Youth, language and urban public space

Where geography and linguistics meet

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This paper presents an interdisciplinary study on the interface between young people, their language use, group belonging and urban space. Relevant literature from the fields of sociolinguistics and urban geography is reviewed and integrated, focusing on language, identity and place. The outcomes are based on on-site interviews and focus group meetings that were used to explore and explain the in-depth meanings of our assumption: language is a situated practice. Participants reported to adjust their language use to place 'automatically', indicating the awareness of unwritten norms. Furthermore, being in or out of place and adjustment of language use is merely a function of the presence of other people. It is concluded that the space where young people find themselves is crucial for physical and social distance between the self and others and, therefore, the way language is used.

Keywords: youth, identity, sociolinguistics, urban public space, group belonging

1. Introduction

In sociolinguistics there is a growing interest in 'language in the city' and in multilingual policy in urban regions (e.g., Redder et al., 2013; King & Carson, 2016). The internationally leading conference Sociolinguistics Symposium 19 (Berlin, August 2012) had 'Language and the City' as its central theme. It seems that in most studies, terms such as 'urban' and 'city' are used in opposition to 'rural' or 'the countryside', and sometimes they serve as an undefined background ('wallpaper') against which linguistic practices are positioned. Of course, the city is a place with close-knit and multiplex networks where people with different social profiles live next to each other in neighbourhoods. However, the combination of a diverse and dense population and different kinds of public space that exists in the city, offers an

https://doi.org/10.1075/dujal.17001.aal
Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics 7:1 (2018), pp. 68–88. issn 2211-7245 | e-issn 2211-7253
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exciting opportunity to explore the ways that its users attach meaning to the city and its public space, and to study mechanisms and processes of appropriation. Within the city, many social encounters that make up daily life take place in public space: streets, shops and parks. They are the spaces where we experience public city life (Zukin, 1995).

In this paper, we contribute to the development of knowledge about the relation between the language of young people and the use of urban public space by combining a sociolinguistic approach with the study of urban geography, which has a vast body of literature and research on the experience of specific places and the place behaviour of different user groups (e.g., Senett, 1978; Mitchell, 1995; Lofland, 1998; Low & Smith, 2006; Iveson, 2007). Young people are an interesting group to focus on, since they have a unique relationship with urban places. Streets, squares, sport clubs, schools, shopping centres and nightlife areas are not only sites for them to meet, play and 'hang out', but also sites to learn and interact with peers, as a stage for performance where they construct their identities (Lieberg, 1997; Tani, 2015).

Urban geographers are showing an increasing interest in multi-ethnic encounters between young people in urban public space (e.g., Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Spierings, Van Melik, & Van Aalst, 2016). Although it could be hypothesized that language plays an important role, and talking is central to the production of most public spaces (Laurier, 1999), knowledge about this topic and the position of language has received little attention in the field of human geography.

Within sociolinguistics, much work has been done on linguistic landscaping, defined as the study of 'visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region' (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23). However, the relation between place and linguistic practices among and between groups of (young) people is more relevant for the purpose of this paper and will therefore be focused on.

Inspired by the lack of a shared research tradition between our disciplines – sociolinguistics and urban geography – we established an interdisciplinary research group within the University's strategic programme 'Dynamics of Youth'. Fieldwork and data collection were carried out from May till the end of October 2014, guided by the following research question:

> *How and to what extent are groups of teenagers and adolescents attracted to specific public places in Utrecht, and how is this related to the ways they express themselves linguistically in order to construct and protect their group belonging?*

This paper makes connections between two disciplinary approaches and perspectives. In addition to presenting a small-scale exploratory study, the paper also reflects the authors' experience of cooperating in a new field. Following a

theoretical section on central terms and concepts that emerge from the literature of both disciplines, we analyse the relation between youth, language and public spaces. The research results, which are based on on-site interviews and focus group meetings with young urban people, show that a holistic view, namely the integration of the two disciplines, is more than the sum of two research fields.

2. Theoretical framework: Where urban geography and sociolinguistics meet

How are language and urban geography related? Language is both a strong mirror and a creator of individual and group behaviour. In Blommaert's (2010, p. 10) words: 'Language is an extremely sensitive indicator of broader social and cultural processes'. In the same vein, Ahearn argues that 'questions about social relations and cultural meanings can best be answered by paying close attention to language' (Ahearn, 2012, p. 17).

