Standard Dutch in the school language of upper middle-class pupils: a sociolinguistic ethnography

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In modern-day Europe, standard languages are undergoing changes (see e.g. Deumert & Vandenbussche, 2003), and Flanders constitutes no exception. Often, both linguists and laymen refer to the language use of Flemish teen-agers and adolescents, supposedly full of lexical borrowings and linguistic “mistakes”, to proclaim that the end of Standard Dutch is near. However, in recent studies, Flemish teenagers and adolescents were observed to play around with linguistic varieties - including the standard (see e.g. Jaspers, 2006) - and norms in an innovative and creative manner (Jaspers & Vandekerckhove, 2009), which suggests that the standard is still present and vital.

While existing studies mainly focus on groups of immigrant, low-achieving and working class youth, the spoken language of high-achieving, middle class and mono-ethnically white teen-agers still remains unknown. Nevertheless, these teen-agers are relevant subjects in the research on standard languages, given that they can be considered precursors of standard language change (Van Lancker, 2016 (in press)). That is why a sociolinguistic ethnography was executed at a Flemish secondary school, mapping out the spoken language use in educational contexts of specifically that kind of pupils. The questions discussed are (a) how standard the default school language of these pupils is, (b) whether this proportion of “standardness” meets the expectations of the school staff, and (c) how important the pupils find Standard Dutch inside and outside school.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of different types of data - observations with field notes, audio recordings of spontaneous speech, Facebook posts, written documents and audio-recorded interviews - does not point in the direction of the end of Standard Dutch. The study namely demonstrates that the majority of the pupils underline the importance of the existence and maintenance of Standard Dutch in school settings and beyond. Furthermore, the pupils are willing (and able) to use the standard in specific contexts such as apologies to teachers, oral presentations, reading tasks, but also job interviews and encounters with strangers. However, instances of the standard are fairly exceptional in the recorded language of the pupils. Yet, one might wonder whether this has ever been any different (see e.g. Van de Craen & Willemyns, 1985 for similar observations more than 30 years ago). Moreover, the oral language proficiency of the pupils seems to meet the teachers’ expectations. The pupils’ use of Dutch with a few regional elements and some infringements of the strict norm is evaluated by the teachers as suitable in school contexts, which indicates that the norm itself is being modified.

Thus, all aspects considered, the language use and perceptions of these pupils seem to suggest that the changes of the Flemish standard language might merely result in a transformation of its suitability and form, instead of in its complete redundancy.


