Ethnic labeling among pupils with migration backgrounds

'Turks', 'Moroccans', and 'foreigners' in the Netherlands

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This paper analyzes ethnic self-labeling among pupils of a secondary school in Venlo, the Netherlands. Pupils with migration backgrounds, born in the Netherlands, referred to themselves as 'Moroccan', 'Turk' or 'foreigner', and to others as 'Dutch'. Ascription to these ethnic categories is often understood as an expression of national (un)belonging. Based on nine months of linguistic ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that ethnic labels functioned to manage everyday interpersonal social relations and did not necessarily express feelings of (un)belonging to the nation. Rather, pupils used ethnic labels to associate social personae with particular styles and behaviors and to construct local social hierarchies. The paper contributes to the investigation of ethnic labels as signs with locally contingent meanings, which nevertheless retain indexical links with wider discourses about social categories and belonging. It furthermore emphasizes the necessity of investigating the local meanings of ethnic categories.

Keywords: ethnic labeling, membership categorization, classroom ethnography, ethnicity

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the use of ethnic category labels by pupils with migration backgrounds in a secondary school class in Venlo, the Netherlands (henceforth class 3b of South High School).[1] These pupils, almost all of whom were born in the Netherlands, referred to themselves as *Marokkaan* 'Moroccan', *Turk* 'Turk' or *buitenlander* 'foreigner' and referred to others (but not themselves) as *Nederlander* ('Dutch').

1. The names of the school, the class, and the pupils are pseudonyms.

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I explore the meanings of those categories in their local context, and in doing so, take issue with research that understands the use of ethnic labels for self-reference as an indication of a lack of national belonging (e.g. Azghari, Hooghiemstra, & Van de Vijver, 2015; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). Instead, the pupils of 3b used these labels as part of the formation a local, intra-national social order. Building on the close analysis of talk-in-interaction, I explore ethnic labels as signs with locally contingent indexicalities (Silverstein, 2003), which nevertheless retain indexical links with wider discourses about social categories and belonging.

In the first part of the paper, I suggest that the pupils treated the categories *Marokkanen, Turken*, and *buitenlanders* as kinds of people within the Netherlands. When prompted by the researcher, pupils discussed categories in relation to the countries to which they refer, but when pupils used categories on their own initiative, they highlighted locally embedded characteristics such as physical appearance, language, and style (e.g. clothing). The paper thereby emphasizes that labels need to be understood in terms of how they are contextualized by their users, and that they can index dimensions of social differentiation other than ethnicity (Chun, 2011; Nørreby, 2019).

Thereafter, I examine how pupils negotiated social hierarchies through category references, in particular by reversing the conventional pecking order of widely known categories. Thus, although categories like *buitenlander, Marokkaan* and *Turk* usually carry negative associations in the Netherlands, these categories carried prestige in this school. I argue that this enabled pupils to comment on stigmatization of people with migration backgrounds in Dutch society. The labels had thus acquired locally contingent meanings, but they also retained indexical links to discourses in Dutch society at large.

In order to understand how pupils' use of categories is embedded in wider social structures, it is necessary to first review the context of, and discourses surrounding, immigration in the Netherlands.

2. Frameworks: Ethnic categories in public discourse and research

Twenty-four percent of the Dutch population has a migration background (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2019). Approximately twenty percent of those people – almost five percent of the Dutch population – have a migration background in Morocco or Turkey. Although their presence can be traced back over fifty years, and over half of those with a Turkish or Moroccan migration background were born in the Netherlands, much popular, political, and media discourse in the Netherlands continues to represent these groups as national 'others' (e.g. Roggeband & Van der Haar, 2018). Terminology used to refer to people with

migration backgrounds plays an important role in this othering. An illustrative example of this in the Netherlands is the word *allochtoon*. When introduced in 1971, *allochtoon* was conceived as a factual and objective way to refer to all people with migration backgrounds in the Netherlands. It was used in research, statistics, and policy and later also in popular discourse, but increasingly became associated with people who were positioned as problematic – particularly young men with Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds (Roggeband & Van der Haar, 2018). After years of public discussions, *allochtoon* was abolished from official usage in 2016 and was replaced by 'person with a migration background.' Like *allochtoon*, this category continues to be divided into 'Western' and 'non-Western'. This division is not based on geography but on the supposed cultural similarity of a country to the Netherlands, which leads to the curious categorization of, for instance, Japan as 'Western' and Aruba as 'non-Western' – although Aruba forms part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Van der Haar & Yanow, 2011). Other terms, like 'Moroccan' or 'Moroccan Dutch' are also common in media, political and public discourse to refer to people with migration backgrounds.