Language is a strong and rich resource for semiotic expressions and messages, since it is dual in nature: linguistic forms not only convey a referential message but also contain reference to social meaning and identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This can be illustrated by the differences in pronunciation of Dutch /g/ as in *geld* (money) or *morgen* (morning, tomorrow). In the southern parts of the Netherlands, these words are pronounced with a soft /g/, whereas the hard /g/ is found in other parts of the country. The pronunciation of *geld* or *morgen* thus refers to region on a broader sociocultural level. Moreover, the soft /g/ is associated with people from the south – who are supposed to have *joie de vivre* – whereas the hard /g/ is associated with people from the north, who are believed to be more reserved. The fact that linguistic forms constitute this semiotic meaning makes them powerful resources for people trying to align themselves with or distinguish themselves from others: '(…) the analysis of language use is the area par excellence where constructions of belonging to places and groups can be studied closely' (Thissen, 2013, p. 123).

In Section 2.1., a selection of the sociolinguistic literature with relevance for urban geography, here conceptualized as place, is reviewed. In 2.2., a different perspective is taken: some insights from the urban geographical literature with relevance for linguistic practices are presented. Identity and belonging are central notions in both.

2.1 Language and the interface with identity and place

According to Eckert (2008), linguistic variation is the social practice in which people use different linguistic forms that may index particular places or social groups. It is challenging to analyse how variation is related to social meaning, and it is an interesting part of the study of linguistic variation. Woolard (2008) states that a possible explanation for linguistic variation can be found in using an ideological approach. As soon as language users become aware of the underlying ideology of a particular linguistic form, they may decide to change their linguistic practices according to the ideology they represent. Therefore, it is safe to say that the choice of a linguistic form is never neutral. An example from Dutch would be the use of *taartje* vs *gebakje*. Both lexical items refer to a piece of cake or a tartlet. However, the use of *taartje* is associated with higher social classes and *gebakje* with lower social classes. Many (particularly younger) speakers are not aware of the difference but for those who are, the decision to use *taartje* or *gebakje* is a conscious one (for comparable pairs, see https://onzetaal.nl/taaladvies/taartje-gebakje/ and https://www.beatrijs.com/ijskast-of-koelkast/).

A linguistic form is not only a reflection or expression of meaning; it also constructs and shapes meaning and identity. Following this principle, Quist (2008) studied linguistic variation and sociocultural diversity in a multicultural school in Copenhagen. She used two perspectives: a linguistic variety perspective and a stylistic practice perspective. She used the first perspective to present a formal description of linguistic variation in relation to the standard variety, and the second perspective to explain the (ascribed) identity in the social space.

Linguistic variation is the social practice in which people use different linguistic forms that may index particular places or social groups. Indexicality refers to the relation between a linguistic characteristic and the place or practice with which it is associated. R. Scollon and S. Scollon (2003) refer to signs like *slegs vir blankies* ('Whites only') during Apartheid in South Africa. The sign is indexical: it links a semiotic form (the text on the sign) to a specific contextualized meaning (identity). Once in place, a sign functions in relation with other signs. Although the word *blankies* ('whites') is used, black/coloured people are indexed at the same time. The message is directed towards them in particular.

In the literature on language, identity plays an important role, as can be seen above. But is it possible to describe what it means? Identity is not static or monolithic; it is potentially multiple in nature, dynamic, multi-layered and negotiable, which is in line with recent research on language and identity (e.g., Auer, 1998; Bucholtz, 2004; LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Rampton, 1995). Identity both shapes and is shaped by language and other cultural practices, hence it 'is not only

something we have, but also something we create, mould and change through action' (Lane, 2009, p. 212).

Blommaert (2005, p. 207) defines identity 'not as a property or a stable category of individuals, but as particular forms of semiotic potential, organised in a repertoire.' He furthermore stresses that identities are not only chosen, but also ascribed: '[…] in order for an identity to be established, it has to be recognised by others. That means that a lot of what happens in the field of identity is done by others, not by oneself. I know of only very few individuals who would self-qualify as 'arrogant bastards', 'liars', or 'cowards'; yet many people carry such identity labels around.' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 205). According to Bucholtz (2011), genuine objective research studies of social practice do not exist. When people look at their own behaviour, they are able to see subtle differences from others, whereas groups of others seem to be much more homogeneous. At the same time, the self is unmarked whereas the other is distinguished.

