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Nortier, J.; Dorleijn, M.

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Multi-ethnolects and the role of multilingualism

Magreet Dorleijn & Jacomine Nortier
Universiteit van Amsterdam / Universiteit Utrecht
M.Dorleijn@uva.nl
J.M.Nortier@uu.nl

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Introduction

In this contribution we will give an introduction to the linguistic behavior of young people in ethnically mixed groups, often referred to as youth language or multi-ethnolects. First we will elaborate on the terminology. In section 2 we will focus on the function of these dynamic varieties used by adolescents and in section 3 the linguistic characteristics will be discussed. In section 4, we will look into examples from a range of languages and areas in Europe and beyond. In the final section (5), perspectives on the future will be discussed.

1. Terminology

Many relatively recent immigrant communities of various ethnic and linguistic descent have settled in large urban centers all over Europe. In these communities, very specific slang-like linguistic varieties pop up among urban, multi-ethnic adolescent groups. These varieties are among the general public often referred to as ‘youth slang’; ‘language of the street’; ‘youth language’, etc. In the sociolinguistic literature they are generally labelled as ‘Multi-ethnolects’. In recent decades, the phenomenon of these ‘multi-ethnolects’ has received the warm attention of sociolinguists. These youth varieties (or rather, styles, see discussion below) share remarkably many features and characteristics, whether they are spoken in Scandinavia, the UK, the Netherlands, etc. In this contribution, we use the term multi-ethnolect, although we are aware of its problematic status.

Although there is much debate among researchers about the precise nature of the phenomenon, a majority seems to be comfortable with a definition like the following (taken from Dorleijn & Nortier *forthc*)

a linguistic style and/or variety that is part of linguistic practices of speakers of more than two different ethnic and (by consequence) linguistic backgrounds, and contains features from more than one language, but has one clear base-language, generally the dominant language of the society where the multi-ethnolect is in use.¹

It is tempting to attribute the recent warm attention of sociolinguists to the fact that multi-ethnolects have emerged only recently, in the wake of migration waves toward western urban areas; that they are, in fact, a logical product of late modernity. This, however, is unlikely, since migration has happened all over the world, and the presence of multi-ethnic urban areas are a global phenomenon, too. Multi-ethnolects certainly exist outside the western world, as one can infer from work by, e.g., Kießling & Mous (2004) on African urban youth languages.

Moreover, multi-ethnolects appear not to be such recent phenomena, neither. For example, Wolfram reports already in 1974 on Puerto Rican-American groups where, as Fought (2006 [2002]) formulates it: ‘adolescents in particular have been found to use certain

¹ In the literature, there is an ongoing discussion about the (correct) use of the term. E.g., there is no static set of linguistic norms, nor a one-to-one relation with specific ethnic groups. For a more detailed discussion cf Jørgensen (2008) and Nortier (2008).

features of AAVE [‘African American Vernacular English’–MD & JN] in their English.’(p.450).

We see a multi-ethnolect as one of the possible outcomes of crossing, which was first described by Rampton (1995). In crossing, elements from other languages than one’s own are used to construct a (new) identity. With the term multi-ethnolect, however, we refer to more than crossing: it is supposed to cover language play or manipulation as well. An example is given in section 4, where it is illustrated how people who use Verlan (France) play with words by turning them upside down and use elements from other languages than French at the same time.

2. Function of multi-ethnolects

As was remarked above, multi-ethnolects are typically used by speakers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and this includes the dominant, mainstream background. Multi-ethnolects appear to be a mostly urban phenomenon that emerges among adolescents in a context of migration in cities. This is not surprising: multi-ethnolect-users are much involved in the process of constructing and presenting a social identity, and such actions are an unavoidable consequence of living in the highly dynamic circumstances that multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in large urban areas are.

For adolescents in these circumstances the culture of the home is but one out of many possibilities to build an identity on. Both migrant and non-migrant adolescents are invited on a quest through a landscape with all kinds of linguistic and cultural possibilities but no clear directions, no obvious dominant tendencies, no fixed social positions. Therefore, an appeal is made on their own creativity in designing a desirable identity, and that is exactly what the multi-ethnolect is used for. These uncertain but (linguistically) rich circumstances leave people with all kinds of linguistic possibilities to create new, multicultural identities. Since multi-ethnolects are used in highly dynamic circumstances and mainly by adolescents, the exact form of the lects is not very stable and they are in most cases probably ephemeral. The degree to which multi-ethnolects persist when the users assume responsibilities for family and career needs further investigation.

