Social class reflections in a superdiverse city: Western expats in Doha, Qatar

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In sociolinguistics, social class is usually either measured ‘objectively’ through sociological surveys and then mapped onto linguistic variation (cf. Labov 2006) or it is indexed via linguistic markers and stereotypes (e.g. Rampton 2006; Zhang 2008). Nonetheless, what seems to be lacking is a more dynamic and contextualized approach, which can capture the social and geographic mobility (Pennycook 2012) characterizing people in contemporary, superdiverse cities (Vertovec 2006, 2007; Blommaert 2011). Doha, the capital of Qatar, can be seen as a superdiverse city, because it gathers people from all over the world representing different ethnicities, religions and social classes. Contrary to other metropolises in the world, like New York, which usually accept immigrants, Qatar houses primarily expats, namely foreigners, who come to work for a limited amount of time. Such fleeting-ness has repercussions in these expats’ mobility and hence social class trajectories, in the sense that their position within the social hierarchy keeps shifting. Against this backdrop, this paper delves into the sociolinguistic scaling patterns (Collins & Slembrouck 2009; Blommaert 2010) and the stances (chapters in Englebretson 2007; chapters in Jaffe 2009) 5 Western expats take vis-a-vis social class, and it shows how these people construct for themselves a sociolinguistic portrait of a new middle class of technocrats (cf. Kamrava 2013: 158) enjoying lucrative but precarious positions in the state bureaucracy. My methodology includes a three-year ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and ethnographic interviews (Levon 2013) with the aforementioned expats. My overall argument is that, instead of trying to locate these mobile people in a static system of social hierarchy, it makes more sense to ask them to self-reflect on their social class positioning, because in this way we as researchers do justice to the individual life circumstances of our participants, hence our analysis tends to be more emic and thus reliable.

Keywords: scaling, social class, mobility.