To quote Svendsen (2015, p. 14): 'Although not every language choice is an identity act (Auer, 2005; LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), there is much identity work going on in the intersection between linguistic form, language use and the ideologies of language associable by a society at large.' An essentialist conception of identity in which identity is viewed in terms of given categories of who individuals or groups are, or belong to (as advocated by e.g., Giles & Byrne, 1982) is rejected by Svendsen and many others. Rather, they draw on constructivist approaches to identity that recognize it as a multifaceted and fluid construction performed in social interaction (e.g., Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). She continues to argue that identity work is not a subject for free play, but restricted or influenced by the symbolic value of various linguistic 'markets' (Bourdieu, 1991) or by the indexical order of signs that link the micro-interactional instantiations to the macro-societal ideological level (Silverstein, 2003; cf. Agha, 2007; Blommaert, 2005).

In their study on the relation between language and a hip-hop identity, Cutler and Røyneland (2015) consider language a marker of identity: linguistic displays of a hip-hop identity allow young people to differentiate themselves from others, such as non-hip-hop affiliated youth, and to express pride in their identities as members of marginalized ethnic groups, residents of specific neighbourhoods or speakers of regional dialects. '[I]t has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world.' (Cutler & Røyneland, 2015, p. 2).

This subsection presented an overview of the role of sociolinguistics. The basic thought behind sociolinguistics is that language does more than convey messages with a purely referential content. Within sociolinguistics, the form of group-

and/or situation-specific language can be studied, as can practices and ideologies, which together form the 'total linguistic fact' (Silverstein, 1985).

2.2 Place and the interface with identity and language

Space and place are important concepts in human geography. Rather than seeing social processes and relations happening in the empty container of urban space, space is constituted by social relations, which in turn are constituted by space. According to French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991), (social) space is a (social) product based on values and meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions. Lefebvre created the spatial triad, a conceptual framework to recognize the three elements that contribute to the production of space. The first element is physical space, the material city. He used the term 'spatial practice', how we move within and around space, whether we sit silently on a bench in a park or commute on bikes. The second element is conceived space; the space of scientists, planners, urbanists and social engineers (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 24–25). These are the city plans and scale drawings (maps). The third element is the 'lived space' or 'representational space'. These are the spaces of inhabitants and users associated with images and symbols forming a representation that 'overlays physical space' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). In the lived space, history, culture and traditions are created by people talking and thinking about it. Lefebvre emphasized that spaces change over time, as do our use of them, representations of them and symbolic associations with them. The influential geographer Yi-Fu Tuan adds in his book *Space and Place* (1977) that space becomes a place when it is created by human experiences and is imbued with meaning. Place can be conceptualized as a particular site that has acquired a set of meanings and attachments (Cresswell, 2015). As a location that combines locale and sense of place. Locale refers to the material setting and the way a place looks, for example, the trees in the park or the benches in a square (Cresswell, 2015, p. 13). Sense of place refers to the senses and emotions evoked by place. These can be personal (biography) and/or shared (representation). Places combine materiality, meaning and practice, which are interrelated.

Urban public space is often defined as a publicly accessible physical setting, for example the streets, squares and green zones. Space becomes a place when it is used and lived and when it facilitates interaction among diverse user groups and encounters with strangers (Iveson, 2007; Lofland, 1973; Sennett, 1978). Goffman (1963) distinguished two forms of interaction in public places: focused and unfocused. People have a direct conversation or participate in a shared activity, whereas others only share the same space without communicating in a direct and face-to-face manner, such as glancing at people passing by (Goffman, 1963, p. 24). Encounters with sociocultural difference in public space play an important role

in the development of young people's identity (Robinson, 2000; Spierings et al., 2016). They compare themselves with friends, other contemporaries and society as a whole through encounters with peers and other public-space users. In so doing, they are confronted with other norms and values, some of which they may have been unaware of.

Particular meanings, practices and identities can be mapped to place, which leads to the construction of normative places where it is possible to be either 'in place' or 'out of place'. Practices and people labelled out of place are said to have crossed often invisible boundaries that define what is appropriate and what is inappropriate (Pickering, Kintrea, & Bannister, 2012). Those social norms are often invisible and taken for granted, as different social groups have differing interpretations of what is appropriate (Nolan, 2003). Particular places have their own norms or regimes, for example how to behave in a queue, how to move through a busy square and how to avoid physical contact. These unwritten rules regulate communicative practices and encounters between different linguistic performances. In this way, speaking a given language in different spatial contexts can affect young people's sense of identification and belonging. 'Different groups use particular places, such as the neighbourhood, to play out identity struggles between self and others [...] in terms of shared interests, behaviours and circumstances which often give rise to multi-layered micro-geographies (Goffman used the word microsociology) co-existing in the same location' (Percy-Smith & Matthews, 2001, pp. 52–53). Place-making is the process whereby cultural and linguistic meaning is attached to place. The study of place-making is important, since authenticity is questioned in our increasingly globalizing world (Thissen, 2013).

