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The Politics of Labelling Youth Vernaculars in the Netherlands and Belgium

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2014

Introduction: Professional and Common Usage of Language Names

This paper critically analyzes the labelling of youthful language use in Belgium and the Netherlands. Urban youthful speech practices have in recent years been assigned a variety of labels, some of which have gained currency among insiders as well as outsiders. Linguists have not infrequently contributed to (the success of) this labelling process through their scholarly descriptions and public communication about their work (see e.g. Labov on 'Black English Vernacular' or 'Ebonics'). We argue, however, that regardless of the terms chosen, the practice of labelling language use has epistemological and ideological implications that must be addressed in sociolinguistic research. Our paper presents two case studies to illustrate this. The first shows how linguists' labels can begin to live lives of their own as they are ideologized in public discourse (*cf.* Rampton, 2011b). The second demonstrates how an ostensibly technical labelling attempt may be resisted and de-neutralized by those who are labelled. We suggest that making a principled distinction between labels as ethnographic facts and labels as professional acts is a prerequisite for engaging with the intricacies of labelling youth vernaculars.

Attending to language names or linguistic labels appears to be caught, on the one hand, between the growing awareness among (socio)linguists and linguistic-anthropologists that the concept of *a* language as an identifiable object is highly problematic, and, on the other hand, the importance that language names have for speakers as they navigate their social, cultural and political worlds. Thus, an increasing number of professional linguists are agreed that:

- even if useful as a shorthand notion, languages are essentially abstractions of recurring verbal phenomena in social interaction (Alvarez-Cáccamo 1998 cited from Heller 2007; Harris 1998; Calvet 2006; Heller 2007; Errington 2008; Jørgensen 2008), and inventions (Gal and Irvine 1995; Makoni and Pennycook 2007) that Europeans subsequently imposed on others who were seen to be deprived of them, although they often fail to explain those phenomena the linguistic system declares unsystematic;
- linguistic facts are only one of the layers of semiotic communicative activity that can be described in isolation from other layers, at the expense of losing sight of the social conditions that speakers share for producing speech (Harris 1998; Calvet 2006; Agha 2007; Errington 2008);
- instead of working with languages or codes, it may therefore be more useful to investigate how groups of speakers organize '(sets of) linguistic resources […] in ways that make sense under specific social conditions' (Heller 2007: 1; Jørgensen 2008: 167), or to adopt a practice-based view in which speakers and their actions are the driving force behind sociolinguistic descriptions, rather than the linguistic systems or structures that are derived from them.

[1] The order of the author names is alphabetical.

Professional linguists also increasingly agree that:

- 'doing linguistics' is not just a technical issue, but a socially situated and thus ideological practice with political consequences (Gal and Irvine 1995; Blommaert 1999; Eckert 2008; Errington 2008; Jaspers 2008; Kroskrity 2010; Rampton 2010);
- pointing out linguistic difference can easily lead to identifications of linguistic deficiency, deviance or backwardness (Varenne and McDermott 1999; Stroud 2004; Errington 2008);
- it is necessary to attend to the collateral damage or harmful consequences linguistic work can bring to those who are described and to identify whose interests are eventually served by it, as a precondition for topicalizing the power differences that exist between linguists and their subjects and audiences (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Heller and Duchêne 2007; Makoni and Pennycook 2007: 28-32; Errington 2008; Coupland 2010; Pennycook 2010).

There is, thus, a growing realization that labelling linguistic practices and inventing new names (such as e.g. 'ethnolects' or 'youth language') has serious ideological implications that ought to be taken into account. Even so, while languages may not exist, this has obviously not prevented their existence in the minds of speakers, and their consequent impact on linguistic practices. Languages may be fictions for us, but they are realities for others:

- languages and language names play a crucial role as a target in 'enregisterment' practices where one language (variety) is distinguished from another through speech typification practices ('this language is appropriate/ugly', *cf.* Agha 2005, 2007) that consequently inform new linguistic practices.
- people often hold passionate beliefs about languages and what they mean for them, and they have equally strong feelings about people who are not seen to 'have a language' (*cf.* Calvet 2006; Blackledge and Creese 2008; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Linguists are not always exempt from such emotions (*cf.* Cameron 1995). Consequently, linguists' acting on the knowledge that there are no languages and that labelling is uncalled for can be disenfranchising and unsettling, and it may be difficult to convince mainstream media that 'languages do not exist'.
- (socio)linguists have in fact made ample use of the fiction of language to communicate their work to the general public and to set up sociopolitical action with the intention of saving endangered languages, fighting linguistic discrimination, dignifying linguistic practices, advocating multilingualism in education and so on (Labov 1969; Hymes 1996; Extra and Yağmur 2004; Cummins and Hornberger 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.* 2009; Jaspers and Verschueren 2011).

It thus looks as though at least for now any discussion of linguistic practices cannot simply ignore languages or linguistic labels. But this immediately raises the question of how linguists are to deal with these when they approach linguistic practices. Which criteria do we use to distinguish between useful and less useful labels or reifications? How do we weigh linguists' and speakers' conceptions of what they do and of how they see each other? Indeed, '[w]hose understandings [...] of linguistic boundaries should we privilege in our labels and codings? What kinds of evidence can we gather for 'relevant' boundaries? When do we depend on ethnographic insights to make claims about [sociolinguistic practices], when on our own expert knowledge, when on quantitative evidence of distribution, and when on interactional evidence [...]?' (Chun 2010, personal communication). Simply put: to label, or not to label?

In what follows, we will look into two cases of linguistic naming to investigate their ideological provenances, effects and relations to situated linguistic practices. The first case considers the use of the label *straattaal* ('street language') in the Netherlands. The second case describes a linguist's attempt to name adolescent linguistic practices in Belgium.

The Labelling of Youthful Language Use as *Straattaal* in the Netherlands

The widespread use and success of a label such as *straattaal* or 'street language' in the Netherlands certainly warns against all too optimistic postulations that the abovementioned concerns and understandings are now commonly recognized. Popularized by the linguist René Appel in 1999, the term *straattaal* is widely used today among Dutch linguists, educators and journalists as a container concept for various urban youth varieties characterized by moderate to heavy lexical, phonological and grammatical influence from immigrant languages and popular (American) English.[2] In public discourse, the use of the term has typically come to be associated with descriptions of social and linguistic deviance, deficiency and even delinquency (*cf.* Cornips and de Rooij 2005; Cornips, de Rooij and Reizevoort 2006; Cornips and de Rooij 2009, in press), and its continued use in the media only seems to solidify and naturalize the stereotype. Ironically enough, however, Appel suggested *straattaal* as a less derogatory replacement for another popular label for youthful language use at that time, *smurfentaal* ('smurf lingo'). If anything, therefore, the data we discuss below illustrate how a linguist's well-meaning labelling attempt can go awry once the label becomes infused with pejorative connotations in public discourse. We will also point out, though, that as the term came into fashion, its unreflexive use in sociolinguistic analysis obfuscated actual linguistic practices.

