

The mythology of street language

Leonie Cornips

(Meertens Institute)

&

Vincent de Rooij

(Amsterdam School for Social Science Research)

Adolescents in multilingual contexts

Network meeting NIAS, Wassenaar, 9-10 January 2009

Straattaal (street language) as an object of sociolinguistic research

- ‘Straattaal’ used to refer to youth varieties of Dutch characterized by
 - Lexical items from migrant-background languages
 - Grammatical innovations (+/- contact-induced)
- Term ‘straattaal’ introduced by Appel (1999)
 - ‘Emic’ term (used by speakers of ‘straattaal’)
 - As a way of avoiding pejorative connotations of ‘smurfentaal’ (smurf lingo)

Language ideology in sociolinguistic research of 'straattaal'

- Focus on difference, exotic nature (instead of looking at similarities and continuity with other varieties of Dutch)
- Naïveté in naming object of research, especially in contacts with the media
- Naïveté in using emic terminology (even if emic terms are available, neutral descriptive labels may be preferred)

Myths of 'straattaal'

- Myth of 'straattaal' as deficient Dutch
- Myth of 'straattaal' as deviant Dutch
- Myth of 'straattaal' as index & icon of social deviance and delinquency of its speakers

Myth of deficient Dutch

Educators and journalists versus (or *cum?*)
sociolinguists

Smurfentaal – smurf lingo

- Term used by teachers
- Popularized by an article in Amsterdam based newspaper 'het Parool' (December 24, 1997)

Myth of deficient Dutch: teachers in the media

Petra Noorlander (age 33, Amsterdam, teacher lower education):

“Het merendeel van de leerlingen,” zegt Noorlander, “is van Surinaamse komaf en de meesten praten thuis en op straat sranan. Alleen op school spreken ze Nederlands, of eigenlijk is het meer wat wij docenten gekscherend noemen **smurfentaal.**”

Most pupils have a Surinamese background and they 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, December 24, 1997),

Myth of deficient Dutch: teachers in the media

Dan hoor je ze zeggen: “Ik moet nog dingens doen, want straks heb ik dingens.” (...) Veel woorden kennen ze niet. Ze verwisselen het lidwoord *het* voortdurend met *de*, dus *de meisje*, *de boek* enzovoorts. Er zijn er die me regelmatig aanspreken met “meester” terwijl ik toch de juf ben.

So, you hear them say: “I have to do ‘dingens’ because later I have ‘dingens’. There are many words they don’t know. They switch the article ‘de’ for ‘het’, as in ‘the girl’ [‘de meisje’, combining ‘de’, determiner marking common gender, and ‘meisje’, a neuter noun], ‘the book’ [another example of a common gender determiner + neuter gender noun]. Some call me ‘meester’ [sir] while I am the ‘juf’ [miss].

Myth of deficient Dutch: teachers in the media

Volgens Noorlander is het niet toevallig dat een matig ontwikkeld Nederlands taalgebruik leidt tot een bepaalde felheid in de omgang met elkaar. “Ze praten niet, ze schreeuwen.”

According to Noorlander, it is not a coincidence that a poorly developed Dutch usage leads towards a certain intensity in their daily contacts. “They don’t talk, they shout”.

Moral panic in the Netherlands, late 1990s: youth from ethnic minorities speak 'smurfentaal' (smurf lingo)

- Young people no longer able to speak 'proper' Dutch
 - Restricted lexicon ('dingens', thing, as a filler of lexical gaps)
 - Grammatical 'mistakes' (e.g. loss of neuter gender showing up in use of definite article and adjective flexion)
- Erosion of 'proper', polite communicative behavior

“Aan hun manier van praten is ook een bepaald gedrag verbonden. Vraag ik: heb je je huiswerk gedaan Mustafa? Zegt-ie, terwijl ik hem notabene aankijk: wie, ik? Marokkanen zijn zelden rechtstreeks, altijd proberen ze tijd te winnen om eventueel nog andere onderhandelingsopties open te houden. Echte handelaren zijn het, ja.” 42 year old Dutch teacher in *‘het Parool’* (December 24, 1997)

“Their way of talking is also connected to specific behavior. Me asking: have you done your homework Mustafa? Says he, mind you while I’m looking at him: ‘who, me?’ Moroccans are seldom direct; they’re always trying to stall to try and keep (open) other possibilities to negotiate. They are real bargainers, yeah.”