Language, symbols, movement and gestures are all considered place-relevant aspects (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 204). Who we are is directly related to where we are. People make places and places make people. For teenagers, it is hard to control private property. Teenagers have no choice but to use public space, since they do not possess their own private space. That is why young people are frequent users of parks and plazas as sites to hang out (Van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008). Those are sites with less control and adult supervision ('places of retreat') and more encounters ('places of interaction') compared to the alternative of staying at home (Lieberg, 1997). On the one hand, youngsters want to be 'on stage', which means that they can see other young people and they can be seen by others (Tani, 2014). On the other hand, they wish to stay 'backstage' when they are hanging out (Matthews, Taylor, Percy-Smith, & Limb, 2000): they need their own space, where they can socialize and be together with their peers but stay away from the adult gaze. At best, adults tolerate the presence of teenagers in public space, but they control them and the space they use. Teenagers and adolescents hanging around are considered a threat; they are 'the others' with whom many adults are unable

to identify. It is interesting that territorial behaviour is not innate: it is learned in order to handle human relations (Pickering et al., 2012).

Since language is part of these behavioural processes and a way to express group membership, it becomes a tool to emphasize group distinctiveness at a specific location. Accommodation theory is a theory of communication developed by Giles and colleagues to account for the ways people speak according to whom they are talking to. When speakers wish to reduce the social distance between themselves and their interlocutors they use convergence strategies: they adjust their speech production to the way their interlocutors speak or are believed to speak; they adopt similar ways of speaking. When they want to increase the social distance for whatever reason, they diverge. They create distance by talking in a way that differs from their interlocutors' way of talking. Convergence and divergence can be accomplished by using the same or, respectively, different languages, accents, lexical material, volume, speech rate, etc. (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991)

Place and space are produced and discussed in discourse and at the same time they are the location of discourse. An example is the way people who arrive at a beach decide where exactly to settle for the day – close to the water, the toilets or a restaurant? On dry or wet sand? Etc. The decision is taken in oral communication. On South African beaches, history is one of the aspects to be considered when the decision is made where or where not to settle. The relation between space and identity is evident here. In a study by Dixon and Durrheim based on interviews with beach visitors in South Africa (quoted in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006), three territorial levels were distinguished: the micro-territory or 'umbrella space'; the broader level of patterns of occupancy whereby racial groups position themselves at specific places; and the invasion-succession sequences when the arrival of black visitors made the white visitors decide to move.

As in the example above, the necessary negotiations and discussions are all carried out using language. In order to practice and describe non-linguistic behaviour such as spatial identity, linguistic means must be used. Language is essential here, too. In our research, we aim to grasp the linguistic ways that young people in public space mark their group belonging.

3. Research design: Geographical context, methods and participants

The data for our empirical analysis were gathered in Utrecht, a historic city in the Netherlands with 334,000 inhabitants (2015). Utrecht has a young population, with many inhabitants under 18 years (20 per cent) and between 18 and 26 years (18 per cent), mainly due to a relatively young immigrant community and the

presence of a large university (Brasileiro, Nortier, & Ridder, 2014). According to the city's website, almost half of the population aged 16 years or older are highly educated (i.e. hold at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent).

For our study, we concentrated on young people (aged 15–25 years) who use public spaces in Utrecht in peer groups. In May and June, 2014, our field workers conducted 29 on-site interviews with groups of 3–8 teenagers and adolescents in two city parks about their activities and interaction with other groups, and about specific places in the park. We focused on public parks because they can be considered urban places where many different people can meet and be co-present. Low and colleagues (2005) even argue that, considering the more general erosion of public spaces in cities, parks may be considered 'the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people of different gender, class, culture, nationality, and ethnicity intermingle peacefully' (ibid, p. 4). Our respondents were presented with a map and asked to mark their own position and the position of other groups. For the park interviews, groups in all parts of the parks were approached and asked to participate, based on the observation that specific groups do not choose their locations randomly. An example is given in (1) where interviewees pointed on the map:

(1) *Hier kan je je hond uitlaten, hier kan je slapen en hier liggen alle junkies. Hier kan je vuur maken en hier zitten alle voetballende sjonnies. (…) Hier zitten altijd iets meer nettere mensen. (…) Hierzo is de nette spot. Hier zitten de nette mensen.*
'Here you can walk your dog, here you can sleep and here lie all the junkies. Here you can make a fire and here are the soccer playing yobs (…) Here are the decent people.'

The average length of the interviews was 15 minutes and they were transcribed verbatim.