Therefore multi-ethnolects should not be considered as clear-cut, stable *varieties* of a language, but rather as *styles*. ‘Style’ or ‘linguistic style’ is a complicated topic in which several dimensions play a role, (cf. e.g. Eckert & Rickford (2001), Auer, 2007, Coupland, 2007, Keim, 2007, Quist 2008) What concerns us here is that linguistic style can be mobilized by speakers in the appropriate situation, and can be associated with specific situations, interlocutors, and/or specific interaction types. Style, in the definition of Eckert (2001) is a ‘clustering of linguistic resources and an association of that clustering with social meaning’ (123) A style is used in particular circumstances and/or with particular interlocutors. Therefore the term ‘multi-ethnic style’ would have been a more appropriate term in this respect.

It is used for in-group communication. Just as it is the case with using a speech style in general, speaking a multi-ethnolect means a continuous act of identity, a way of self-positioning versus the out-group and toward consolidating in-group solidarity. In the literature it is reported that the kind of social identity multi-ethnolect-users wish to convey is fairly universally a tough, ‘gang-like’, ‘street’-identity and is generally associated with other non-linguistic stylisation, like clothing, musical preference, etc.

3. Linguistic features of multi-ethnolects

As indicated above, multi-ethnolects have in general one base-language, which is usually the dominant national language of the country. In countries where more than one official language is spoken, more base languages are generally involved. Into the base language, features of other languages are mixed. ‘Mixing’ occurs on all linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and very prominently, in prosody and intonation. Linguistic characteristics that are attested in many multi-ethnolects are:

-exaggerated and consciously stereotyped features characteristic of second language learners (grammatical structures, pronunciation, prosodic features)

-insertions of (non-dominant-language-) formulaic expressions, greetings, discourse particles, all kinds of interjections, (taboo) content words and even occasionally function words of diverse linguistic sources.

-In some multi-ethnolects also word reversion is attested.

(Examples are given in section 4 below)

These characteristics are (mainly) the result of conscious agentivity by multi-ethnolect users, and they always carry social meaning, as may be illustrated by the following interview fragment (taken from Nortier & Dorleijn 2008):

- (1) R: *Dat is het slechte Nederlands*
I: *En heeft dat ook een naam?*
R: *Ja, niet echt, maar 't is in principe dan eh lidwoorden die gebruik je dan expres verkeerd.*
I: *Ja, ja, die gebruik je dan exprès verkeerd, net als-*
R: *Ja dus*
I: *Die meisje*
R: *Die huis zeg ik dan. Terwijl ik weet ik bedoel ik weet heus wel dat het dat huis is, maar 't staat zo dom als ik dat op straat zeg, als ik zeg*
I: *Ja*
R: *Als ik zeg dat huis*
I: *Jaja*
R: *'t Is gewoon die huis. Maar als ik met jullie spreek dan wordt 't gewoon dat huis.*
- R: That is the bad kind of Dutch
I: Does it have a name?
R: No, not really, but in principle you uhmm... just use the articles deliberately in the wrong way.
I: Right! So you use them in the wrong way deliberately? Just like-
R: -Yes, like
I: **Die meisje** (‘that girl’ – **dat** meisje in standard Dutch).
R: I would say: **Die huis** (‘that house’- **dat** huis in standard Dutch). At the same time I know, I mean, I am very well aware of the fact that it should actually be **het huis**, but it would make a stupid impression if I would say...
I: Yes
R: If I would say **dat huis** out on the street
I: Yes, yes
R: It is just **die huis**. But when I speak with you (the authors – both Dutch and middel-aged) it is just **dat huis**.

In many cases, elements from one (of several) contributing languages are more manifest than elements from the other languages. E.g., in a Dutch multi-ethnolect features

from Moroccan languages are more predominant than from other contributing languages, like Turkish. Similarly, Turkish is predominant in German multi-ethnolects (cf. e.g. Dirim & Auer (2004). This may partly be due to the fact that speakers of such a language constitute a majority within the multi-ethnolect speaking group, but this is not necessarily the only factor. It is also likely that the speakers of the language that predominantly provides ‘ethnic’ elements have a certain covert prestige compared to other ‘ethnic’ groups, i.e. they are considered to be ‘tough’. For example, in The Netherlands, respondents repeatedly have maintained that Moroccans are tough and Turks are dull (own field notes).