Contra the myth of deficient Dutch: Evidence from Rotterdam corpus (Cornips & De Rooij 2004, Fieldwork by Hardenberg 2002)

- Feijenoord neighborhood in Rotterdam.
- Fieldworker from Surinamese creole origin
- a core-group of four male youngsters in their early twenties from Surinamese creole origin

Contra the myth of deficient Dutch

If one abandons a prescriptive and normative view on spoken language:

No lexical gap but discursive purpose

*GER: jullie gingen nog *dinges* bellen he dan.

you are going to call 'dinges', aren't you?

*RON: ja:

yes

*RON: iemands *dinges* was jarig zijn moeder of zo of zus.

someone's 'dinges' has his birthday, his mother or sister or so

Contra the myth of deficient Dutch: **change in progress** Cornips & De Rooij (2003)

*GER “Hij had *de* juiste merk aan maar toch gingen ze hem dissen.”

*he was wearing the_{common} right brand_{neuter}
but they still wanted to dis him*

*RON “Het is een beetje gebroken Engels, een beetje zelfgemaakte Engels.”

*it is a somewhat broken English a
somewhat self-made_{common} English_{neuter}*

Contra the myth of deficient Dutch: **change in progress**

Monolingual results in elicited production task for the determiner de/het (n=4; target in green) (cf Cornips et al 2006, Cornips 2008)

age: 10;5-12;11 n=4	definite determiner	
	<i>de</i>	<i>het</i>
neuter noun	18.7% 9/48	68.8% 33/48

Contra the myth of deficient Dutch: change in progress

Monolingual results in elicited production task for the attributive adjective +e/∅ (n=4; target in green) (cf Cornips et al 2006, Cornips 2008)

age: 10;5-12;11 n=4	attributive adjective	
	-e	∅
neuter noun	48.9% 47/96	48.9% 47/96

The myth of street language not belonging to Dutch (sociolinguistics)

Appel: Speakers of straattaal are the ones most fluent in Dutch, *but*:

Appel & Schoonen (2005: 85): “(...) *it [street language] is not 'normal' or 'common' Dutch, not even in the broad sense of the term, which would include regional and social dialects*’.

Contra the myth of deviant Dutch

(One variety of) speakers' L1 exhibits lexical items inserted (Sranan, English hip hop, Papiamentu) from one language into a Dutch structure:

Contra the myth of deviant Dutch

Sranan noun with Dutch inflection:

plural **-s**:

a ga je andere **patas** kopen.
 go you other shoes buy

diminutive **-(t)je**

b. een **killtje**
 a little boy

c. geen **smatje**
 no little girl

Contra the myth of deviant Dutch

Sranan adjectives always predicative, never attributive:

- a. het is **switi** vriend
 it is tasty friend
- b. dat je **bun** met je meisje gaat blijven
 ‘that you will keep a good relationship
 with your girl(friend)’

Myth of deviant Dutch (reinforced by styling)

imitation of Antillian youngsters

PAPIAMENTU

bai den patatzaak?
go in snackbar

imitation of Moroccan youngsters

MOROCCAN ARABIC

ach *zaghbie*, wat jij doet *zaghbie*
ach friend what you do friend

Myth of deviant Dutch in spite of (supra-)regional characteristics

hun = nom, 3p, pl instead of standard *zij/ze* ‘they’

*RON: *hun* zijn nog kinderachtig.
they are still childish

*RON: *hun* snappen het leven nog niet.
they don’t understand life yet

Myth of deviant Dutch in spite of (supra-)regional characteristics

*ROM: vertel jij iets over *je eigen*, wij vertellen+...
 tell you something about yourself, we tell

The myth of social deviance and delinquency

Appropriation of sociolinguistic uses of
straattaal by media.