After this first phase of research, we designed a second stage in the form of two focus group meetings held in October 2014. These focus groups were used to explore and explain the in-depth meanings of our main finding from the first part of our study: language is a situated practice. One of our questions in the park interviews was whether participants would be willing to take part in a focus group, a form of qualitative research that allowed us to discuss specific topics with a selected group of young people in order to obtain information about their views outside the park setting. The focus groups consisted of people who had agreed to participate and some of their friends and peers, who were recruited through snowball sampling. We sought to vary our sample in terms of lifestyle, cultural and political affiliation, and gender, and recruited 11 females and 4 males. The 15 respondents were high school or university (research or applied sciences) students.

Their ages ranged from 14 to 27 years. They were asked about their perceptions and experiences of and attitudes towards the relation between linguistic performances and specific places in Utrecht. The setting was informal and interactive; participants (the majority of whom did not know each other) were free to talk with other group members. The interviews lasted about 2 hours and were held in a university building in the centre of Utrecht. The focus groups were guided by one moderator who introduced topics for discussion and helped the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion. A second member of the research group was present in the background, taking notes and arranging various practical matters. Like the park interviews, both focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysed.

We identified two main themes for each session. First we discussed particular public places related to specific language use. In order to make this question more concrete, the respondents were given Post-it notes and asked to write down the names of places they associated with certain forms of language use. Second, we tried to understand variation in their language use related to the places they had written down. In the discussion, attention was paid to accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, volume and topic. For example, a certain pronunciation would identify them as a member of a certain group; a tendency to use certain lexical items would be typical for specific social and spatial situations, such as their professional or family life.

In the following section, we present examples from both on-site park interviews and focus group meetings.

4. Results

4.1 Language is situational

In the presentation and discussion of the results, the topics that were addressed in the theoretical framework are leading and guiding. The results from the park interviews and focus group discussions provided a complex and multifaceted view that can best be captured under the statement that language use is determined situationally and is place-specific. Several aspects add to this finding: first, participants are well aware of the physical space where they practice their communicative behaviour, as in the following example:

(2) *Nou het [park] is wel chiller dan een restaurant, want een restaurant zit je wel meer met elkaar ehm dichter bij elkaar. Of hoe zeg je dat?*
‘Well the [park] is more chilled than a restaurant, because [in] a restaurant you sit, uh, closer to each other. Or how do you say that?’

In the following examples, the interviewees illustrate how their behaviour is guided by unwritten norms and laws.

By focusing on language as a situational practice, the leading question on the background is how individuals relate to each other within their own group and towards other individuals or groups. The observation in Wilhelminapark where the 'scooter youths' claimed their own space is illustrative:

(3) I: *En waarom denk je dat aso's dan aan de rand blijven zitten, en de yuppen nooit op de randjes gaan zitten?*
C: *Ik denk dat het vooral te maken heeft met dat het handig is als je op je scooter wilt blijven zitten. Dat je die dan op een plek kunt zetten. Dus dat dat dicht bij de paden is, en als iemand van je vrienden geen scooter bij zich heeft wil die natuurlijk ook op hoogte zitten, dus dan moet je een bankje hebben.*
I: 'And why do you think antisocial people stay on the edge and the yuppies never settle on the edges?'
C: 'I think it mainly has to do with that it's handy if you want to sit on your scooter. That you can put it somewhere. So that it is close to the paths, and if one of your friends hasn't brought his scooter he wants to sit on the same level, of course, so then you need a bench.'

There was a tight connection between this particular place and group. For the scooter youths, occupying the benches was an act of group membership and belonging. This space, the benches in the park, was a no-go area for other youths.

From Example (3) it appears that groups are identified by characteristics such as 'being antisocial' or 'yuppies', a general tendency we observed in all park interviews. Examples of other group names we encountered are *ballen* ('frat boys'), *kakkers* ('snotties'), *corpsmeisjes* ('sorority girls'), *studenten* ('students'), *scootervolk* ('scooter youths'), *hockeyers, voetballers* ('soccer players'), *skaters, junks* ('junkies'), *vrije geesten* ('free spirits'), *sporters, hip-hoppers, hangjongeren* ('corner boys'). As was illustrated above, group characteristics can be identified with specific places: scooter youths use benches, sporters need space so they occupy the middle of the lawn, etc.

In Section 4.2, more examples of the situational character of language are given.