Such labels are not only coined by outsiders or powerful institutions, however. Labels such as *Marokkaan* or *Turk* have been observed to be used as terms of self-reference throughout the Netherlands as well as in other countries (Bozay, 2012; Jaspers, 2011; Slootman, 2018). This phenomenon has entered research in different ways. Much quantitative scholarship has interpreted it as an indicator of a strong identification with, and orientation to, the country of origin (e.g. Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2010; Huijnk & Dagevos, 2012), which, in turn, is often thought to form an "[obstacle] to integration into Dutch society" (Bouras, 2013, p. 1220). Anthropological and sociolinguistic studies have challenged such interpretations, arguing that ethnic categories are context-specific, discursively constructed, multi-faceted, and negotiated in interaction, and that they can therefore have a variety of meanings (Bucholtz, 2011; Cornips & De Rooij, 2013; Lee, 2009; Nørreby & Møller, 2015). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that ethnic category labels can be "locally reconfigured to do non-ethnic work" (Nørreby, 2019, p. 138). Nørreby (2019), for instance, describes how a group of Copenhagen school children equated the labels 'araber' (for 'Arab') and 'perker' (a controversial term for immigrants, particularly from Middle Eastern countries) with academic and social failure. Chun (2011) notes that ethnic or racial terms can be used to provide ideological commentary on authenticity, but also on gender and class performance. With this paper, I aim to follow that scholarship and complement it with a case in the Dutch context by arguing, firstly, that the categories *buitenlander, Marokkaan, Turk* and *Nederlander* must be understood in their context of use, and that they cannot simply be interpreted as indexing non-belonging to the

Netherlands. Secondly, I argue that these labels do not necessarily signify 'ethnic identity' but may (also) have other local meanings and functions.

To investigate labels as resources with local meaning potential, and as a resource that participants use to interact, I build on membership categorization analysis (MCA). MCA focuses on how people 'do' person descriptions and recognize them in interaction. Categories come with associated characteristics and activities, which are largely shared between people in a same community or culture. This makes them inference rich: "[t]hey are the store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means ALL people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they behave, etc." (Schegloff, 2007, p. 469). In other words, categories have social meanings, and labels connotate indexical fields that may be different across contexts. Interactants negotiate and shape those indexicalities: they can contest, reinforce, alter, or discredit them by tying existing categories to new characteristics. Using MCA as a tool of analysis enables me to focus on participants' orientations to, and negotiations of categories in interaction. One MCA principle is that members can "allude to the category membership" (Schegloff, 2007, p. 470) by merely mentioning category-bound characteristics. In this paper, I use 'labeling' to refer to explicit mentions of membership category labels, and 'categorization' for more implicit categorization contexts.

In line with Brubaker's approach to ethnicity "not in terms of substantial groups or entities but in terms of practical categories" (Brubaker, 2002, p. 167), I analyze ethnic categories as a discursive construct, and ethnic labeling as a practice. Ethnic categories are "a key part of what [I] want to explain, not what [I] want to explain things *with*; it belongs to [my] empirical data, not to [my] analytical toolkit" (Brubaker, 2002, p. 165, emphasis in original). Hence, I do not use categories to interpret interactions, but I investigate them as a resource with which participants interact. Although I refer to the categories used by the pupils in this study as 'ethnic', they did not use the term 'ethnicity'. If anything, they spoke about *afkomst* 'descent'. What, then, justifies my characterization of those categories as ethnic? Firstly, I could have chosen 'national' or 'ethno-national' as a descriptor, but I agree with several authors that ethnicity, race, and nationhood can be construed as "a single integrated family of forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political contestation" (Brubaker, 2009, p. 21; see also Wimmer, 2013). There is not much sense in drawing boundaries between ethnicity, race, and nationhood, when taking them as a perspective on, rather than a thing in, the world. The question of interest here is not whether categories such as 'Moroccan' or 'Dutch' are ethnic or national categories, or what defines them, but rather how the idea that there is such a thing as 'Moroccanness' or 'Dutchness' is reproduced, and how the meanings of those categories are negotiated. I use the term 'ethnic

categories' to clarify the connection to research that refers to those categories as such (although they have also been termed 'national identities' (Koole & Hanson, 2002)).

3. Ethnographic fieldwork in class 3b

I collected the data for this paper during nine months of ethnographic fieldwork between January 2017 and March 2018, with one school class in Venlo, the Netherlands. Thanks to the accommodating attitude of the school administration, and with consent from pupils, teachers, and others involved, I accompanied one group of pupils during their third and fourth school years. I attended 333 class hours, leading to daily field notes, 140 hours of audio-recordings, and hundreds of pages of transcribed interactions. At the beginning of the fieldwork, most pupils were fifteen years old. They followed the 'basic vocational track' (*vmbo basis),* where pupils with migration backgrounds are overrepresented (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2018). Therefore, this is a fruitful place to study how youth with and without migration backgrounds engage in local negotiations of ethnic categories. I observed thirty-seven pupils in total, of whom eight had a migration background in Morocco, five in Turkey, and four in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Gabon, and the Dutch Antilles, respectively. All these pupils, except two, had been born in the Netherlands. The remaining twenty had no (known or recent) migration background. Most pupils had lived for most of their lives in or nearby Venlo, a middle-sized city in the Southern province of Limburg.