Straattaal in Public Discourse

To situate our data, it is useful to know that in spite of an earlier image of broad-mindedness, Dutch society has since the late 1990s been characterized by an ever-increasing intolerance to cultural diversity (see e.g. Scheffer 2000) and by an unprecedented identity crisis and moral panic, which, as elsewhere, also extends to language (Cameron 1995; Stroud 2004). There has been public criticism of the use of languages other than Dutch in the public sphere, and the youthful language use of ethnically-mixed or ethnic minority youth has been a continual bone of contention. One primary school teacher articulated her concern about adolescent language use in the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* in 1997, arguing that ethnic minority youth are no longer able to speak 'proper' Dutch:

> 'Most pupils', Noorlander says, 'have a Surinamese background and speak Sranan at home and in the street. School is the only place where they speak Dutch, or rather, what we teachers jokingly call smurf lingo' (*Het Parool*, 24 December 1997, our translation).

'Smurf lingo' was meant to allude to the fact that pupils would tend to use a lexical filler (*dinges/dingens*, 'stuff') rather than the actual noun (*cf.* 'I have to do "dingens" because later I have "dingens"') as a symptom of their restricted lexicon. It also hinted at their failure to use the appropriate gender for the definite determiner, and at their eroded sense of 'proper', polite communication and the voice volume this requires. In the words of the same teacher:

[2] Some linguists, such as Nortier (2001), have indicated that for some respondents *straattaal* was equivalent to 'speaking indecently', which sometimes meant using dialectal or substandard forms of Dutch.

> Then you hear them say: 'I have to do "stuff" because later I have "stuff" [...] There are many words they don't know. They continuously confuse the article *de* with *het*, so it's *de meisje*, *de boek* and so on [instead of regular *het meisje* ('the girl') and *het boek* ('the book')]. Some tend to call me *sir* while I am clearly *miss*.' According to Noorlander, it is not a coincidence that a poorly developed Dutch competence leads to a certain intensity in their daily contacts. They don't talk, they shout (*Het Parool*, 24 December 1997, our translation).

Another teacher in the same article adds:

> Their way of speaking is also connected to specific behaviour. When I ask 'Have you done your homework, Mustafa?', he goes, mind you while I'm looking at him, 'Who, me?' Moroccans are rarely direct, they're always trying to win time to keep their options open. Real bargainers they are, yes (*Het Parool*, 24 December 1997, our translation).

Appel (1999b) indicates that teacher complaints such as these seemed to have inspired several television programmes between February and March 1998 on various channels, discussing 'the degeneration of Dutch' and the bad influence 'smurf lingo' or 'ethnic Dutch' was feared to have on white Dutch youth or on the Dutch language as a whole. Acknowledging that ethnically-mixed youth groups in Amsterdam were producing a mixed or hybrid language, he insisted however that *straattaal* was to be preferred as a label over derogatory and belittling alternatives such as 'smurf lingo' or 'Smurf Dutch':

> Smurf lingo is a rather disparaging name […] Following the speakers of this variety, I prefer to use the name *street language* (Appel 1999a: 39, our translation; Appel 1999b: 140-142).

Appel certainly wasn't the first to use this label. It did not appear in newspapers before 1990, but the following years show a gradual increase of occurrences, initially linked for the most part to urban music practices such as rap (Douwes 1995), hip hop (Heijmans and De Vries 1997) and break dancing (van Dijk 1997), where *straattaal* referred to the insertion of Sranan words in Dutch. From 1997 onwards, the term occurs in newspapers as a name for the base variety of Dutch youth from recent immigrant communities. Later, its scope can be seen to expand when it is used to refer to varieties of Dutch mixed with Sranan, American English, Moroccan Arabic and Berber. Be that as it may, it is clear that at a certain point Appel coins *straattaal* as a neutral, descriptive and even emic term for the linguistic practices of ethnically-mixed adolescent groups.[3] In effect, public discourse in the following decade demonstrates that *straattaal* became a mainstream term in the media.

In spite of these attempts to avoid pejorative labelling, current public discourse in the Netherlands seems to have invested *straattaal* with much of the negative semiosis that is associated with its stereotypical users, i.e., ethnically-mixed urban youth. Consequently, *straattaal* has become available as a name for disrespectful, deviant or aggressive verbal behaviour, and seems to function as a proxy for dangerous young males and small petty-crime street gangs (*cf.* Stroud 2004; Androutsopoulos 2010, 2011; Milani 2010). Indeed, as Preston (2002: 41) argues, '[…] attitudes towards language and their varieties seem to be tied to attitudes towards groups of people […] [S]uch correlations are obvious, reaching down even

[3] Although Appel (1999a, b) claims to follow speakers' usage, he does not present any evidence from interviews for the currency of *straattaal* as an emic label.

into the linguistic details of the language or variety itself', as is illustrated by the use of 'sinister word' in the following description of *straattaal* users by Zijlmans (2004):

> Three youngsters approximately seventeen years of age are on the Amsterdam metro. One is black, one is North African, a third one white. They're obviously showing off to each other, even if they're barely understandable. They're speaking some sort of Dutch, but mixed up with a hodgepodge of incomprehensible words. Now and then one of the three loudly repeats *a sinister word*; it is clear that one of the others isn't familiar with the used term. They're shoving each other about, hitting each other on the back, their shoulders touching each other. All in all, the trio give off a noisy and rowdy impression. The effect is that all other passengers in the metro stay at a safe distance. And by the looks of it, this is exactly the idea. Not only does their body language express 'keep away from us', but their incomprehensible language use sets them apart from their environment as well. These three Amsterdam youngsters speak 'street language' or 'youth language' (our emphasis and translation).

A similar example of this can be found in an article published in the weekly magazine of the national newspaper *NRC* of 20 March 2010. The magazine cover ominously announces the article with the caption *Een nieuwe schoolstrijd tegen straattaal* ('A new school battle against straattaal') and features a photograph of an adolescent man, likely Surinamese or Antillean-Dutch, every inch a hip-hopper (notice, among other things, the hand gesture, the red hoodie, black leather jacket, black cap and white iPod earphones with earbuds over the ears).