4.2 Communicative practices in public space

Participants expressed the influence of place on the way they speak, whereas people are important since they attach meaning and content to a particular place

(Cresswell, 2015). In the following fragment from one of the focus group meetings, different speech modes in private and public space are mentioned:

(4) *Het is gewoon automatisme. Van als ik met mijn vrienden thuis ben dan praat ik zo maar als ik in de trein zit en ik zit met diezelfde vrienden dan is het automatisch en dan past iedereen zich daarop aan en dan is het… Dan praat je op een andere manier.*
'It's just automatic. When I'm at home with friends I talk like this, but when I'm on the train, with the same friends, it is automatically – everyone adjusts to… Then you talk in a different way.'

The speaker in (4) stresses the influence of a particular place – home vs. train, or private vs. public or semi-public – on the way she speaks. When she has to share public or semi-public space with people she does not know, she 'automatically' adjusts linguistically, indicating her awareness of an unwritten norm. What she does not mention explicitly is the drive to behave as expected, the need not to be considered different or deviant. The following examples show that this drive is never spoken of but always present.

The choice not only of style (volume, formal versus informal) but also of language depends on where and among whom speakers find themselves. A bilingual Dutch-Moroccan participant in one of the focus groups stressed that language choice depends on situation and place:

(5) *In de Kanaalstraat weet ik dat ik Marokkaans kan praten en dat ze mij dan begrijpen of mij op die manier mij misschien beter begrijpen. Dus dan praat ik Marokkaans. Maar als ik ergens anders ben en ik weet dat Nederlands gewoon begrepen wordt, dan gebruik ik Nederlands. Als het een dure zaak is dan ga ik m'n beste Nederlands gebruiken.*
'When I am in Kanaalstraat I know I can speak Moroccan and that they will understand me or perhaps even understand me better that way. But when I am somewhere else and I know people understand Dutch better, I use Dutch. In a posh shop I use my best Dutch.'

Awareness of place determines her language choice. Not only the difference between private and public or semi-public space is relevant: within public or semi-public space choices have to be made as well, depending on the other people present. Another explanation for different forms of language use in public or semi-public space is related to the proximity of other people, illustrated by the following extract from a discussion about language use in a restaurant:

(6) *(…) Dus dan is het ook in de intonatie en in de toon. Dat je toch wel iets bescheidener bent in het openbaar.*

'So then it's also in the intonation and in the tone. That you are somewhat more modest in public.'

Examples are, more specifically, a restaurant, a park and a street:

(7) *Nou het is wel chiller dan een restaurant [het park], want een restaurant zit je wel meer met elkaar ehm dichter bij elkaar. Of hoe zeg je dat? (…) hier wat meer een veilige ruimte. (…) Terwijl in een restaurant, (…) dan heb je af en toe gesprekken, en dan zie je mensen echt zo kijken van, beetje ohh. Misschien even een ander onderwerp beetje van (lachen). Dus misschien dat dat het verschil is, dat je hier iets meer ruimte om je heen hebt. (…) Dat mensen niet zo goed kunnen horen. (…) Ja en dan zit je. Ja, gewoon alles eruit kan slaan wat je wilt. Precies, als ik over de Oude Gracht loop, dan zou ik het misschien – wel een beetje oppassen inderdaad.*
'Well [the park] is more chill than a restaurant, because in a restaurant you sit closer to each other. Here you have more like a safe space. (…) In a restaurant when you talk sometimes you see people watching, like ohhh. So change the subject (laughs). Maybe that's the difference: that you have more space here. That people can't hear you well. And then (…) you can say whatever you want. Exactly, when I walk on Oudegracht [main street in the city centre] then I might watch out.'

Here, too, the speaker wants to be valued and respected by others. The presence of people who might condemn her is powerful enough to change the subject of conversation ('You see people watching, like ohhhh. So change the subject.').

The above examples suggest that the way language is used is determined not only by whether one is in private or public/semi-public space, but in the latter case also by the actual or supposed characteristics and the physical proximity of the other people who are present.

The following examples show that being in or out of place and adjusting one's language use to the spatial environment crosses the boundaries of private and public space and is merely a function of the people present.

For the speaker in (8), too, situation and space are closely linked to the way she speaks – and she is well aware of it:

(8) *Ik ben heel veel aan het solliciteren dus dan gebruik je een bepaalde taal. Dan kom je wel binnen en dan wil je een eerste goede indruk maken. En dan ga je heel…. Zoals jij zei ehm, heel ja… Argumentatie moet heel duidelijk zijn en alles is zo serieus. Zo ben ik natuurlijk niet elke dag. Wat ik denk zeg ik gelijk maar dan moet je je wel een beetje inhouden. Want dat zijn bepaalde situaties in je leven waar je toch wat anders ja… Je gedraagt dan… Ja gewoon de manier op straat of met je vrienden.*

'I have many job interviews at the moment and then you use a specific language. When you enter you want to make a good first impression. And then you will… As you said, well, uh… Argumentation has to be very clear and everything is serious. I'm not like that every day, of course. I say what I think, but you have to be careful. Since those are specific situations in your life where you … behave different from… Well, the way you do on the street or with your friends.'