In my data collection, I built on linguistic ethnography: "an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures" (Creese & Copland, 2017, p. 340). Initially, the aim of the research was not to study ethnic categorization, but to understand the role of pupils' multilingualism in a school with a monolingual Dutch policy. The frequency with which participants labeled themselves and each other caused categorization to be one of my main foci. I gathered, transcribed, and coded 265 ethnic label references, amounting to almost two references for every hour of recording (excluding some that were unrecorded or inaudible on the recording). I avoided asking participants to label themselves, in order to see how and when they would bring up labels on their own accord. Often, categories came up fleetingly during all kinds of daily activities, such as gossiping or making fun (see Van de Weerd, 2019). The interactions that I analyze in this paper were selected because they are representative examples of common interactions in this context.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Labeling selves and others

Pupils with Turkish migration backgrounds in class 3b referred to themselves as *Turk* ('Turk'), pupils with Moroccan migration backgrounds called themselves *Marokkaan* ('Moroccan'), and the umbrella term that all pupils with migration backgrounds used for themselves and each other was *buitenlander* ('foreigner'). I did not observe the four pupils with migration backgrounds in countries other than Morocco or Turkey employ labels for themselves that were more specific than *buitenlander*. Pupils without migration backgrounds rarely categorized themselves: being *Nederlander* seemed unmarked, but as I will argue later, this category also lacked local prestige. Other pupils did use the label *Nederlander* 'Dutch person' (or its alternatives, *Hollander* and *tatta*)[2] to refer to them. Pupils without migration backgrounds rarely used the labels 'Turk', 'Moroccan' or 'foreigner', especially not in the presence of pupils who categorized themselves as such, as this raised the specter of discrimination. All pupils treated the existence of these categories as a given, but they also constantly negotiated what it entailed to be a member of a category.

When I spoke to pupils who labeled themselves *Marokkaan* or *Turk* about Morocco or Turkey, they signaled that they enjoyed taking their holidays there, but that it was 'too different' to live there permanently. Example (1) demonstrates such an interaction. It occurred during class, while Dounia and Yildiz worked on an assignment. The teacher was at the other end of the classroom, so the two (who were good friends) engaged in informal conversation. They had just been discussing the city in Morocco where Dounia's family is from when I ask the question in line 1, whether they would ever consider actually living in Morocco. The interaction shows that the pupils' labels for self-reference – Dounia referred to herself as *Marokkaan*, and Yildiz as *Turk* - did not seem strongly related to feelings of belonging to Morocco or Turkey.

2. In Limburg, *Hollander* commonly refers to a Dutch person from outside Limburg. Outside Limburg, *Hollander* refers to people seen as somehow prototypically Dutch. The pupils of 3b used it in that latter sense. The word *tatta* comes from *ptata* or *tata* ('potato' in the Surinamese language Sranan Tongo) where it is used to refer to a stereotypical image of a (white, potato-eating) Dutch person (Cornips & De Rooij, 2013).

Example 1.[3] 'I will not live there either'
15 May 2017. Participants: Dounia (D), Yildiz (Y), and the researcher (P).

```
1  P  maar zou je wel eens (.) denk je wel eens dat je een keer
      but would you ever (.) do you ever think that you will go
2     te- in Marokko wil gaan wonen? of niet.
      b- go live in Morocco? or not.
3  Y  I::[:L:]
      E::[:W:]
4  D     [wonen? ( ) niet.]
         [to live? ( ) not.]
5  Y     [wonen (kan gewoon) niet]
         [to live (simply can) not]
6  P  nee? wat dan?
      no? how come?
7     (1.0)
8  D  want ik ben hun di- dingen niet gewend, hoe hun doen
      because I am not used to their thi- things, how they[4] act
9     daarzo, [is wel apart].
      there,  [is kinda strange].
10 Y       [(            )] (.) ik (ga) daar ook niet wonen.
           [(            )] (.) I (will) not live there either.
11 P  nee. in Turkije bedoel je [dan]
      no. in Turkey you mean [then]
12 Y                          [ja in] Turkije
                              [yes in] Turkey
13 P  wil je ook [niet]
      you also don't [want]
14 Y             [nee] ik vind het [echt te druk in Turkije]
                 [no] I find it [much too busy in Turkey]
15 D                               [je kunt er wel op vakantie gaan]
                                   [you can go on holidays there]
16     maar wonen niet.
       but not to live.
```

In this interaction, Yildiz reacts to my question to Dounia about living in Morocco with an exclamation ('Ew!'), signaling shock, or even disgust. Dounia does not orient to this as an insult, but instead aligns with Yildiz. Although their exact words in lines 4–5 are unclear because they are speaking simultaneously, both girls state that they would not consider living 'there.' 'Living' is heard in opposition to going for holidays, as made explicit by Dounia in line 15. 'There' constructs an implicit opposition with 'here in the Netherlands.' Dounia elaborates on her reaction in lines 8–9: by explaining 'how *they* act *there*', she constructs 'Moroccans' in Morocco as Other, and thereby constructs an implicit 'we here'.