In the article inside, we find a mix of photos and *straattaal* words scattered criss-cross over the pages, working to create an association between *straattaal* and adolescents of colour. All *straattaal* words have, with a couple of exceptions, a Sranantongo origin emphasizing their non-Dutch character. A similar effect is achieved by the article's title page, where it states *Wallah: school is nakkoe = ik zweer: school is niks* ('I swear: school sucks') in *straattaal*, followed by a translation in Dutch in smaller type against a background photo figuring four young men of colour. The article itself indicates a clash between school culture and 'street culture', the latter of which is described as 'dominant and resisting authority', idolizing values that conflict with school culture:

> Studying dutifully isn't cool. Getting up late, extending oneself as little as possible and showing off your stuff, that's all part of street culture. Like smoking joints before lessons start... [A street culture] that is heavily influenced by American gangster rap: macho behaviour is normal, violence is glorified. The emphasis is on bling-bling: making money fast and an outer display (our translation).

The article then quite abruptly makes the transition from street culture to *straattaal*, spoken by youngsters who 'are proud of their street culture and their street language'. *Straattaal*, according to the article, is a problem because it 'lowers many students' linguistic proficiency'. It is also suggested that it hampers students' opportunities to find work:

> A lot of youngsters know quite well that they should not speak street language during a job interview. But they just can't do otherwise anymore. (our translation).

After that, the article makes a final abrupt transition to describing students' violent behaviour, often in response to school authority with which they have difficulty coping, because it conflicts with the honour code of the street. The way the article freely associates non-standard

language use influenced by migrant languages with violence and deviance is certainly neither unique nor original (*cf.* Cornips 2005; Cornips and de Rooij 2005).

Hence, in spite of its intended neutral indexicality, *straattaal* appears to be firmly established in Dutch public discourse as a ready-made category label for antisocial or dangerous behaviour associated with ethnically-mixed groups. Uses of the label *straattaal* assign specific meanings to linguistic resources, and consequently to its users, which affects how they are positioned socially. In a process of iconization (Gal and Irvine 1995), features of *straattaal* that are negatively evaluated from a dominant culture perspective come to stand as iconic for those who are considered to use it (*cf.* Milani and Jonsson 2012). As a result, speakers of *straattaal* are positioned outside of regular Dutch society, and are seen as a threat to the social order (*cf.* Stroud 2004). Linguistic, usually also ethnic, others are even blamed for not doing well in the labour market because of their linguistic otherness (*cf.* Bjornson 2007). The label *straattaal* has thus become a key resource in public debates on (linguistic) norms and behaviour in Dutch society.

Straattaal in Sociolinguistic Research

After its popularization, *straattaal* has had quite a career in Dutch sociolinguistics. Interestingly, however, much of this research has only seemed to confirm the deviant character of the practices labelled as *straattaal*. Most extremely, Appel and Schoonen (2005) suggest that *straattaal* is 'not "normal" or "common" Dutch, not even in the broad sense of the term, which would include regional and social dialect' (2005: 85). But its abnormal, exotic, spectacular character has also been confirmed through descriptive attempts that put a premium on codification and word lists. Thus, *straattaal* research has classically involved written questionnaires in which students are asked to provide *straattaal* translations for a number of ordinary Dutch words (*cf.* Appel 1999a, 1999b; Nortier 2001; Appel and Schoonen 2005; Vermeij 2006), often with a follow-up interview to check reliability and accuracy.[4] The act of translation naturally maximizes the distance between Dutch and *straattaal*, as it also helps to reduce youthful language use to a stock of foreign or deviant words, with no attention to youths' phonological, morpho-syntactic or pragmatic exploitation of linguistic resources, and with no consideration for actual linguistic practices (*cf.* Androutsopoulos 2010). In terms of data collection, aims and eventual product, there is a striking resemblance between this approach to *straattaal* and a much older, colonialist approach to language, which consisted of drawing up rudimentary word lists Europeans could consequently use in their contacts with (and directives for) African or Asian employees or workers (*cf.* Fabian 1986). It may not be too far-fetched, therefore, to claim that *straattaal* research of this kind does little more than provide mainstream Dutch citizens with a handy glossary that alleviates their communicative trouble ('*straattaal* is incomprehensible') in the urban jungle.

Even more problematic is that *straattaal* quickly lost its status as an emic label, and came to be used as a descriptive analytical term. Thus, while Appel initially suggested that *straattaal* was a politically-correct, since emic, label (see above), it is striking to see the term become etic when it is found not to ring a bell in subsequent investigations: 'Young people themselves do not always have a term for this language variety [i.e. *straattaal*], or they call it *jongerentaal* ('youth language'), *vriendentaal* ('language among friends') or *chilltaal* ('chill

[4] In Appel & Schoonen (2005), for example, the lexical elements to be translated in *straattaal* include *girl, boy, shoes, money, very good/fantastic, what's going on, pig, a joke* (Appel and Schoonen 2005: 106; *cf.* Stroud 2004: 206). This is an arbitrary selection of words, based on Appel's earlier requests to his informants to produce typical *straattaal* words. The Internet features a number of *straattaal* dictionaries, see for example http://www.straatwoordenboek.nl or http://jongeren.blog.nl.onderwijs/2005/08/26/drop_je_straattaal.

language'). Here, we will only use the term "street language"' (Appel and Schoonen 2005: 85). In this way, however, a once-emic term has been stripped of its original context of use, and is now suggested as a common name for all ethnically-mixed, urban youthful language use in spite of the existence of other emic labels in use. While it is not objectionable in itself to use emic labels as etic labels, this specific re-fashioning of *straattaal* obviously ignores young people's own categorizations, prioritizes one context of use over all others and surrenders those who are seen to speak the variety to the wider-spread (from a dominant culture perspective usually pejorative) indexicalities of the 'street' as soon as the term is picked up by non-linguists with a less nuanced understanding of what *straattaal* may actually involve. The question is then probably who benefits from how *straattaal* is used here, and how descriptively adequate the label is if youngsters keep pointing out that [1] what researchers stubbornly call *straattaal* can also pertain to linguistic interaction at school, in class and among siblings at home; that consequently [2] what linguists find spectacular is only a small part of a broader set of quite ordinary communicative practices; and that [3] although *straattaal* is widely accepted as a generic label, alleged *straattaal* speakers do not necessarily recognize practices from another city as comparable or related to their own (Cornips *et al.* 2006).[5]

Its use as an etic label in data collection procedures may also deliver results that likely hide more than they reveal. Nortier (2001: 70) for example notes that in one of her questionnaires pupils were asked if they used *straattaal*, and if they did, for which purposes. Pupils were also given the opportunity to give examples of *straattaal*. 'But because we were not sure that everyone knew what was meant by *straattaal*, we first explained to them what we understood it to be'. The explanation was as follows: 'Young people tend to speak differently among themselves than they do to outsiders, especially adults. Some people call this *straattaal*. S*traattaal* contains a lot of words and expressions from languages other than Dutch, for example *habibi* ('sweetheart') or *woela* ('I swear'). On some occasions, the Dutch also use a non-Dutch accent on purpose' (Nortier 2001: 70-71). In effect, all data on *straattaal* obtained in this way depend on how well pupils have understood this not entirely transparent explanation (is it a mixed language, or foreigner talk by competent Dutch speakers?), and it's unclear what this can reveal about the 'use' of *straattaal*.

