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“Crawlers, footers and runners”: language ideological attributions to adult language learners in a Dutch as L2 classroom


Abstract: This paper deals with a volunteer teacher teaching Dutch as an L2 to asylum seekers at a Red Cross asylum seeker centre in West Flanders, Belgium. More precisely, it investigates the practical professional knowledge of this volunteer teacher, taking a peek into her meta-pragmatic judgements about language and her views on her students' literacy skills (or lack thereof). It further shows how her students manage to challenge her authority through jocular moves which reveal the value of their multilingual repertoires and the literacy skills they already own through their previous experiences with various literacy systems.

Résumé : Dans cet article consacré à une enseignante bénévole qui enseigne le néerlandais en L2 aux nouveaux arrivants dans un centre de demandeurs d'asile de la Croix-Rouge, dans la province belge de Flandre-Occidentale, nous nous intéressons plus particulièrement aux compétences de l'enseignante en situation, à ses jugements méta-pragmatiques sur la langue et à ses opinions sur les compétences (ou le manque de compétences) des apprenants. Nous expliquons également comment les apprenants se servent de l'humour pour contester son autorité, valorisant ainsi leur répertoire multilinguistique et les compétences déjà acquises grâce à leur expérience antérieure de différents systèmes.

1 Introduction

Wherever and whenever it occurs that newcomers enter a country and seek refugee status, we see a storm of institutional demands confronting them. One of these, and most likely the most compelling one, is the learning of the host country's official language. Language and literacy skills therefore become an important currency in the heavily institutionalized and languagised world they enter. This is so because the host country language counts even more than any other language the newly arrived migrant may already master. In fact, it counts during

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the process that leads to the granting of refugee status but it also counts – and even more so – once somebody enters the civic integration pathway (see Spotti 2011 for the case of The Netherlands). It is the mastering of the official language that functions as key in many gate-keeping institutions, e.g., those granting access to integration trajectories into (low) paid jobs and to social security. It is again the mastering of the official language that shows the loyalty of the newcomer – contrary to what the host countries’ public and political discourses flag out – so that s/he can function in mainstream society. The situation described above is rather naive and it makes sociolinguists turn pale. This is so not only because it poses as central the term “integration” (*inburgering*), a term that is extremely hard to define, but in particular because it relies on a legacy of language, understood as a transparent, stable denotational code, accompanied by a clearly defined syntax and clearly definable ways in which phonemes should be mapped onto graphemes in order to gain the right, and by this I mean standard, pronunciation. Language and language learning *stricto sensu* result that are anchored in a regimented and strongly normative field often linked to – as outlined above – ideological arguments of integration, participation (*mee-doen*) and of who can be considered to be a full loyal citizen of country X (see Pulinx, Avermaet, and Extramiana 2014), often neglecting the equality of languages and of language varieties as well as the validity of the sociolinguistic resources newly arrived migrants already own.

Against this background, the present paper explores the attribution of linguistic resources (or lack thereof) to multilingual students in a Dutch as L2 classroom run by a volunteer teacher at an asylum seeker centre in West Flanders, Belgium. After being introduced to the context of the study, the reader gains access to a glimpse of the language-ideological apparatus that informs the teacher’s view on her students’ languages and it zooms in on a classroom episode that highlights how the patterns of interaction in this class point toward a monolingual management of a multilingual classroom reality. Here we see a case of what Bourdieu has termed (mis)recognition (Bourdieu 1990) where the language knowledge held by these students is deemed inappropriate. The paper concludes by offering some reflections on the issue of language learning for adult migrants.

2 Research context

The setting in which Dutch as L2 is taught here is not that of a regular school classroom. Rather, we find ourselves at a Red Cross asylum seeker centre (henceforth AZC) in West Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, right on the border with France. At the time of data collection, October 2013, the centre

was running at full pace with a total of 67 asylum seekers out of a maximum capacity of 69, plus myself, Max the ethnographer, interested in these people’s lives and in understanding the meaning of doing and being a migrant seeking asylum at a time of globalisation, that is at a time in which asylum seekers are strongly networked through the web in transnational ties that range from the country of origin to both the host continent and host country of residence. Being run by the Red Cross, the centre’s sole obligation is to give a roof, a bed and food to its guests. Activities like those aimed at introducing these guests to the norms and values of mainstream Belgian society do not fall under the basic provision system, and although hosted by the centre and welcomed by its personnel, they all happen as the result of a bottom-up community effort.