In line 10, Yildiz says she does not want to 'live *there* either.' However, Yildiz labeled herself 'Turk', and we had been talking about Morocco. Dounia's use of

3. Transcription conventions can be found at the end of this paper.

4. In Dutch, Amira's use of *hun* in the subject position (as Meryem's in line 44) is regarded to be non-standard Dutch. I translate it into a standard English phrase using 'they' because its use is widespread. Translating it as (e.g.) 'them' would portray it as more marked than it is in my view. Furthermore, patterns of 'non-standard' language use are not the focus of this paper.

the rather general words *them* and *there*, in line 8, seems to have made the link to Morocco, specifically, irrelevant to Yildiz. *There* has become a concept, meaning 'not here in the Netherlands' – whether that is Morocco or Turkey – and Yildiz reproduces it to refer Turkey. By constructing a 'them, there', they construct an implicit 'we, here', and can be said to produce a kind of shared belonging in the Netherlands.

As illustrated by Example (1), in the case of these pupils the act of labeling themselves *Marokkaan* or *Turk* did not necessarily co-exist with feelings of attachment to the country to which those labels referred, or at least not as strongly as often suggested. The next extracts show some of the category-incumbent characteristics that pupils brought up on their own initiative (instead of as a response to a question, as in Example (1)) in discussions about categories. The characteristic discussed in Example (2a) is physical appearance. During a class in which I sat next to Amine, he asked me whether I would have guessed that he was *Marokkaan*, had I not known him. I was surprised by his question and said I was not sure. The conversation continued as transcribed below.

Example 2a. 'I don't look like a Moroccan.'
16 June 2017. Care and well-being class. Participants: Amine (A), and the researcher (P).

```
1  P  maar Amine, hoezo vraag je dat?
      but Amine, why do you ask that?
2  A  gewoon (.) omdat ik heel vaak van mensen hoor d-dat ik niet
      because (.) because people often tell me th- that I don't
3     (.) dat ik op geen Marokkaan lijk.
      (.) that I look like no Moroccan.
4  P  dat je niet op een Marokkaan lijkt.
      that you don't look like a Moroccan.
5  A  ja.
      yes.
6  P  oké en vind je dat (.) f-fijn? of stom.
      okay and do you (.) find that g-good? or bad.
7  A  maakt mij niks uit (.) ik vin- ik vind dat ik ook
      it doesn't matter to me (.) I thin- I think that I also
8     niet op een Marokkaan lijk maar
      don't look like a Moroccan but
9     (0.5)
10 P  en hoe zou een Marokkaan wel zijn dan?
      and how would a Moroccan be then?
11 A  echt zwart haar
      really black hair
12 P  ah oke, en jij hebt dat niet.
      ah alright, and you don't have that.
13 A  ik lijk op zo (0.7) hoe heet dat, Brazilië (en zo).
      I look like (0.7) what's it called, Brazil (and such).
      ((25.0 seconds omitted))
19 P  maar zou je liever meer op een Marokkaan willen lijken dan?
      but would you rather look more like a Moroccan then?
20    (0.5)
21  A ik- ik ben wel Marokkaan, maakt echt niets uit hoor.
      I- I still am a Moroccan, it really doesn't matter you know.
```

This extract demonstrates that Amine considered physical appearance important to being (perceived as) a member of the locally established category *Marokkaan*. Although he states that 'it doesn't matter' in line 7, and that he 'still is a Moroccan' in line 21, and thereby debates the assumption that the essence of category membership is physical appearance, the fact that he has just asked me about it suggests that it did matter to him. However, Amine gives short and evasive replies to my persistent requests for an emotive evaluation of his physical appearance (lines 6 and 19). In trying to elicit his opinion, I never actually respond to Amine's initial question. In line 21, he apparently tries to end the conversation with an evaluative statement. Then Stefan, who had been sitting next to Amine during the conversation, joins in and introduces another characteristic that could potentially define category membership: nationality.

