Dutch suffered of syntactical problems too. From Mohammed’s case, Miss Sanne moved to the opposite end of the category and dealt with Lejla, a Bosnian pupil of her current Form 8a who came with her parents to the Netherlands at the age of three. Within the discourse model of immigrant minority pupils with a language disadvantage, Lejla appeared to be the opposite of Mohammed. Lejla’s Dutch was good and, following Miss Sanne’s discourse model, it was good because her parents just ‘simply’ spoke Dutch at home and also because she has learnt Dutch at a young age. However, Lejla’s own language attributions differed from those formulated by Miss Sanne. Lejla, in fact, addressed Bosnian as her language and she reported to use it extensively with her immediate siblings and parents.

After having discussed Mohammed and Lejla we come to Walid’s and Micheline’s case. Following the discourse model so far reconstructed that sees abundant contact with immigrant minority languages and parental lack of Dutch proficiency as deterrent for the pupils’ Dutch, Walid would be a 1.90 pupil. ‘Technically speaking’, in fact, Walid has Moroccan parents and he is a hundred percent Moroccan himself. Yet Miss Sanne’s own experience was different, since ‘in practice’, Walid was a smart boy with highly educated parents who, in the teacher’s view, spoke good Dutch. This reality came to erode the discourse model that Miss Sanne had so far drawn about parental language practices, the language attribution of immigrant minority pupils and the construction of immigrant minority pupils’ identities. In fact, Walid’s educational weight should be a 1.0. For the teacher, though, it still remained difficult to grasp how an educational weight of 1.0 could be possible for a pupil who like all the other pupils in Form 8a is a descendant of foreign parents. Micheline, finally, is an Antillean pupil born in Curacao to Antillean parents and grown up in the Netherlands. Following the teacher’s discourse, Micheline was among the brightest pupils of Form 8a and she did not have a language disadvantage. This was so for two reasons. First, in agreement with the model of pupils’ language disadvantage because of parental lack of Dutch, her parents spoke Dutch to her and this language behaviour should suffice to explain her good results. Second, following Miss Sanne’s own ‘ethnic hierarchy’ (cf. Verkuyten, Hagendoorn & Masson, 1996), Antillean pupils possess Dutch ‘a bit better’ than the rest of the immigrant minority pupils of Form 8a. This was so because Dutch is not really a second language to them but also their mother tongue with Papiamentu’. The two other Antillean pupils of Form 8a, though, also had Dutch at home but they instead were categorised as ‘weak’ pupils. Their connotation of ‘weak’ pupils then brings Miss Sanne’s discourse model to erode. As a way out, the teacher attributes Micheline’s good results not anymore to Dutch as almost a first language for Antilleans and to parental language use but to Micheline’s own ‘bright’ nature.

**Discussion**

Within the indexical order of identities reconstructed from Miss Sanne’s discourse models, a connection was made between parental linguistic practices (or lack thereof) and the perceived intrinsic deficit of particular pupils’ ethnic identities. On the one hand, these language attributions were reminiscent of the last three decades of work carried out in sociolinguistics and education (Keddy, 1971; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979) where the sociolinguistic background of pupils matched their ascribed ethnic identities and, together with them, became fertile ground for preconceived barriers to these pupils’ school success. On the other hand, the language attributions proposed by the class teacher, their underlying discourse model and the language ideology this calls back to are eroding. Such erosion might also hold consequences for the way in which immigrant minority pupils’ identities are constructed in the discourse of Dutch governmental institutions. If (primary) educational discourse is contingent on giving accurate attributions of pupils’ language repertoires and resources, which it often is, mismatching in language attributions can cause the construction of *a priori* disadvantaged identities in these pupils’ schooling trajectories (cf. Kroon & Vallen, 2006).

**References**


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