Straattaal also informs sociolinguistic research that appears to be guided by the semantics of the term, in the sense that researchers see 'investigating *straattaal*' as 'describing the language use of street gangs' who use secret words to 'do business' (Duurkoop 2008; Zijlmans 2010). Interesting as such descriptions may be, and while *straattaal* in a street gang context might be descriptively more adequate, the use of that label here only seems to reinforce *straattaal*'s capacity for grouping various mainstream citizens' fears and fascinations.

To sum up, *straattaal* in sociolinguistic research is a troublesome term. Its continued use serves to essentialize and codify vibrant language practices in different places and in different social contexts. And even if it can be taken as a sign of an ostensible interest in diversity, it effectively marginalizes those who are seen to speak it.

[5] Thus, the key informant in Cornips *et al.* (2006: 129-130), Surinamese-Dutch Brian from Amsterdam-East, argues that *straattaal* as spoken by Surinamese differs from *straattaal* as spoken by Antilleans. He goes on to point out that every neighbourhood has its own specific way of using *straattaal*, corresponding to its ethnic composition. He also states that *straattaal* from Rotterdam differs from that of Amsterdam. Such segmentations (Baumann 2004) are contextually motivated and, hence, fluid: what is seen as different in one context may be seen as alike in another context. *Straattaal* may, therefore, refer to different 'objects.'

Regular versus 'Moroccan Dutch' in Belgium

Interestingly, there is no corresponding label for *straattaal* in (Flemish) Belgium. Even if the term filters through into Flemish media given its prominent role in the Netherlands, it does not enjoy much uptake. There have been intense linguistic labelling efforts in the last decade, but all of these were oriented to the emergent use of non-standard, vernacular, but not completely dialectal language forms in settings and situations previously considered the exclusive domain of Standard Dutch usage (e.g. in formal settings or in entertainment programmes on TV such as talk shows and fiction series). Given the intense linguistic standardization process that took effect in Flemish Belgium after World War II (which involved schools and grassroots organisations setting up 'Standard Dutch Actions', at times comprising whole weeks of speaking contests, awareness campaigns, dictations and quizzes, in addition to primetime language advice on radio and television, *cf.* Vandenbussche 2010; Van Hoof 2012), this nomenclature has been fairly pejorative. A range of Flemish linguists as well as opinion-makers (journalists, writers, literary critics) have moreover ardently played a part in this, coining new names for non-standard language use such as *Schoon Vlaams* ('brushed-up Flemish'), *hamburgertaal* ('hamburger language', alluding to the profane quality but seemingly unstoppable popularity of this way of speaking), *soap-Vlaams* ('soap-Flemish'), *Verkavelingsvlaams* ('allotment Flemish', referring to residential neighbourhoods with pseudo-farmhouses and haciendas erected on recently-allotted countryside fields around villages and small towns), *sloddertaal* ('slob-speak'), *koetervlaams* ('jabber-Flemish', a contraction of 'jabbertalk' and 'Flemish'), *ineengeflanst dialect* ('botched-together dialect') and so on, with *tussentaal* ('in-between variety') now emerging as a more or less acceptable denominator[6] of this non-standard but also non-dialectal way of speaking (*cf.* De Caluwe 2009; Jaspers 2001; Jaspers and Brisard 2006; Grondelaers and van Hout 2011).

Hence, preoccupied with the degree to which Flemings were living up to decades of standardization efforts, it appears that linguistic as well as non-professional attention to language in Flemish Belgium has largely failed to notice, let alone name, practices similar to those that were much-discussed in the Netherlands. There has been some recognition of a vernacular similar to *straattaal* (in terms of its structural hybridity and use by mixed-ethnicity teenagers outside home contexts) in mining towns in the Eastern province of Limbourg, which has come be named *citétaal* (literally, 'compound language') due to its occurrence in the compounds specially built after World War II to house miners from Italy, Turkey, Greece and Morocco (Marzo and Ceuleers 2011). But the peripheral location of *citétaal* – as opposed to more central areas of the country – appears to have seriously limited its spread and fame. In any case, teenagers from peripheral ex-mining towns (the mining industry was defunct by the end of the 1980s) seem to be much less an object of fascination and fear than are urban teenagers with migration backgrounds in larger cities like Antwerp or Ghent. For where *citétaal* is usually discussed as something exotic but essentially harmless, it is not uncommon that the language of teenagers in the latter cities is seen as a threat to Standard Dutch or the Dutch language altogether, especially when observers note that white teenagers are starting to adopt 'immigrant ways of speaking' in regular peer-group interaction, even among whites.

[6] More or less, because *tussentaal* originally was a literal reference to *interlanguage*, the term used to name the learner's temporarily incomplete knowledge of the target language (Selinker 1973; Ellis 1994: 350). In other words, Flemings' non-standard and non-dialectal language use was seen as (and hoped to be) a temporary stage in their language learning process, that was to move from their first language (a Flemish dialect) towards full competence in the target language, Standard Dutch. This teleological undertone of *tussentaal* has however largely worn off, or has failed to resonate in public discourse, in favour of the spatial metaphor the term evokes: language in-between the two opposing and highly-charged poles on the linguistic map, dialect and Standard Dutch.

Despite this unsympathetic climate, no popular label that can be considered equivalent to *straattaal* has emerged for these practices – yet.