Among these activities we find the teaching of Dutch as L2 carried out by Miss Frida, an elderly lady on a pension with a background in teaching. Her commitment to the centre has been in place for a number of years and she claims to enjoy what she does, given that at her age “there are people who like to drink coffee while I like people, so that’s why I do it” (Interview Frida 10102013:1). That is why, once a week, Miss Frida teaches Dutch as L2 for one hour using the didactic resources that she sees most fitting to the needs of her students, who are all literate and have a basic knowledge of Dutch. Given that the centre does not have a proper classroom, lessons generally take place in the activities’ room, i.e., a large room with desks and a whiteboard where I have observed activities that range from knitting – mainly for women – to integration talks dealing with gender equality in Europe. The students in Miss Frida’s class are not – as in a regular L2 classroom – compelled to attend an integration programme. Students can walk in freely at any time during class, making sure though that they are no bother to those who have been attending class from the start.

3 Findings and discussion

In what follows, although space is limited, we focus on a classroom episode that deals with Frida’s way of teaching Dutch as L2; we then move on to Frida’s meta-pragmatic judgments about her students and their literacy skills. It is October 10, 2013 and class should start at 13:00 sharp. At 13:03, the lesson opens as follows:

01. Armenian guy {reading from the board}: if you find yourself [...] from my room an’
02. Frida: Niet, vandaag geen Engelse les he’, vandag nederlandse les hey? Oke’, dus we starten op bladzijde zes. Iedereen heeft een copie?

[*No, today no English lesson, right? Today is Dutch lesson, right? Okay so we start on page six, has everyone got a copy?*]

After preparing her worksheets for the day and handing them out, at 13:06 Miss Frida starts reading each word from the worksheet that she is holding while standing on the right hand side of the whiteboard facing the whole class. The lesson, which in a retrospective interview Miss Frida says was designed to increase her students' vocabulary in Dutch, unfolds as follows:

03. Frida: Haan [...] Jan [...] lam [...] tak [...] een boom [...] — [with a descending intonation on the double vowel b{oo}m]

[*hen, Jan, lamb, branch, a tr[e]e*]

04. Frida: Oke' [...] hier is Nel, hier [pointing to the ground in front of her] hier, hier, hi[i]er, hier is Nel. Nel is naam, naam voor vrouw, Fatima, Nel, Leen, naam voor vrouw.

[*Okay, here we have Nel, here, here, here, here is Nel. Nel is a name, a name for a woman, like Fatima, Nel, Leen, a name for a woman*]

05. Armenian guy: Waarom naam voor vrouw mitz zu [uh] klein leter?

[*Why then is the name for a woman with a small cap?*]

06. Frida: Dat is basis nederlands, BASIS [Frida onderstreep dit:MS]. Eerst starten wij met de basis, wij lopen niet! wij stappen [...] na stappen, wij stappen vlucht, daarna gaan wij lopen, dus nu stappen wij. Maar dat is juist.

[*That is basic Dutch, BASIC [Frida stresses this:MS]. First we start with the basics, we don't walk, we make steps, after making steps, we step faster, and then we get walking, so now we make steps. Though, that is right.*]

3.1 Meta-pragmatic judgements

In the episode above, we find a catechistic approach to L2 language teaching. Miss Frida, whose aim is to increase the vocabulary breadth and – later on – the vocabulary depth of her students, is reading aloud clusters of monosyllabic words, which her students will then be invited to repeat out loud. Interesting is the way in which Frida clearly defines that in this class at that very moment there is no English lesson going on, de-legitimising the use of English and stressing