The myth of social deviance and delinquency (media)

Trouw 29/01/2000

“Appel constateert dat een groot deel van de woordenschat obscene of agressief is: ‘bossen’, ‘hoeken’, ‘nakken’, ‘bieden’, de mogelijkheden om iemand te bedreigen zijn onuitputtelijk’.(...)”

Appel concludes that a large proportion of the lexicon is obscene or aggressive: ‘bossen’, ‘hoeken’, ‘nakken’, ‘bieden’, the possibilities to threaten someone are infinite.

The myth of social deviance and delinquency (media)

Toch meent hij dat van de beledigingen juist de scherpe kantjes afgaan dankzij de optuiging met leenwoorden. Bezwaren van de leerkrachten tegen de corrumperende invloed van straattaal deelt hij niet.' Jongeren zeggen heus niet *gimme afoe*, omdat ze onbekend zijn met de uitdrukking 'geef me een trekje' (ibid.)

Nevertheless, he thinks that the insults are softened by the use of borrowings. He doesn't share the objections from teachers against the corrupting influence of street language. 'Of course, youngsters don't say *gimme afoe* because they do not know the expression 'geef me een trekje'

The myth of social deviance and delinquency (media)

Dit wijst erop dat straattaal iets extra's is, waarbij overigens nog steeds voor veel jongeren geldt dat hun Nederlands matig tot zeer matig is. Dat lijkt me echter nauwelijks te wijten aan het gebruik van straattaal.'Dat 'extra's' waar Appel het over heeft wordt in het onderzoek naar de Amerikaanse zwarte getto's de 'cultuur van de armoede' genoemd (ibid.)

This indicates that street language is something additional. However, it is the case for many youngsters that their Dutch is poor. This, however, cannot be attributed to the use of street language. What Appel calls 'additional' is called culture of poverty in research of black getto's in the United States.

The myth of social deviance and delinquency (media)

Als Appel zijn zin krijgt, en er uitgebreid etnografisch onderzoek naar de gebruikers van straattaal wordt ingesteld, zal mogelijk net als in Amerika worden vastgesteld dat de cultuur van de armoede vooral armoede aan cultuur is. Wat er gebeurt als die straattaal geen woorden maar daden wordt laat zich lezen in [report on riots in Dutch neighborhoods]

If Appel would have his way and an extensive ethnographic research of street language users will be conducted, just as in the United States, it would possibly result in the finding that the culture of poverty is first and foremost a poverty [lack] of culture. What happens when street language turns from words into actions, can be read in [report on riots in Dutch neighborhoods]

The myth of social deviance and delinquency

(Zijlmans, science-editor *Volkscrant* newspaper)

‘Drie jongens van een jaar of 17 staan in de Amsterdamse metro. Een zwarte jongen, een Noord-Afrikaan en een blanke. Ze staan tegen elkaar op te scheppen, zoveel is duidelijk, al zijn ze nauwelijks te verstaan. Ze spreken een soort Nederlands, maar dan met een brij van onverstaanbare woorden er doorheen gehusseld. Nu en dan herhaalt een van de drie een duister woord een paar keer luidkeels: duidelijk is dat een van de anderen de gebruikte term dan niet kent.

Three youngsters of 17 years old sit in the Amsterdam metro. A black guy, a North-African and a white one. They are clearly boasting although one can hardly understand them. They speak some sort of Dutch but intermingled with a hodgepodge of incomprehensible words. Now and then one of them repeats a sinister word in a loud voice: it is clear that one of the others doesn't know the word.