Indeed, there are recent signs that it does not take much for a term suddenly to flare up and circulate in public discourse as a popular stereotype. In September 2011, the second author of this paper was called in as an expert by a broadsheet journalist who had heard of the label *illegaals* ('illegal') being used by school teachers to refer to the speech of teenagers with migration backgrounds, or, alternatively, by white teenagers to refer to what they see themselves speaking with the former. White teenagers added that it means 'speaking broken Dutch on purpose' through using incorrect articles (saying *de meisje* instead of *het meisje* for 'the girl'), loan words from Arabic, Berber or Turkish and a specific intonation. Confronted with this label and with a journalist's wish to turn this into news, Jaspers attempted to contextualize the linguistic phenomena supposedly named by it, and likewise hoped to discourage the journalist's use of the label in question, suggesting the use of 'informal urban language use' instead (*cf.* Rampton 2011b). But while the journalist was willing to recycle much of the contextualization, the objection about *illegaals* did not make it into the article's caption that was prominently displayed on the newspaper's inside cover which read: *Hier spreekt men illegaals*. This title unambiguously alluded to an earlier primetime television broadcast (1964-1973), *Hier spreekt men Nederlands* ('One speaks Dutch here') in which Flemings were reminded three days a week – through an exposition of avoidable mistakes, dialectisms and gallicisms – of the fact they were supposed to speak Standard Dutch rather than a Flemish dialect.

Combined with a photo under the caption of a school playground and a group of pupils (of mixed ethnic origin), the heading immediately evokes a dystopian image of how inner-city schools have become sites of *broken* rather than Standard Dutch, flouting decades of standardization efforts in school and media. The article was consequently picked up a week later by the national radio (Radio 1, 26 September 2011), where a journalist set up an interview with urban teenagers at school, introducing it as follows:

> What do you do if you're a young allochthon in our country and you have to speak a language with another allochthon whom you don't understand? You speak *illegal* then, or Dutch with words from your own language. In Flemish cities *illegal* is so popular among youth that also Flemish youth speak it. Wim Schepens [the journalist] went to the St Norbert Institute in Antwerp for a course of *illegal* where he found a couple of willing teachers [...]

The introduction shows that the journalist struggled to reconcile a number of conflicting notions under one umbrella term. After evoking, in the first lines, the spectre of non-comprehension in the multilingual city, which appears to necessitate some kind of foreigner talk or broken Dutch ('you speak *illegal* then'), he connects this in one fell swoop with 'Dutch with words from your own language', most likely referring now to a *fluent* Dutch, even if influenced by other urban codes, that white Flemish youth find attractive while calling it 'broken Dutch'. In doing so, he is obviously unconcerned with the fact that in the case of any real misunderstanding, 'Dutch with words from your own language' would probably be much less effective than mere Dutch, or than the use of a named language other than Dutch. At any rate, he is maintaining a broad notion of *illegal* that throws foreigner talk, learner varieties and fluent vernacular urban language use into one and the same bag. The teenage interviewees, all non-white and highly fluent in Dutch, sustained a much stricter definition of *illegaals*. When invited to talk about *illegaals*, they mentioned a couple of typical, eye-catching lexical items from named languages such as Arabic or Turkish – such as *shmet* ('coward'), *tfu* ('damn'), *wajow* ('wow'); *kardash* ('mate') – but explained that in their view, *illegaals* only refers to

recent immigrants' limited competence in Dutch or to foreigner talk directed to those with a limited competence. They did not see *illegaals* as something that applies to them, in other words, contrary to what the interviewer seemed to presume – even if one teenager jokingly added that *illegaals* comes in handy when they anticipated or were accused of making a linguistic mistake in Dutch: '[...] then you can say, no, it's *illegaals*, so you're always right [laughs]'. This interview and the article in turn led to a couple of short articles and chatroom interaction on the Internet, with contributions both positive (praising the variety's potential for uniting urban adolescents of various origins, in addition to listing typical, exotic, words) and negative (with a focus on laughable 'mistakes' that teenagers with migration backgrounds produce in Dutch).

This clearly demonstrates that *illegaals* is "[i]nvoked, invested and contested from a range of different positions" (*cf.* Rampton 2011b) as it moves from one place to another and from one medium to another. It perhaps also demonstrates the limited influence linguists can exert on what the media find exciting about language use. All in all, though, public use of the term has subsided afterwards, in contrast with large-scale public debates that comparable terms have sparked in other European contexts (Stroud 2004; Androutsopoulos 2010, 2011; Milani 2010; and see above). As is demonstrated in the previous section, this may not be regrettable. The present section goes on to argue, however, that also a linguist's ostensibly *technical* labelling attempt can be resisted and de-neutralized by the putative owners of the labelled practices, and that linguists, the authors of this article included, would do well not to sweep such signs of disagreement and de-neutralization inadvertently under the carpet. The data for this argument derive from an ethnographic case study carried out by the second author at a multiethnic secondary school in Antwerp (Belgium) at the turn of the century. The study focused on the ways in which students playfully experimented with different (perceived) varieties of Dutch, and in so doing often slowed down the rhythm of classroom and research activities in not entirely unruly ways (Jaspers 2005, 2006, 2011a, 2011b). All students in the case study came from a working class background and were intensely aware of what language use was expected at school and in society as a whole, and were keen observers of what differed from these expectations. Students with migration backgrounds[7] especially stood out in their unremitting efforts to notice and evaluate other people's skills in Dutch, and comparing them, usually unfavourably, to their own. When the second author of this paper – visibly and audibly white middle-class – arrived on the scene to observe their linguistic practices, some students were quite apprehensive about his plans, and seemed to intuit that whatever description was going to come out of this, it surely was not going to be an advertisement for their speech under the then language-ideological climate. Even after winning students' confidence, and after having collected and analysed recordings of their linguistic practices in and out of class, it was clear that students were not simply going to accept any label from their now-favourite linguist. This was clear from how students with a Moroccan background resisted or disagreed with his attempts to label one of their stylized speech practices as 'Moroccan Dutch', or what Jaspers thought was 'Stylized Moroccan Dutch' (*cf.* 'Stylized Asian English' in Rampton 1995), a name he used provisionally in his field notes for a particular practice in which students caricatured other people's incompetent Dutch. The students' own name for this practice was 'talking Illegal Dutch' or 'talking Illegal',[8] with 'Illegal' referring to official or unofficial recent immigrants. But since also their

[7] All students whose parents spoke a variety of Arabic, Berber or Turkish explicitly self-identified (and were also other-identified) as 'Moroccan' or 'Turkish', even if they were born and raised in Belgium.

[8] This is in line with how teenagers in the radio excerpt above used the label. Note however that at the time, it was also invested with different meanings by youth with migration backgrounds and by white youth. With ten years between the radio excerpt and this ethnographic data set, this certainly indicates the continuing availability

own family members could be targets for this caricatural practice, the second author thought their category label hid or was informed by another practice that was predicated on their home situation. In fact, some students acknowledged that their routine Dutch had some Moroccan characteristics, and said they sometimes joked about this themselves. Others, usually more Dutch-fluent adolescents, however, rejected 'Moroccan' as an appropriate name, and consistently re-categorized anything that hinted at imperfect or learner Dutch as 'Illegal', or as 'Kosovarian' or even 'Polish', in this way making it clear that their own routine Dutch could not be confused with a label that would imply a less-than-normal Dutch.