Other factors of importance that contribute to the actual structural and formal manifestation of a multi-ethnolect, are sociolinguistic tendencies like language maintenance and shift, degree of multilingualism, etc. For example, the above mentioned Dutch multi-ethnolect (Nortier & Dorleijn 2008; Dorleijn & Nortier 2008) draws in particular from Moroccan resources, rather than, e.g., from Turkish, even though both communities in the Netherlands are comparable in terms of size and cultural background. Here, it is the sociolinguistic situation of the communities in question that differ considerably and make the Moroccan elements more ‘adoption-prone’. Beside Dutch, in the Dutch-Moroccan community two home languages are spoken: Moroccan Arabic and Berber. An estimated 70% of the Moroccans living in the Netherlands are Berber speaking. Although most Berber speaking Moroccans are more or less familiar with Moroccan Arabic, this does not imply that every Berber speaks Moroccan Arabic fluently. Therefore, Dutch is often the unmarked mode within the community. In the close-knit Turkish community in the Netherlands, on the other hand, Turkish is still very vital. The unmarked mode among Dutch-Turkish bilinguals is the bilingual code switching mode, which is considered an in-group mode by its speakers (and by outsiders, who often complain that they feel excluded in all-Turkish company; cf. Nortier & Dorleijn, 2008).

4. Examples

The way groups of young people in ethnically mixed groups use linguistic resources to express their identity is not the same for all of them and in all places. What the groups do have in common is that they include other than the official prestigious languages and that the varieties they use are in a continuous state of change.

In the Germanic speaking countries in Europe and America, where the phenomenon has been relatively well-studied in the past decades, multi-ethnolects are varieties based on the official languages. They are ‘a kind of Dutch’ (or Norwegian, German, etc.) rather than a mix of languages. The users of multi-ethnolects have a native (-like) control of the official language which constitutes a firm base in which they insert additional elements from other languages. In languages other than English, (American) English is an important source, too, since it is associated with prestige and fashion. A quote from Nortier & Dorleijn (2008: 138) underlines this statement:

- (2) *Nederlandse taal klinkt gewoon niet, dat Marokkaans accent zorgt ervoor dat het “rap-achtig” wordt net als in de Bronx NY*
‘Dutch just doesn’t sound good, that Moroccan accent makes it sound more “rap-like” just like in the Bronx NY.’

In recent years, we found many examples of Dutch pronounced with a Moroccan accent in the Netherlands. Also in other languages such as German, pronunciation is used as an ethnic marker:

- (3) *Hab isch gekauft neue BMW*
Standard German: *ich habe einen neuen BMW gekauft*
'I bought a new BMW' (Deppermann, 2007)

In (3) *ich* ('I') is pronounced as slightly fronted palatal *isch* which marks an ethnic identity and has its roots in the pronunciation of German by native speakers of Turkish. This form is also used by speakers who don't know any Turkish and it is frequently heard in, e.g., popular rap songs.

Other markers are syntactic or morphological in nature. An example is (3) above: The German word order SVO/SOV is violated here and in stead, VSO is used. Word order violation is also found in, for example, language use by native speakers of Norwegian. In (4), the SV order is used in a sentence that requires inversion (Svendsen and Røyneland 2008: 75):

- (4) *hvis en av oss vinner vi deler halvparten*
'if one of us wins we split half' (in stead of correct Norwegian *split we*)

Violations of standard word order are typically associated with an imperfect second language acquisition. The speakers under consideration, however, speak the target language well and in unmarked communication they usually have no problems with the canonical word order (though exceptions to this rule do occur).

In languages with a grammatical gender distinction such as Dutch, German and the Scandinavian languages, the use of a wrong grammatical gender is often encountered in multi-ethnolects. This was illustrated in example (1) in section 3 above where the speaker explained that he deliberately used the wrong gender when he was talking to his friends informally. Not only in Dutch, common gender is often overgeneralized and also used for neuter words: Swedish *en bord* is used in stead of correct *ett bord* (a table; Kotsinas 1998).