Example 2b. 'I don't look like a Moroccan'
Continuation of Extract 2a. Stefan (S) joins the conversation.

```
22 S  je moet blij (.) je moet blij zijn zijn met de
      nationaliteit
      you have to (.) you have to be happy with the nationality
23    die je hebt.
      that you have.
24 P  maar hij is (.) jouw nationaliteit is Nederlands, toch?
      but he's (.) your nationality is Dutch, right?
25 A  ja
      yes
26    (0.7)
27 A  maar ik ben gewoon Marokkaans.
      but I am simply Moroccan.
28    (0.5)
29 P  en Nederlands
      and Dutch
30 A  ja
      yes
31 P  of vooral Marokkaans?
      or mostly Moroccan?
32 A  vooral Marokkaans
      mostly Moroccan
33 P  ja? voel je je meer Marokkaans dan Nederlands?
      yes? you feel more Moroccan than Dutch?
34 A  ja (  )
      yes (  )
35 P  en als je naar Marokko gaat?
      and when you go to Morocco?
36 A  dan voel ik me (.) dan voel ik me echt Nederlands.
      then I feel (.) then I really feel Dutch.
37 P  dan voel je je Nederlands ja? hoe komt dat?
      then you feel Dutch yes? how come?
38 A  ik weet niet (.) ik-ik ben de enige Marokkaan die
      I don't know (.) I-I am the only Moroccan who
39    Hollands kan praten enzo
      can speak Hollandish and such
40    (0.8)
41 A  ik kan echt niet volle (.)
      I can't speak full (.)
42    ik kan niet echt volop Marokkaans praten.
      I can't really fully speak Moroccan.
```

In this part of the interaction, Amine and Stefan introduce more factors that, to them, may define what it is to be a *Marokkaan*. In Stefan's eyes, it seems that nationality defines a person's category. I had not heard the pupils talk about 'nationality' in relation to category membership before, and in my confusion seek to confirm with Amine that his nationality is Dutch in line 24. By stating that he is 'just Moroccan' in line 25, Amine constructs the category *Marokkaan* as something that 'just is', regardless of 'nationality'. Stefan does not further contribute to the conversation, but his one comment seems to be what launched me into a series of questions (lines 24, 29, 31, 33) about 'being' or 'feeling' *Nederlander/Nederlands* or *Marokkaan(s)*. Amine produces very short answers: my insistence on his 'feelings' about being or looking like a *Marokkaan* appears to make him uncomfortable.

In lines 36–42, Amine engages with my question (of line 33) about his 'feelings' of being 'Moroccan' or 'Dutch' in Morocco. He speaks about language proficiency to contextualize feeling *Nederlands* when in Morocco. When he is outside the regular context within which this categorization occurs (i.e. the Netherlands), there is a shift in orientation from the opposition *Marokkaan-Nederlander*, in which he identifies with the former, to different kinds of *Marokkaan*: one in the Netherlands (like himself), and another in Morocco. Similar to Dounia and Amira in Example (1), he constructs these as categorically different. Amine's self-categorization in line 38 remains defined by the category *Marokkaan* but is now complemented with a quality (speaking *Hollands* 'Hollandish').[5] The other kind of *Marokkaan* lives in Morocco and speaks 'Moroccan', unlike Amine (line 41–42). Amine's lack of proficiency in 'Moroccan' (it is unclear whether he refers to Moroccan Arabic or Berber) makes him feel like an outsider in Morocco, but it does not change his use of the label *Marokkaan* to refer to himself. Note, also, that Amine uses the adjectival 'Dutch' (*Nederlands*) rather than the noun *Nederlander* in line 36. In class 3b, this noun was typically reserved for categorical use in reference to people without migration backgrounds.

In Examples 2a and 2b, Amine and Stefan (and I) negotiate essences of category membership. At first, Amine seems preoccupied with his perceived deviance from expectations regarding physical appearance, and wonders whether that makes other people recognize him as a *Marokkaan*. When in the context of Morocco, he constructs language proficiency as more central to category membership: being there makes him feel more 'Dutch' because he does not speak 'Moroccan'. So, in contrast with accounts that suggest that labels such as *Marokkaan*

5. Rather uncommonly, Amine refers to the Dutch language as *Hollands* ('Hollandish') instead of *Nederlands* ('Dutch'). This had not happened before and did not happen after, and it is unclear to the researcher why Amine might have done so.

indicate feelings of belonging to Morocco or unbelonging to the Netherlands, the data discussed here illustrate that label use is much more complex. When pupils talked about ethnic categories on their own accord, they distinguished between different social categories with the same label, and they highlighted and negotiated category-incumbent features other than national belonging. Categories could be associated with many locally embedded characteristics, including physical appearance, nationality, 'feeling', or language proficiency. The pupils constantly negotiated the degree to which these or other factors defined category membership, and these essences furthermore shifted according to context. Ethnic labels for self-reference can thus not simply be taken as a measure of national 'belonging': their meaning is constructed and negotiated in interactions between individuals and depends on the context of use.

The next section further illustrates the meanings and functions of membership categories among the pupils of 3b, particularly in relation to local social hierarchies.