Ze staan een beetje tegen elkaar aan te duwen, ze meppen elkaar op de rug, hun schouders raken elkaar. Al met al komt het drietal nogal luidruchtig en hardhandig over. Effect: alle andere reizigers in de metro blijven op veilige afstand. En dat is zo te zien ook precies de bedoeling. Niet alleen hun lichaamstaal zegt: 'Blijf uit de buurt', maar ook hun onverstaanbare taalgebruik zondert hen af van hun omgeving. Deze drie Amsterdamse jongens praten “straattaal” of “jongerentaal”.’

They are pushing and hitting each other on the back and their shoulders hit each other. Eventually, the three youngsters give a noisy and roudy impression. The effect is that all other passengers in the subway keep at a safe distance. By the looks of it, this is exactly the intention. Not only does their body language express ‘keep away from us’ but their incomprehensible language use sets them apart from the surrounding as well. These three Amsterdam youngsters talk street language or youth language.

Zijlmans, M. (2004). ‘Straattaal’. *Taalschrift: tijdschrift over taal en taalbeleid* (19/03/2004 <http://taalschrift.org/reportage/000485.html>).

Contra the myth of social deviance and delinquency

- Behavior perceived as loud, rude, violent may be an effect of boundary marking in settings of contacts between ingroup and outgroup (performing the Other)
- Speakers have jobs, or study: ethnographic research needed to question stereotypes in the media & public discourse in general

To conclude, some questions, and an answer (sort of)

- Why are we interested in studying whom we study? (youth, adolescents)
- Are we interested in deviance? And if so, why?
- Which groups remain invisible in our studies? (elites, mainstreamers?)
- Are we sufficiently aware of ideologies guiding our research? And are we too naïve in naming and presenting our objects of research?
- How do we handle the media? And how are we affected by the media and public discourse? (the media force us to objectify and to essentialize)
- Are we critical and reflexive enough in choosing and using research methods?
- A reflexive ethnographic approach forces us to keep asking ourselves these questions

References

- Appel, René. 1997. Jeugdtaal is van alle tijden en van voorbijgaande aard. *Het Parool* 24-12-1997.
- Appel, René. 1999. Straattaal. De mengtaal van jongeren in Amsterdam. *Thema's en trends in de sociolinguïstiek* 33. *Toegepaste taalwetenschap in artikelen* 62 (2): 38-55.
- Appel, René and Rob Schoonen. 2005. Street language: A multilingual youth register in the Netherlands. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 26 (2): 85-117.
- Backus, A. 2002. Etniciteit als sociolinguïstische factor. *Levende Talen Tijdschrift* 3 (1) : 3-10.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovic. 1986. *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovic. 1981. *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. Introduction. In Fredrik Barth (ed.) *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget. 9-38.
- Bucholtz, M. 1999. You da man: Narrating the racial other in the production of white masculinity. Ben Rampton (ed.) *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3/4: 443-460.
- Chandler, Daniel. 2001. *Semiotics for beginners*.
http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4Bsem02a.html#empty_signifier (24 January 2006).
- Cornips, L. 2008 'Loosing grammatical gender in Dutch. The result of bilingual acquisition and/or an act of identity?' *International Journal of Bilingualism - Ethnolects? The emergence of new varieties among adolescents*, 105-124.
- Cornips, Leonie. 2004. Straattaal: Sociale betekenis en morfo-syntactische verschijnselen. In Johan De Caluwe et al. (eds.) *Taaldeman, man van de taal, schatbewaarder van de taal*. Gent: Academia Press. 175-187.
- Cornips, L. & J. Nortier (eds) 2008 Ethnolects? The emergence of new varieties among adolescents. 144 p. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 12 (1&2).
- Cornips, L. & V. de Rooij & B. Reizevoort (2006) 'Straattaal: processen van naamgeving en stereotypering.' *Toegepaste Taalwetenschap in Artikelen* 76. *Thema's en trends in de Sociolinguïstiek* 5 (2), 123-136.
- Cornips, L. & V. de Rooij (2004). *The concept of 'neger' (negro) in a Rotterdam youth language and culture (The Netherlands)*. NWAV 33, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, V.S., 02-10.
- Cornips, Leonie and Vincent de Rooij. 2003. "Kijk, Levi's is een goeie merk: maar toch hadden ze 'm gedist van je schoenen doen 'm niet". Jongerentaal heeft de toekomst. In J. Stroop (ed.) *Het Nederlands van Nu en Straks. Waar gaat het Nederlands naar toe?* Prometheus: Amsterdam. 131-142.
- Coupland, Nicolas. Language, situation, and the relational self. In Penelope Eckert and John Rickford (eds) *Style and sociolinguistic variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 185-210.