Similar objections to categorizations of their speech as different could be found when students discussed white speakers' attempts to speak like them or imitate their style (prosodically, lexically, morpho-syntactically). Such implicit recognitions were seen as condescending, as this interaction extract shows (see Jaspers 2008 for an earlier account):

Example 1

Setting: April 2001. Interview with Imran [19], Jamal [18], Faisal [19], JJ [25]. Faisal has just been warmly mentioning a white-Flemish teenager in his neighbourhood who has recently converted to Islam and with whom Faisal sometimes speaks 'Moroccan', or as Faisal says, 'half Moroccan half Dutch' or 'kind of Illegal Moroccan'. Jamal, however, says he does not really appreciate such linguistic efforts made by 'Belgians' – a label consistently used to refer to whites – and he illustrates this by mockingly imitating (i.e., stylising) others' attempts at speaking (like a) 'Moroccan'. "He" in lines 18, 21 and 24 is the teenager Faisal has just mentioned. Simplified and abbreviated transcription. Stylisations are in bold-face, unmarked text is vernacular Dutch. 'Woela' is Arabic for 'I swear'.

	Dutch original		English translation
1	Jam.:	nee zo sommigen zo die willen zo precies slijmen zo	no some people seem to want to kiss ass or so
2	JJ:	door-door veel Marokkaanse woorden te zeggen?	by by saying a lot of Moroccan words?
3	Jam.:	nee, en die spreken geen Marokkaanse woorden die	no, and they don't speak Moroccan words
4		spreken gewoon Nederlands [lachend:] met een	they just speak plain Dutch [laughs]
5		voos accent	with a lame accent
6	Imr.:	jaaah	yeaaah
7	Jam.:	zo '↑**hé kom**, **we gaan naar daar**↓'	like '↑**hey**, **let's go over there**↓'
8	Imr.:	ja	yeah
9	Jam.:	zo zeggen die Belgen … ja *woela woela*	that's what those Belgians say … yeah *woela woela*
10	Fais.:	JAAA! hé kom we gaan naar daar, die willen-	YEAH! hey let's go over there, they want to-
11	Jam.:	hé ik zweer het, weet gij hoeveel da wij der- ja	hey I swear, do you know how many we- yeah
12	Fais.:	zo die willen zo Marokkaan ( )	like they want to like Moroccan ( )
13	Jam.:	die willen Marokkaan maar die maken zo…	they want [to be] Moroccan but they make like …
14		belachelijk	ridiculous
15	JJ:	ma-ma bedoelde- w- '**hé kom we gaan naar daar**'	bu-but do you mean w- '**hey let's go over there**'
16		da is dan Neder- da's dan Marokkaans of wa?	that's Dut- that's Moroccan then or what?
17	Imr.:	die denken da	they think so
18	Jam.:	die kent geen Marokkaanse woorden, die spreekt	he doesn't know any Moroccan words, he speaks
19		gewoon Vlaams, maar illegaal Vlaams	plain Flemish, but Illegal Flemish
20	Fais.:	onze taal allee-	our language in fact
21	Jam.:	op- nee gewoon- V- da's nie Marokkaans, die spreekt	on- no just F- that's not Moroccan, he just speaks
22		gewoon Vlaams maar met fouten derin	Flemish but with mistakes in it
23	Imr.:	wij spreken zo nie	we don't talk like that
24	Jam.:	(die spreekt) me fouten wij spreken helemaal nie ( )	(he speaks) with mistakes we don't talk at all ( )
25	Imr.:	toen wij in 't lagere school zaten okee t-toen, toen	when we were in primary school okay t-then, then
26		misschien toen spraken wij toen spraken wij	maybe then we spoke then we spoke perhaps with
27		misschien zo van die rare, raar accent en dan eh	a strange, strange accent and then uh they
28		onthouden die da	remember that

of *illegaals* as a 'point of derogatory or comic reference' for various groups at the same time (*cf.* Rampton 2011b).

29	Jam.:	die hebben gewoon zo'n voos accent:	29	Jam.:	they just have a silly accent:
30		'↑**HE ↑HAMID↓! Gade gij mee naar ↑daar** ↑joenge↑↓!'	30		'↑**HEY ↑HAMID↓! Are you joining us over ↑there** ↑**man↑↓!**'
31		[smile voice:] die denken dat da Marokkaans is	31		[smile voice:] they think that's Moroccan
32	Imr.:	'**ikke nie gedaan**.' [lacht]	32	Imr.:	'**me done nothing**.' [laughs]
33	Jam.:	'**akke niks gedaan**.'	33	Jam.:	'**me done nothing**.'
34	JJ:	ja, maar gulle- maar dat is nie zo leuk zegde gij soms	34	JJ:	yes, but you- but that's not funny you say
35		dan voeldu ( )	35		sometimes you feel ( )
36	Imr.:	nee nee	36	Imr.:	no no
37	Jam.:	da's nie nee da's z-z-zo slijmbal, nu hé alleen maar	37	Jam.:	that's not noo- that's s-so slimeball, now, right?
38		slijmballen doen da	38		only slimeballs do that
39	Fais.:	ja ja da is	39	Fais.:	yeah yeah that's right
40	Jam.:	da's nie cool of niks, da's een Belg, die (doet)	40	Jam.:	it isn't cool or nothing, that's a Belgian, who (does)
41		Marokkaan	41		Moroccan
42	JJ:	maar ge zijt er nie door beledigd mochten ze da	42	JJ:	but you're not offended by it should they speak
43		zeggen zo?	43		like that?
44	Jam.:	nee, dan maken wij die gewoon zo uit 'hé slijmbal	44	Jam.:	no, then we just call him names: 'hey slimeball
45		bakkes dicht joenge'	45		shut it man'

It must be noted that Faisal and Jamal are probably not talking about the same thing, at least not initially. After Faisal's mention, prior to the extract, of a white Flemish friend with whom he speaks 'Moroccan' or a 'kind of Illegal Moroccan' (with Moroccan Arabic as the probable target variety given his friend's conversion to Islam), Jamal interprets this as an instance of a wider practice of 'Belgians who are trying to sound like a Moroccan-Flemish teenager' (with a particular kind of Dutch as the target). Beyond this, there are two aspects of this extract that are relevant to our purposes. First, it is clear that Jamal and Imran are taking offence at other people's implicit categorization of their regular speech as somehow attractive but different:

- Jamal calls Belgians' accommodating efforts to 'act Moroccan' an act of 'kissing ass' (line 1), as 'ridiculous' (line 14), or as 'what slimeballs do' (lines 37 and 44);
- he produces mocking imitations of these efforts, using an exaggeratedly oscillating intonation (lines 7 and 30) to illustrate how 'silly' the accent is (line 5) that Belgians then produce;
- Imran also undeniably relates Jamal's performance of Belgians' styling efforts in line 32 with an act of foreigner talk in producing an accented, stereotypically apologetic utterance ('me done nothing', repeated and made slightly more accented by Jamal in line 33). In this way, Imran suggests that Belgian teenagers who try to sound Moroccan are either incompetent speakers themselves or are inauthentically downgrading their own Dutch as if to talk to incompetent speakers. On another occasion, in fact, Imran resented that Belgians 'who talk with a Moroccan accent just want to show to other Belgians like hey I've got Moroccan friends', but subsequently speak 'normally' again when interacting with other whites.