4.2 Labels and local social hierarchies

Although much literature and public debate assumes an association between ethnic labels and ethnic identity work, these interpretations rarely take stock of the non-ethnic work that can be done by reference to ethnic labels. Pupils of 3b labeled selves and others based on a family history of migration, but they also often assigned ethnic labels to cultural signs or personal characteristics that they could have interpreted in many other ways (Chun, 2011). For example, in the next interaction, a pupil relates an activity that appears wholly unrelated to descent to being a 'foreigner'.

Example 3. The *polonaise*
I ask Naomi and Hatice whether they had a good time at the school party last night. Naomi says she didn't like the music much. Hatice says: 'I danced to all the songs. I even did the *polonaise*!' I laugh: 'You did the polonaise?' Hatice, also laughing: 'Yes, all the *buitenlanders* [foreigners] did that, only the *buitenlanders*.' (field notes, 2 June 2017)

Interpretation of this short interaction requires an analysis of the connotations of the *polonaise* and of 'foreigners' in this specific context. Hatice (who commonly labeled herself *Turk* or *buitenlander*) comments that 'all the *buitenlanders*' (thereby including herself) did the *polonaise*: a kind of conga line that can be perceived as 'typically Dutch', and in this local context also has connotations of Carnival celebrations and may index a regionalized identity (Cornips & De Rooij, 2015). Pupils who labeled themselves *buitenlander* generally distanced themselves from

styles or behaviors that they considered typically 'Dutch' or 'Limburgish'. Possibly, Hatice found it worthy of recounting that *buitenlanders* did a dance seen as typically Dutch or Limburgish because to her this was categorically incongruent and therefore humorous. This short interaction furthermore alludes to the hierarchization of categories in class 3b. Example (3) is one of many examples in my notes and recordings that demonstrate how in class 3b the category *buitenlander* carried prestige and *Nederlander* did not. The incongruence of 'cool' pupils doing something 'uncool' may have been another reason why Hatice pointed out this event as remarkable.

The local prestige in being a *buitenlander* presents a striking contrast with the image of those social categories in Dutch society more generally, in which people with migration backgrounds are often portrayed as problematic. Especially the image of the 'Moroccan' in much national media is that of a 'folk devil' (Bouabid, 2016): it is often associated with nuisance, criminality, or religious extremism. In 3b, however, these categories carried prestige: pupils related them to characteristics and behaviors that they related to status, such as having a good sense of humor, not (always) subjecting to authority, or being relaxed about money. In much the same process, pupils linked the label *Nederlander* to behavior considered 'uncool'. Ahmed, for example, drew on the stereotype of Dutch stinginess during a class discussion about an upcoming school excursion: "That's a real *tatta* right there: 'My parents have paid so I will go.'" On another occasion, I asked Amira, Meryem and Dounia whether they had friends who were *Nederlanders*. They replied: 'No, they are so boring. They don't have the same sense of humor.'

Pupils who labeled themselves *buitenlander* thus framed prestigious signs and behaviors as indexical of their category. When *Nederlanders* performed those signs and behaviors, they could be judged as 'wannabes'. This happens in Example (4), which occurred in the context of an informal group conversation.

Example 4a. 'Gucci caps and little bags'
16 June 2017. Participants: Farida (F), Yildiz (Y), Meryem (M) (categorized themselves as 'Turks'), Amira (A), Dounia (D) (categorized themselves as 'Moroccans'), and the researcher (P).

```
1  P  ik hoor ook [wel eens mensen die]
      I also sometimes hear [people who are]
2  F                        [heh-heh]
                            [heh-heh]
3  P  bijvoorbeeld (.) mensen die niet Marokkaans zijn
      for example (.) people who are not Moroccan
4  A  °ja
      °yes
5  P  eh eh Marokkaanse woorden gebruiken.
      eh eh using Moroccan words.
6  A  ja:
      yes:
7  M  JA dat [snap ik ook niet]
      YES I  [don't get that either]
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8  A         [hun willen Marokkanen worden]
             [they wanna become Moroccans]
9  M  aar ja  [lukt niet helaas]
      but yes [they can't unfortunately]
10 M          [dat snap ik ook niet]
              [I also don't get that]
11 P                   [heh-heh] snap je niet [eh:]
                       [heh-heh] you don't get it [eh:]
12 M                                              [nee]
                                                  [no]
13 A  of dan gaan ze Gucci petjes dragen
      or then they wear Gucci caps
14 M  of ze doen zich
      or they do as if
15 A  [tasje]
      [little bag]
16 M  [ja ze] doen kleren aan wat [meestal buitenlanders aandoen]
      [yes they] wear clothes that[6] [usually foreigners wear]
      ((33 seconds omitted))
40 P  maar (.) maar waarom doen mensen dat dan (.)
      but (.) but why do people do that then (.)
41    dat vind je dus raar eigenlijk [als ze dat doen]
      so you find it weird actually [when they do that]
42 A                                 [ja is ook] raar, iedereen heeft
                                     [yes it is] weird, everyone has
43    toch zijn eigen cul[tuur]
      their own culture [right]
44 M                     [kijk] meestal hebben buitenlanders dat aan
                         [look] usually foreigners wear that

45    en dan (.) Nederlanders kunnen dat wel aandoen maar hun doen
      and then (.) Dutch people can wear it but then they also use
46    dan ook die Marokkaanse woorden enzo gebruiken doen ze alsof ze
      Moroccan words and stuff and act as if they
47    buitenlanders [zijn]
      are foreign[ners]
48 A                [ja:]
                    [yes:]
49 P  oké maar (.)als iemand eh eh als een Turks iemand een
      Marokkaans
      okay and if someone eh eh if a Turkish person uses a Moroccon
50    woord gebruikt, is dat dan beter? is dat dan
      word, is that then better? is that then
51 M  ja:: vind ik wel
      yes:: I think so
52 Y  want [Marokkanen gebruiken ook] Turkse woorden
      because [Moroccans also use Turkish] words
53 A       [is ande:rs]
           [is di:fferent]
54 A  is gewoon hetzelfde, Marokkaans [en Turks]
      is just the same, Moroccan [and Turkish]
55 M                                [ja is] bijna hetzelfde daarom
                                    [yes is] almost the same that's why
```