this boundary through the use of the tag “hey” (01). In line (04), Frida further stimulates other learning channels to make her students understand what the locative pronoun “here” (*hier*) means. She repeats the word, stressing the [r] at the end. She also points her finger to the ground where she is standing. In the retrospective interview, Miss Frida pointed out that she has developed a knowledge of English by working as a volunteer at the centre and that she has some knowledge of Africa because of the holidays she has spent there. Although only one third of her classroom on that day came from the African continent, this consideration is reminiscent of a construction of “the other” that comes from far. In the retrospective interview, she asserts: “yes, once you go to those places it is all hands and feet in order to understand each other and here is the same”, adding: “look these people have languages, beautiful languages, but they are not really languages, if you know what I mean, aren’t they?” Here several issues emerge from her discourse practices. First, there is a conceptualization of the students in front of her through the lens of Africa: in Africa there are foreigners who don’t speak Dutch and thus everything has to go through gestures, and the same holds for her class. Second, there is disqualification of the languages of foreigners in general. To her these languages, although “beautiful”, are “not really languages”, which possibly reflects the fact that they are not European languages and do not have a subject–verb–object structure. Interestingly enough, though, the lesson snapshot above sees one of her students (who is not from Africa) asking a question that, although posed with the clear intent to challenge the teacher’s authority, is also meant to show that he holds basic literacy skills and that although Frida is addressing the class as an assemblage of blank slates, there is valid literacy present there. Frida’s reply is very telling for two reasons. She first reiterates firmly how she sees the learning of L2, through the metaphor of “*we don’t walk, we make steps, after making steps, we step faster, and then we get walking, so now we make steps*”. Yet again through the adversative clause that closes her sentence in line (06) – “*but that is correct*” – she has to give up her authority, admitting that there is indeed a mistake on the worksheet and that the student’s observation is actually a valid one.

4 Final considerations

The switch from a language teaching approach that sees language as countable reality to a vision where speakers use language to engage in language learning and bring in their previously encountered literacy skills, does not mean that languages and their normativities no longer exist. This becomes especially clear in education, where the official language of a country in its standard variety is at

the same time the medium of instruction and the target language (see Kurvers & Spotti, 2015). A main characteristic of the teaching episode in Miss Frida's class is a "one way" normativity. This includes the existence of clear and respected (grammatical and pronunciation) rules that – although influenced by the strongly local variety of Dutch used by Miss Frida – are invested with the authority of what language should be taught, and in particular how it should be taught to students like hers, newly arrived adult migrants. In urging students to follow what she thinks they need, e.g. words, this class turns them into members of an ideological linguistic community – that of foreign speaker of Dutch – which overshadows these students' previously acquired literacy skills in that they are seen as blank slates to be filled by the repository of knowledge held by the teacher. In response to this, Blommaert and Backus (2013) provide a programmatic perspective on language education which addresses many of the questions that we are confronted with in the episode and in Frida's reasoning. They consider learning languages as a matter of developing repertoires that consist of asymmetrical contextual competences. This language learning takes place in a context of power relationships, i.e., formal education, in which, as a consequence of educational normativity, some varieties are credited and others are discredited. It takes place, moreover, in different ways – i.e., specific language resources become part of a learner's repertoire through "a broad range of tactics, technologies and mechanisms" as well as of their previous – albeit informal – language learning trajectories (see Spotti & Blommaert forthcoming). This implies that there are quite a few different ways of learning languages (or acquiring linguistic resources) that lead to different levels and forms of "knowing" a language. Following this, Blommaert and Backus (2013) distinguish: (1) highly formal and patterned *comprehensive language learning* in schools, (2) *specialized language learning* related to specific and specialized skills and resources, e.g., learning academic English, (3) highly informal and ephemeral out-of-school *encounters with language* (e.g., age group slang learning, temporary language learning, single word learning, recognizing language), and (4) *embedded language learning*, i.e., learning a language that can only be used if another language is used as well (e.g., computer technology-related English used while speaking Dutch). For each of these types of competence, they then distinguish: (1) maximum competence, (2) partial competence, (3) minimal competence, and (4) recognizing competence (2013: 22). Such a revised understanding of language learning also asks for a new mindset in teachers – whether regular or voluntary. It makes modes of in- and out-of-school language learning acceptable and valid resources for institutionalized environments. Needless to say, as shown here, there is still quite some work to be done, but in a contemporary globalized reality like that of an asylum seeker centre, these changes are nonetheless crucial.

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