Beside resentment of other teenagers' implicit labelling and insincere 'crossing' attempts (*cf.* Rampton 1995), the extract also contains a struggle around explicit linguistic labels. Many labels pass in revue here: 'Moroccan', 'Half Dutch half Moroccan' and 'kind of Illegal Moroccan' in the introduction to the interview extract, consequently in the actual extract we find 'plain Dutch with a lame accent' (line 4), 'Moroccan' (lines 16, 21, 31 and 41), 'plain Flemish' and 'Illegal Flemish (line 19) and 'Flemish but with mistakes in it' (line 22). Notable, however, is the serious disagreement among these friends (which actually began earlier in the interview when Jamal said he didn't appreciate the accommodative efforts of Faisal's friend): Faisal concludes in line 20 that what Jamal calls 'illegal Flemish' is in fact 'our language'. Both Jamal and Imran consequently disagree. Jamal points out that 'illegal' has to do with producing mistakes and cannot be confused with 'their' language (lines 21-22

and 24). Imran in his turn disagrees ('we don't talk like that', line 23), and points out that all differences are now long gone, dating from when they were at primary school.

This discussion itself must of course be interpreted within the frame of wider-spread ideas in Flemish Belgium about language names and linguistic differences and what they mean, sociopolitically speaking, for who is seen to own them. In this sense, it is notable that Jamal and Imran juxtapose their regular speech with what they see as accented, incorrect speech ('with mistakes in it'), and to what others perceive to be 'Moroccan' (*cf.* lines 3 and 16-19). Indeed, also the linguist's modest attempt at classifying their speech in line 16 is politely ignored or is immediately re-categorized as the faulty interpretation of other teenagers ('they think so'). Thus, in spite of observable linguistic differences that they resent others orienting to (even if positively), these students are presenting themselves implicitly and explicitly as plain, regular or competent Dutch speakers (although they may not all agree immediately about this), and they seem to want to avoid the sociopolitical damage that a recognition of these differences may confer upon them.

We believe it would be unwise to overlook such linguistic self-presentations, even if they are not explicitly motivated or partially ignore observable differences. Doing so in our view involves a unilateral decision that ignores the fact that linguists also have a stake in the sociolinguistic hierarchy to which these teenagers are clearly orienting in their self-labelling efforts. Most Flemish linguists, for example, would seriously object to being called a speaker of Flemish rather than Dutch, in spite of the obvious differences between their own speech practices and that of their northern neighbours. The question then is how linguists should approach this ground-level labelling. Should they simply accept the label speakers say suits them best? But what to do with the fact that labels often eclipse those phenomena with which the label is incompatible, and that particular kinds of other-labelling can be quite damaging (cf. Jaspers 2011a)? We will address some of these issues in our concluding section.

Approaching linguistic labels

Up to now we have seen that separately-labelled languages or codes are problematic concepts for explaining linguistic practices (section 1); that linguists' introduction of such labelled codes in public discourse may be troublesome (section 2); and that linguists' attempts at labelling language may not be welcomed with open arms (section 3). This however does not address the fact that – at least for the time being – the world outside this particular corner of (socio)linguistics is thoroughly 'languagized'; language names matter a great deal to people, not to mention that many linguists in other areas of the academy are far less concerned about the idea of languages and using language names (see e.g. Hinskens 2011). There is a risk, too, that in avoiding linguistic labels in public communication about their work, linguists may be making themselves (or may be judged as) incomprehensible or even irrelevant. Likewise, if linguists in their academic work simply treat labelling and the implications of this as proven-to-be-inadequate old-school practices that are undeserving of their attention, they may be badly equipped to examine other linguists' on-going labelling practices. Our suggestion is that it may be useful to distinguish between labels as ethnographic facts versus labels as professional acts, even if this distinction may not address every issue comprehensively.

Approaching labels as ethnographic facts means seeing them as member categorizations or ground-level interpretations of linguistic practices (with 'ground' also pertaining to digital or air-waved media). These do not have to be taken at face value, but must consequently be investigated for their accuracy (i.e., their relation to actual linguistic practices), their status as opposed to other metalinguistic names in the symbolic economy and the social meanings attached to them, their history, contexts of use and typical users. Such an

investigation may point not only to social distinctions and perceptions of which outsiders are largely unaware (*cf.* 'integrated' in Madsen 2011), but it can also offer important clues as to how labellers shape what they perceive as routine, non-labelled, linguistic behaviour, by styling away from or aligning towards the labelled linguistic practices (*cf.* Agha 2005; Hanks, Ide and Katagiri 2009; Jaspers 2010; Rampton 2011b). Moreover, in describing how people categorize and recognize ways of speaking as socially meaningful, we also tap into ideologizing processes and the politics of representation (*cf.* Bucholtz and Hall 2004). After all, labelling is an unavoidably political act. It consists of identifying an object's quality or its properties as opposed to other known qualities and properties that are already hierarchized or ordered in keeping with existing quality standards of various kinds (appropriateness, beauty, level of education, and so on). In labelling, therefore, we find attempts to define what an object or a practice is and where its place is in existing symbolic hierarchies. Applied to ways of speaking, linguistic labels can be approached as tools for engaging in a language-ideological struggle over what is to be seen as an attractive, legitimate way of speaking, or as shorthand 'ideological stories that people use to group certain signs, practices and persons together, positioning them in general social processes, differentiating them from others, aligning them with particular histories, trajectories and destinies' (Rampton 2011a: 3). The practice of using linguistic labels can in this way be seen as indexical of and as a starting point for exploring, and possibly criticizing, power relationships and 'othering' practices locally, across larger areas and historically (Bourdieu 1991: 90-102; Blommaert 1999; Stroud 2004; Androutsopolous 2010, 2011; Coupland 2010; Milani 2010). An analysis of language names, i.e. comparing names to linguistic forms as well as investigating the use of (and orientation towards) names in interaction and their mediation by larger-scale representations, can thus significantly contribute to the analysis of what Silverstein calls the 'total linguistic fact' (Silverstein 1985; *cf.* Rampton 2011b). It enables researchers to attend to the use of linguistic forms, social interaction and their ideological mediation simultaneously. Because they offer 'rich points' (*cf.* Agar 2010) for sociolinguistic description and analysis, linguistic labels are in this sense not something to avoid or ignore, but rather something of which to actively be aware.