My statement in lines 1-3-5 about people 'who are not Moroccan' who use 'Moroccan words' launches Amira and Meryem into a conversation not about language,

6. I have translated the (non-standard) use of *wat* ('what') into standard English 'that' for the reason described in note 5.

but about 'people who are not Moroccan' versus 'Moroccans' (line 8). Amira and Meryem construct language as a central characteristic of the category *Marokkaan*. The language they refer to is not the same as that which Amine spoke about in Example (2b), however. Amine mentioned not being able to 'fully speak Moroccan', which made him feel 'Dutch' in Morocco. Amira and Meryem refer to the insertion of 'Moroccan words' into utterances that are otherwise regarded as Dutch as indicative of the category *buitenlander* 'foreigner'.

In line 7, Meryem comments that 'she does not get it either', implying that she and I both do not understand why 'people who are not Moroccan' would use 'Moroccan words'. During my fieldwork, however, I observed that Meryem categorized herself as a 'Turk' and often used Moroccan words: She thus engaged in the practice about which I asked. Here, she constructs it as something that 'others' do, however, and in fact changes the category we are discussing from 'Moroccans' to 'foreigners' in line 16 – thereby including herself in the imitated category. This is not marked nor taken up as a change in topic. The practice of 'using Moroccan words' is thus constructed as a central characteristic not only of the category *Marokkaan*, but of the category *buitenlander* more generally. This equation of *Marokkanen* and *buitenlanders* in terms of language and dress continues in the rest of the conversation. In line 42, Amira stresses that it is 'weird' when people use language and display signs that she perceives as incongruent with their category, because 'everyone has their own culture.' She constructs the category *Marokkaan* as a 'culture' that one 'has', which is shared (or shareable) between *Turken* and *Marokkanen* and desirable but unreachable to others.

The pupils thus assigned rather generalized 'ethnic' meanings to language, clothing, and accessories: the main opposition built in the interaction is one between *buitenlanders* (including and equating *Turken* and *Marokkanen*) and *Nederlanders*. This might have to do with recipient design (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974): during the fieldwork, they had categorized me as a *Nederlander* and may have assumed that I was oblivious to differences between different 'kinds' of *buitenlanders*. Another possibility is that, for these pupils, the categories *Turk* and *Marokkaan* were sufficiently similar with regard to certain locally indexed category incumbent characteristics and activities that they could use the labels interchangeably in discussions of those characteristics. Either way, their equation of *Turken* and *Marokkanen* shows that the pupils shaped these categories in a locally specific way, as embedded in the Netherlands, and related them to stylistic choices in (e.g.) language and clothing.

A few minutes later, I asked the pupils why they thought people display such 'incongruent' behavior. This brings up the topic of social hierarchies more explicitly.