In the theoretical framework, the work by Pickering et al. (2012) was mentioned in relation to normative places. The participants in the focus groups were well aware of being 'in place' or 'out of place'. The speaker in (8) realizes that the situation and physical space where she has her job interviews determine her way of speaking. In this case, the same need to adjust to the others who are present is felt, but contrary to the earlier examples, violation of the unwritten law here will not just give her a feeling that she is behaving out of place: it will have strong practical consequences (i.e. not getting the job she wants). Awareness of being in or out of place was underlined by the comments on language use as illustrated in the following comments about two neighbourhoods in Utrecht:

(9) *Overvecht is bijvoorbeeld ook veel luidruchtiger dan Tuindorp. Als je in Tuindorp bent gaat niet iemand opeens keihard tegen je roepen vanaf de andere kant van de straat. In Overvecht is het zo van als je iemand tegen komt dan ga je roepen. Maar in Tuindorp loop je eerst naar elkaar toe en groet je elkaar dan.*
'For example: Overvecht is much noisier than Tuindorp. In Tuindorp nobody yells to you from across the street. In Overvecht when you meet someone you shout. In Tuindorp you walk towards each other and then you greet each other.'

But of course, it is not only the neighbourhood that makes a difference. Behaviour in the parks may also vary, as in the following example, where an interviewee in one of the Griftpark interviews says:

(10) *In het Wilhelminapark word je misschien eerder aangesproken met de vraag of je een kurkentrekker hebt, dat zal je hier niet gebeuren. (…) Hier vragen ze voor longvloe. (…) Of je lange vloe hebt.*
'In Wilhelminapark they might ask you whether you have a corkscrew, but that won't happen here. Here they ask you for a long ci – whether you have long cigarette paper [to roll a joint].'

4.3 Intra- and intergroup relations

Having presented communicative practices in public space, we now focus on how relations in and between groups are expressed linguistically in specific places.

4.3.1 *Intra-group relations*

Two examples illustrate the awareness of group belonging:

(11) *Ik pas mezelf best wel snel aan. Bijvoorbeeld met vrienden. Zachte G. En ik verander dan weer snel als ik elders ben.*
'I adjust myself rather quickly. For example, with friends. Soft 'g'. And I change again as soon as I'm elsewhere.'

(12) *Je houdt in zekere mate rekening met elkaar denk ik zo. Ik maak echt heel veel grappen die echt niet kunnen. Maar alleen bij vrienden.*
'To a certain point you take others into account I think. I really make a lot of jokes that are not right. But only with friends.'

4.3.2 *Intergroup relations*

Our respondents were strongly aware of the presence of others in the same place.

In the park interviews, participants were usually able to identify and classify others, but they often saw themselves as the default or standard. The following example is illustrative of how several groups reacted when they were asked to describe themselves:

(13) L: *In welke categorie zou je jezelf plaatsen?*
C: *In de- in de regular. (…) Modale eh, normale mensen.*
'I: In what category would you place yourself?
C: In the – in the regular. (…) Average, uh, normal people.'

(14) *Ik denk dat ik redelijk normaal praat, altijd.*
'I think that I talk quite normal, always.'

(15) *Ik denk wel redelijk neutraal eigenlijk. (…) Ja. Ik denk ook doorsnee.*
'I think I'm rather neutral, actually. (…) Yes. I think I'm average as well.'

In the following extract, the speaker adjusts her language use to the way she expects to be evaluated by other groups. She is living up to their (supposed) expectations and seeks to challenge the stereotypical image of Moroccans in the Netherlands:

(16) *(…) Ik wil dan niet overkomen als een straattaal mens. Ik houd er rekening mee. Ik ben Marokkaans. Als ik dan ook nog eens die taal ga gebruiken. Ik ga niet de stereotype doen – ik wil dit bewust niet bevestigen.*
(…)
(I: *hebben jullie ook een bepaald beeld van jezelf? Wat samenhangt met taal?*)
Ja, als je buitenlander bent. Dan heb je al een nadeel. Als je dan netjes praat. Dat scheelt even.

> 'I don't want to come across as a street language person. I take that into account. I am Moroccan. And if I also use that language. I'm not going to do the stereotype. I don't want to confirm that. (…) (I: Do you have a certain image of yourself? In relation to language?) Yes, when you are a foreigner. Then you have a disadvantage. If you talk decently. That makes a difference.'