In example 5 from Cutler (2008: 15), an 18 year old Bulgarian who emigrated to the US at age eight uses characteristics of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), on the levels of both pronunciation and grammar:

- (5) *She is PISSIN' me off! All the shit she's sayin'. I [a:] feel like smackin' 'em. I'm like "Ø you stupid? Do you hear what you're (r-Ø) saying"? (..) She Ø mad racist! (...)*

In the example above, typical AAVE features are monophthongal /a/ in stead of /ay/; /r/-lessness, Ø-copula and the use of *mad* as an intensifier.

In French, and in some other Romance languages such as Spanish, varieties have emerged in which lexical elements (words and/or syllables) are reversed. So, for example, in stead of French *Cité* (city), *Téci* is used. This variety, Verlan, is widespread in France and emerged in the banlieues (suburbs) of Paris and other major cities among multi-ethnic youth groups and is spreading rapidly. Beside the reversed use of words and/or syllables, there are other characteristics, illustrated in a poem in Verlan² (left column), an explanation of the Verlan forms (center) and a translation into English (right column):

J'neco ap La Marseillaise
Mais c'est ici que je mange
mes fraises

J'neco ap = je ne connais pas
la Marseillaise = French
national anthem

'I don't know La
Marseillaise
But I belong here

² http://www.didaweb.net/mediatori/articolo.php?id_vol=1354

Au deblé, j'suis céfran Et j'suis robeu en cefran	deblé = bled céfran = français robeu = beur (= arabe) cefran = France	Back home I am French And here I am an Arab
Kéblo entre ici et là-bas Des fois j'ai envie de me séca Mais c'est près d'Paris qu'j'ai grandi Et l'Algérie j'l'ai tchav' quand j'étais p'tit	kéblo = bloqué séca = cassé (ici j'ai envie de partir) tchav' = quitté	Blocked between here and there Sometimes I feel like leaving But I grew up near Paris And I left Algeria when I was small
Alors où j'me vétrou? J'me sens perdu, c'est chelou Fierté d'être un djez à Paris Tous les soirs, c'est Allah que je prie.	vétrou = trouve chelou = louche un djez = un Algérien	So where do I find myself? I feel lost, it is bizarre Proud of being an Algerian Every night I pray to Allah.'

Examples of longstanding ethnic mixing (at least, in comparison with Western Europe) can be found in African cities where a long tradition of urbanization and migration has interesting linguistic consequences. Contrary to the varieties found in European cities, the varieties in African cities don't always consist of one clear-cut and recognizable base language in which elements from other languages are inserted. Slabbert (1994) describes the situation in Johannesburg where Isicamto is spoken, which is associated with a gang with a Zulu background. It has traces from Zulu, English, and a range of other languages. Isicamto started out as an urban youth language but is spreading now to other groups as well. Consider example 6:

- (6) *If u-roof-a i-bank ya-se-lokishi-ni u-ya-tabalaza?*
'If you rob a bank in the townships, is that fighting for survival?'

The word *roof* has roots in Afrikaans; *bank* in English; *lokishi* is from English 'location' and *tabalaza* has its origins in Zulu (*zabalaza* 'struggle').

5. Conclusion

Multi-ethnolects have emerged all over the world and will continue to do so. Young people have always used linguistic resources to express their identity. They have always turned to varieties with strong covert prestige and low overt prestige. In places where there isn't any ethnic mixing, other substandard varieties and dialects are used for this purpose. With the arrival of other ethnic groups, other languages and varieties have become available and are made use of. As globalization increases, and movements such as migration and urbanization increase accordingly, we expect the emergence of new multi-ethnolects to increase as well. Linguists and anthropologists should study the spread of these varieties, not only among young people but also among other groups in many different societies. We still don't know much about the mechanisms that cause the difference between multi-ethnolects in the Western

world (one base language) and beyond (such as in Africa, multi-language based). More explorative and comparative research is needed. We believe that the more a multi-ethnolect will spread, the stronger the need for groups of young people will be to 'invent' new ways of speaking to distinguish themselves from others.

SEE ALSO: Bilingualism; Code Mixing; Code Switching; Cross-Linguistic influence and multilingualism; Dynamics of multilingualism; Linguistic diversity; Multilingualism and identity; Multilingualism and minority languages

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