Example 4b. ‘Gucci caps and little bags’
Continuation of Example (4a).

```
120  P  waarom denk je dat ze dat doen
        why do you think they do that
121  A  (.) om d’rbij te horen
        to belong
122  P  waar[bij]
        to [what]
123  M      [ja dat] [is altijd]
            [yes that’s] [always that way]
124  A                  [bij de groep]
                        [to the group]
125  D  wannabe moc[ro]
        wannabe moc[ro]
126  Y             [ge]woon om bij de buitenlanders [bij] te horen
                   [just] to belong with the foreig[ners]
127  A                                             [ja]
                                                   [yes]
128  P  omdat dat stoe:rder is (.) of
        because that’s cooler (.) or
129  A  [ja:] denk het wel
        [ye:s] I think so
130  M  ja denk het ook wel
        yes I think so too
131  A  omdat (.) die (.) Marokkanen en Turken heel veel
        because (.) the (.) Moroccans and Turks get a lot of
132     aandacht krijgen denk ik
        attention I think
133     (0.3)
134  P  wat voor aandacht
        what kind of attention
135  A  gewoon e:m
        just e:m
136     (0.7)
137  A  hoe zeg je dat
        how do you say that
138  Y  ja ik weet wa-
        yes I know wha-
139  A  hun hebben je weet toch zo altijd dat groepje en dan zie
        they have you know kind of always that group and then you
140     je zo een paar Hollanders zo d’rbij staan (.) terwijl hun
        see a couple of Hollanders stand there (.) while they also
141     ook in dat groepje willen horen
        want to belong with that group
```

Here, the pupils continue to use the categories *buitenlander* and *Marokkaan* interchangeably. Yildiz speaks about ‘foreigners’ (line 126) and Dounia uses the term ‘wannabe mocro’ in line 125. ‘Mocro’ functions as a synonym for *Marokkaan* here and is associated with youth language in the Netherlands. The use of this word points to the intertextuality of these categories: discourse about them circulates beyond this school class, in Dutch society more generally. Together, Amira, Yildiz and Meryem construct the display of characteristics that they associate with being a *Marokkaan* or *buitenlander,* when performed by a *Nederlander,* as an effort to appear *stoerder* ‘cooler’ – which is the adjective that I offer in line 128. In the

rest of the interaction, they further position the categories *buitenlander, Turk* and *Marokkaan* as eligible for imitation in order to raise one's status.

'Reading ethnicity' (cf. Chun, 2011) in class 3b thus indexed dimensions of social differentiation other than ethnicity, as pupils placed categories along a hierarchy of prestige in reversal of societal discourses. This can be seen as pupils' commentary on structures of social inequality in the Netherlands, of which they were very aware: they recounted experiences of being told to 'go back to their own country' and felt that '*buitenlanders*' had fewer chances at getting a job at particular supermarkets. Reversing the local indexicalities of those labels enabled them to comment on, and deal with, the stigmatizing discourses that affected them outside school.

5. Conclusion

I argued that pupils who labeled themselves *Marokkaan* 'Moroccan', *Turk* 'Turk', and/or *buitenlander* 'foreigner', used these labels to engage in local, interpersonal, and intra-national categorization. Pupils categorized themselves and others according to their migration backgrounds, but in daily use, the categories had a number of locally contingent associations. The examples of interaction illustrate that when pupils talked about ethnic categories on their own initiative, they highlighted category-incumbent features other than specific countries or national belonging: they distanced themselves from the country their labels refer to (Example 1), and mentioned physical appearance (Examples 2a and 2b), dress style (Examples 4a and 4b), or behaviors such as being stingy. Ethnic labels were thus "locally reconfigured to do non-ethnic work as a result of everyday interactional negotiations leading to new common understandings" (Nørreby, 2019, p. 138). As illustrated by Examples (3), (4a) and (4b), non-ethnic work with ethnic labels in this context included negotiations of social status.

Nevertheless, the labels retained indexical links with wider Dutch discourses in which people with migration backgrounds are stigmatized, associated with religious extremism and conservatism, and accused of not 'integrating' (Bouabid, 2016). The pupils of class 3b sometimes explicitly commented on these discourses, for example saying it was unfair that it was harder for them to get a part-time job at the local supermarket. A more implicit but also more pervasive way in which they appeared to comment on this inequality was that they reinterpreted the categories *buitenlander, Marokkaan* and *Turk*. They linked those categories to signs and behaviors they considered 'cool' and linked *Nederlander* to less appealing ways of being. This gave them the status that they were not accorded in most contexts outside school.

In sum, ethnic labels have a complex and locally contingent meaning potential, which must be investigated in interaction, while at the same time paying attention to how they are embedded in societal structures. This paper explored ethnic labeling in one school class in the Netherlands, but the broader point also applies to other (international) contexts in which similar labels are used. Linguistic ethnography and analysis of talk-in-interaction can help capture the local indexicalities of labels, as well as their relation to supra-local discourses.

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Appendix. Transcription conventions

[ ]	overlapping talk
(0.5)	intervals within or between talk (measured in tenths of a second)
(.)	Pause or gap, shorter than 0.2 seconds
.	closing intonation
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
–	abrupt cut off of sound
:::	extension of preceding sound
<u>underlining</u>	emphasis
CAPITALS	loud speech
( )	transcriber unable to hear
(word)	transcriber uncertain of hearing

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