Moving dialects: The production of white unmarked masculinity in public language use

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This talk will focus on expressions of popular culture in the public domain of the Dutch border province of Limburg, known for the vitality of its dialects. While dialects were once seen as anchoring people to specific places, under conditions of globalization dialect has become a resource for indexing various, often instable and ambiguous, social meanings. New media, new language policies, and the growing commodification of local languages have created a stage for public events in which various individual and institutional actors (re)produce their own versions of local uniqueness. Irrespective of their conflicting views on who/what is authentic, however, all parties under scrutiny in this study, unwittingly or not, help to reproduce existing power inequalities.

In this paper, we will focus on carnival as such a public event that creates tensions and conflict between speakers claiming to be authentic, and others, who are considered inauthentic speakers. Carnival constitutes a political forcefield engendering exclusion and inclusion on the basis of language and cultural practices. Not surprisingly, shared language practices indexing localness also function at a higher indexical order. During carnival and carnivalesque public events we find both ‘conventional’ and ‘subversive’ language practices through which the construction of identities, perceived as local and regional are authenticated and cultivated, as well as denaturalized and subverted. We will show that both dynamics are caught up in a dialectic of mutual articulation, that is; in their attempts at authenticating self as local and denaturalizing others’ localness, competing actors all reproduce a white hegemonic masculinity dominating the public sphere. Our talk will be empirically grounded by classic ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviewing, analysis of video data, YouTube, products of local media, radio and television networks.

Keywords: localness, authenticity, masculinity.