Racist and Ethnic Jokes as a Means of Situational Group-Building Process in a German Multiethnic Classroom

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The presentation offers a short explorative insight into a German Hauptschule (lower secondary school) with a high rate of multilingual migrant pupils. This dissertation project is unique for Germany due to its strict privacy law covering children and schools. The research is based on intensive ethnographic field work and analyzes live in-class teacher-pupil interactions as well as pupil-pupil communication applying conversational analysis as a method (all transcripts are bilingual: German/English). The main focus of this presentation is the construction and redefining of what is considered to be discriminative among a multiethnic group within institutional school discourse, as well as analyzing how group membership is constructed in a modern multicultural German school.

Racist and ethnic jokes function as a situational group-building means in the observed class. New in this research is the asymmetric, hierarchical positioning teacher-pupil at the stage of identity and group membership negotiations. In-class discriminative interactions are not being perceived as discriminative acts, but rather have a function of group-bonding and power-redefining between the teacher and his pupils. The teacher redefines his communication style with his migrant pupils and constructs for this reason a new speech style, in which he uses a different vocabulary register as well as racist/ethnic jokes.

By constructing a new identity within the group, the class teacher categorizes all his pupils as "Kanaken" (pejorative for "migrants", "foreigners") and discusses most of the class issues in the modus of "being a foreigner". This process of identity-building includes both situational as well as long-perspective identity variations: some become "foreigners" only for a short moment, whereas the others become stigmatized till their graduation from school. The linguistic means for group membership and categorization based on race and ethnicity within the institutional discourse will be displayed in transcript analysis of vivid school communication.

Keywords: multietnic German school, ethnic/ racist jokes, group membership.