- Cutler, Cecilia. 2003. "Keepin' It Real": White Hip-Hoppers' Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 13(2): 211-233.
- De Jong, Dirk-Jan. 1999. Transcripts. Interviews met jongeren in Amsterdam West.
- De Kleine, Christina Mary. 1999. *A morphosyntactic analysis of Surinamese Dutch as spoken by the creole population of Paramaribo, Suriname*. Michigan: Umi Dissertation Services.
- Doran, M. 2004. Negotiating between Bourge and Racaille: Verlan as youth identity practice in suburban Paris. Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (eds.) *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts*. Multilingual Matters: Frankfurt Lodge. 93-124.
- GGD Amsterdam. 2006. Seksueel gedrag in een subcultuur van tieners in Amsterdam Zuidoost: Rapportage van een quick scan. [Amsterdam: GGD Amsterdam].
http://www.ggd.nl/kennisnet/uploaddb/downl_object.asp?atoom=35101&VolgNr=341
- Halliday, Michael. 1976. Anti-languages. *American Anthropologist* 78(3):570-584.
- Hardenberg, Merlien. 2003. 'Streetlanguage'. Master Thesis. Haagse Hogeschool and Meertens Instituut.
- Hewitt, Roger. 1986. *White talk black talk. Inter-racial friendship and communication amongst adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Irvine, John. 2001 "Style" as distinctiveness: the culture and ideology of linguistic differentiation. In: *Style and sociolinguistic variation*. Penny Eckert and John Rickford (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 21-43.
- Lo, Adrienne. 1999. Codeswitching, Speech Community Membership, and the Construction of Ethnic Identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3(4): 461-479.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1935. *Coral gardens and their magic: a study of the methods of tilling the soil and of agricultural rites in the Trobriand Islands. Vol. 2: The language of magic and gardening*. London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1987. *Linguistic utopias*. In Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant, and Colin MacCabe (eds.) *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*. New York: Methuen. 48-66.
- Rampton, Ben. 2005. *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents (Second Edition)*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing. (First Edition published in 1995 by Longman, London).
- Rampton, Ben. (ed). 1999. Styling the other. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3(4).
- Rooij, Vincent de. 2005a. Contesting 'street language': Language practices and ideologies in Dutch youth subcultures, Paper read at NWA V (New Ways of Analyzing Variation) 34, New York, 20-23 October 2005.
- Rooij, Vincent de. 2005b. Codifying non-existing languages: The case of straattaal (street language). Paper read at the workshop Performing Anthropology: Epistemology, Craft and History, Amsterdam, 20-21 May 2005.
- Rooij, Vincent de. 2005c. De studie van etnolecten: Overdenkingen vanuit een etnografisch perspectief. Workshop Etnisch Nederlands, Utrecht University, Utrecht, 16 November 2005.
- Snijders, Ronald. 2000. *Surinaams van de straat*. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Sweetland, Julie. 2002, 'Unexpected but authentic use of an ethnically-marked dialect.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6 (4): 514-536.
- Vermeij, Lotte. 2004. "Ya know what I'm sayin'?" The double meaning of language crossing among teenagers in the Netherlands. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 170:141-168.
- Williams, Glyn. 1992. *Sociolinguistics: A sociological critique*. London: Routledge.