As mentioned, identifying with each other or strengthening group belonging can be accomplished by drawing clear boundaries between the own group and other users of the same public space:

(17) A: *Ja volume. Straattaal. Lekker luidruchtig. Stoere woorden, dat doe je niet zacht. Daar heb je niks aan. Als niemand het hoort is het ook niet 'stoer'.*
B: *En dat dat het hele ding is en waarom groepjes anders praten toch? Jezelf afzetten tegen anderen en je identificeren met elkaar.*
A: 'Yes volume. Street language. Pleasantly loud. Tough words, you don't do that softly. That doesn't work. When nobody hears it, it is not "tough".
B: And that's what the whole thing is and why groups speak differently right? Stand out against others and identify with each other.'

The quote in (17) supports Tani (2014), who underlined the importance of being 'on stage', which means that groups are both visible and distinguishable. Besides the use of characteristic attributes like ghetto blasters or scooters, this can be accomplished by language use.

As explained, communicative practices are regulated by unwritten rules. Some forms of language use can be 'out of place'. Some more examples given by the informants were swearing in a church or shouting in a *stiltecoupé* (quiet carriage on a train).

The majority of the examples presented above illustrate how speakers accommodate into the direction of other people present. They are clear cases of convergent behaviour. However, divergent behaviour is exhibited when groups claim their own space by creating strong, sometimes invisible boundaries between their own group and others through the use of linguistic and other cues (clothing, music, the use of attributes such as scooters, etc.).

5. Conclusions and future research

The present paper shows that a combination of disciplines is more than the sum of the two. Our initial research question was: How and to what extent are groups of teenagers and adolescents attracted to specific public places in Utrecht, and how is this related to the ways they express themselves linguistically in order to construct

and protect their group belonging? Based on the above examples and illustrations, the following conclusions can be drawn.

In accordance with Blommaert (2010) and Ahearn (2012), we can conclude that language use is a strong marker of group belonging and identity in public space.

Language is shaped by identity, and vice versa (Lane, 2009). Moreover, our results point to the awareness of the presence and visibility of other user groups in the same public space as an important factor. The space where young people find themselves is crucial for the physical and social distance between themselves and other people and, as a consequence, the way language is used. This thought was best expressed by one of the participants in the focus groups: 'All my Post-it notes are about places, but in reality about the people there.'

There are two seemingly opposing forces, namely the underlying need to be liked and respected by others determines the way people speak (topic, volume, roughness), and the sense of group belonging together with image building can, however, be strengthened by marking the boundaries with other groups (e.g., Pickering et al., 2012; Giles et al., 1991). In most examples, space gains significance through the presence of other people.

5.1 The future

Another purpose of the interdisciplinary and explorative study this paper was based on, was to determine interesting areas for future research. We found several topics that need to be studied in more detail than we were able to do in this small project.

In our explorative study, we paid little attention to ethnicity, despite the literature showing that ethnicity is an important factor (e.g., Bucholtz, 2011; Spierings et al., 2016). Future research should therefore take ethnicity into greater account. In future research, the linguistic dimension should be examined in more detail by doing in-depth interviews with informants. For example, in the focus groups it was mentioned that different ways of speaking are used in private and public spheres, but exactly in what linguistic sense remains unclear. Subgroups are associated with certain ways of speaking, but the informants were often unable to name linguistic characteristics. When the interviewers tried to elicit explicit descriptions of group-specific ways of talking, they failed.

If we want to gain more insight into the difference between the language use of specific groups and language use in specific situational contexts (restaurant, park, etc.), more detailed linguistic analyses should be carried out. What exactly do the perceived differences consist of? Are they restricted to volume or

the rough character of the vocabulary used, or is a more or less unconscious use of linguistic features at stake?

Our findings may not cause a revolution but they opened our eyes to phenomena and mechanisms that we usually are not aware of:

- On several occasions, we observed that our subjects and informants were able to categorize other people and their linguistic and other practices in relation to a default 'normal' and unmarked situation.
- We were surprised to hear so many times how important it is to meet expectations, for fear of being misunderstood and judged in a negative way. This tendency, which is related to unwritten laws and norms, seems to be the underlying force behind a multitude of behaviours and practices closely related to places.
- In-group language is intimate. The people who participated in this study found it difficult to talk about language use within their group. They sometimes hid their shyness behind laughter. The function of laughter as a mechanism of in- and exclusion is something we know little about and that should be explored.

It is our challenge to add a spatial dimension to the total linguistic fact.

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