Linguists grow up in languagized societies, and are therefore not immune to common-sense notions about language variation. On a more epistemological level, then, approaching labels as professional acts means inquiring into their accountability, i.e. investigating the extent to which linguists can justifiably account for working with a specific linguistic label. Writing about labels as ethnographic facts naturally warrants the use of these labels in analysis, but probably only as part of the data set rather than as an analytical concept. Given the intrinsically political nature of linguistic labels, it would be imprudent to assume that informants' use of a label for their own practices (e.g. *straattaal*) makes it a 'true' or descriptively more adequate alternative to other labels in use. That said, labels also offer opportunities. They can be used as a shorthand notion to refer to a shared experience of the sociolinguistic world. They offer opportunities for teaching, linguistic activism and intervention as well. A lay label can be put forward as a more positive or politically correct alternative for a derogatory term in use. Linguists have developed various technical terms with the same goal (such as 'Black English Vernacular', e.g. Labov 1972), attributing complexity and dignity to linguistic practices that are otherwise not usually viewed as such, or teaching their students that regional varieties or dialects could equally well be called a 'language'. Various labels have also been suggested to name and highlight what linguists see as new and as yet insufficiently-described linguistic practices, whether they be lay labels (such as *straattaal*, *rynkebysvenska*, *Türkendeutsch*, *Kietzdeutsch*) or by coining technical labels (such as ethnolect, multi-ethnolect, youth language, late modern urban youth style and so on).

All of this is justifiable, but it also implies responsibilities and an awareness of the limitations and drawbacks of labelling. Hence, apart from carefully considering the pros and cons of introducing a particular language name – not to mention apart from trying to find a way to discuss linguistic practices without resorting to language names – linguists may be said to have a monitoring duty for how labels are used in public communication, not least for the ones they themselves have introduced. As the discussions on *straattaal* in section 2 show, labels can live lives of their own as they are ideologized in public discourse and are subsequently recycled as stigmatic terms for their alleged owners. In cases such as these, a non-interventionist stance is difficult to sustain (*cf.* the emergence of *illegaals* in section 3). Neither is it uncommon that professional labels are picked up by non-professionals – as is the case for other meta-level concepts – and are used in daily interaction in a way that does not necessarily correspond to what they were originally meant to denote. This requires a continuous sensitivity for how a particular label is put to use in actual practice and what it is taken to mean, regardless of its use in sociolinguistics. Indeed, it means being alert to how a professional labelling act has become an ethnographic fact, and how, on the basis of its scientific credentials, it may be recruited in representations of the social world and policy-making. In addition, as already indicated, linguists also have language ideologies, so that (newly-developed) professional language names (such as for example 'Moroccan Dutch') may turn out to be largely reflective of these, and reproduce the current status quo in which linguists are often much better positioned than are the speakers they describe. An awareness of our own social location and perspective, and how this may impact on our work, is thus essential.

This monitoring duty also pertains to the use of labels within the discipline. Using 'language' for pedagogic purposes may be a useful first step, but it is one with a serious impact on sociolinguistic investigation if it only reinvigorates an interest in bounded languages and restricts analysis of and insight into those practices that defy the notion of language. Professional linguists need to go beyond this, away from the ideological premisses that the profession of linguistics has brought to bear on (socio-)linguistic analysis, and towards more sophisticated names for language use as social action in their analyses, teaching and writing, all the time taking notice of ground-level names for speech practices and approaching these with the abovementioned caveats. This should not be taken to imply that linguists ought to attempt to coin non-ideological labels, for these probably do not exist. The task is to find out what professional labels can highlight and why, and what they may consequently ignore or obscure. In this sense, Rampton (2011b) has argued that many professional labels unduly constrain our analytical muscle in their focus on a specific identity category (often seen as special, as opposed to what is perceived as ordinary). With terms such as 'ethnolect', 'youth language' or 'Black English Vernacular', for example, one risks ignoring the other relevant dynamics that usually obtain in the practices under investigation, such as class, gender or region. A more encompassing term, such as 'contemporary urban vernacular', is therefore needed. But in his advocacy of this term, Rampton clearly makes the ideological case that, among other things, this term is bound to be much less vulnerable for stigmatization than are other terms in circulation, and that it may help to normalize urban speech practices. Therefore, even if it can be seen as much more valuable, analytically speaking, than its alternatives, due to its capacity to include various social dynamics (or other dynamics than ethnicity or youth) simultaneously, not to mention its terminological simplicity, in its ideological focus, 'contemporary urban vernacular' is also bound to import its own descriptive limitations. For instance, the term inevitably evokes the notion of a code or language, or at least runs the risk of being understood as such, in spite of Rampton's own attempts to define it quite broadly (through indicating its dimensions (combinations of linguistic forms, social and individual variation, routine and non-routine practices) but

recognizing its fundamental structural unpredictability). The term has a denotational history, in other words, that its new meaning may not easily manage to erase when it is used with a lesser degree of detail or accuracy. As a result, it may largely inherit the meanings of the older terms it is intended to replace. Conversely, the more successfully the term helps to dignify the practices it names, the greater the danger that the owners of or participants in such practices may become locked into what has now been dignified; that is, the greater the chance these speakers will be exclusively or primarily associated with that part of their sociolinguistic lives that is covered by 'contemporary urban vernacular', to the detriment of lay and scholarly attention to their capacity to shift into and skilfully deploy less vernacular and/or less hybrid styles (academic, job- or family-related). These drawbacks and risks are arguably preferable to the more serious problems many other linguistic labels bring with them, but they illustrate that when it comes to the use of linguistic labels, we can never sleep the sleep of the just, and must continuously develop a sense for how political the labelling of speech practices is.

Appendix: transcription conventions

Bold	Stylizations of Belgians' attempt to speak 'Moroccan'
Italics	Arabic
CAPITALS	Increased volume
?	Rising contour
↑	Rising contour
.	Falling contour
,	Moderately falling contour
↓	Falling contour
[.]	short pause
[..]	longer pause
[text]	stage directions and details
( )	inaudible
(text)	analyst guess

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