

# Urban multilingualism: individual experiences of linguistic soundscapes in Amsterdam

## Topic

A substantial amount of research in the social sciences has been dedicated to the mundane or everyday living with diversity, yet little has been done in relation to linguistic diversity and the ways in which individuals experience the city through this particular form of diversity. Investigating linguistic diversity in public space can give us important clues on how individuals experience the socially diverse city. Language remains 'a potent marker of difference, with linguistic difference often elided with, or subsumes within, ethnic-racial differences' (Christ & Thomas 2008, p.2). Language serves both as a bridge and a wall, it simultaneously separates as it unites, and as a significant feature of difference should be given a more prominent role in research on urban diversity.

Amsterdam, like many other cities in Europe, is a city that can be characterized by a strong and diverse migrant population. It is a city where many languages can be seen and heard throughout public space, which can be described as a mixture of the majority language Dutch, several migrant languages, foreign languages which are learned at schools and English as the common language in many spheres in daily life. Amsterdam is not typically associated as a site of multilingualism and linguistic tensions as for instance Brussels or Barcelona and Helsinki, yet there are many languages coexist and influence one another. It provides therefore an interesting case to investigate the affect of everyday encounters with linguistic diversity.

## Research question

*'How do individuals experience the linguistic soundscape of Amsterdam's public space?'*

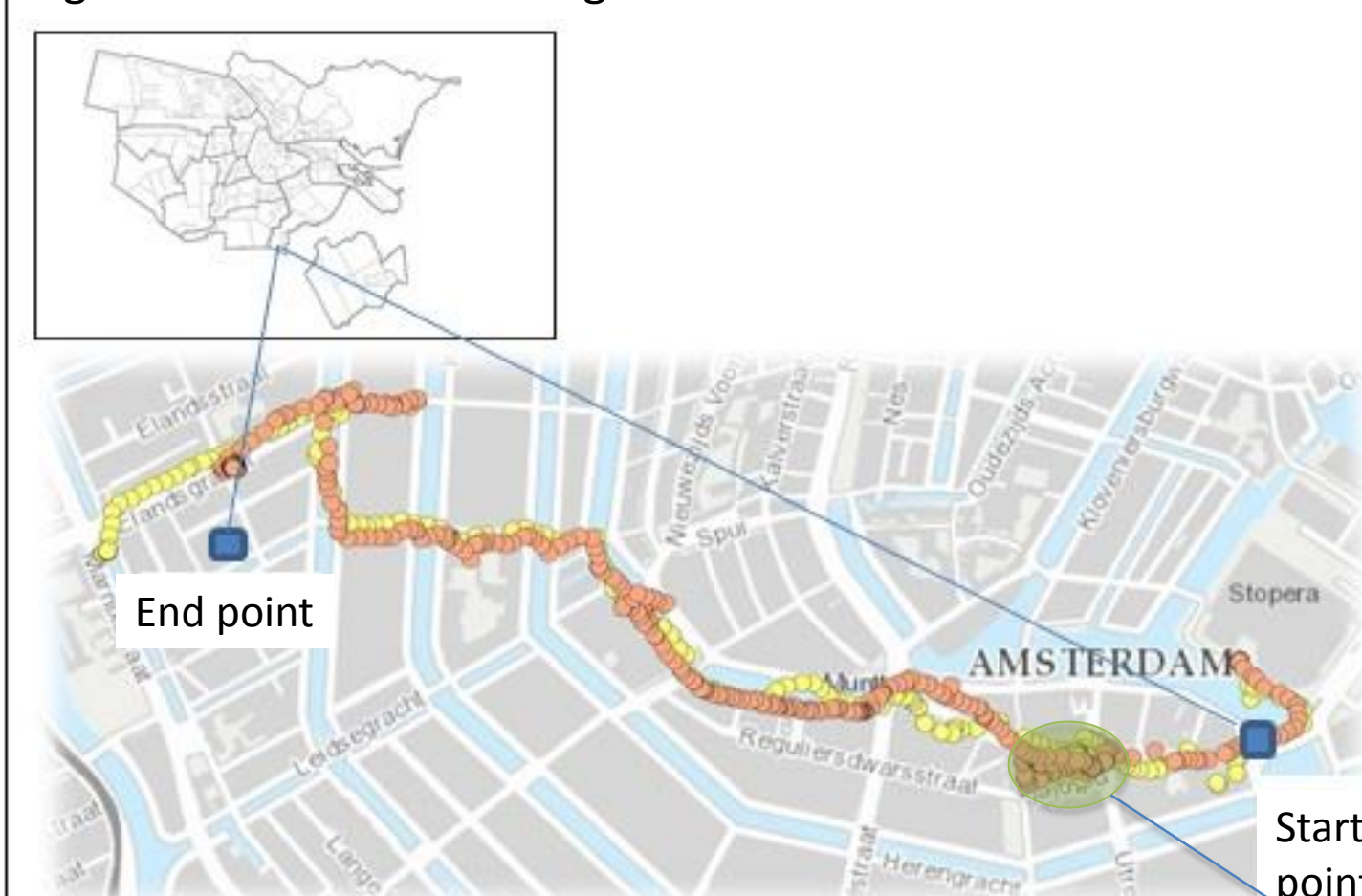
- How do individuals listen to the linguistic soundscape?
- How do individuals assess the linguistic soundscape in relation to spatial and social diversity?

## Methods: Linguistic sound walks

I have made use of linguistic sound walks, which are pre-set walks through the inner-city of Amsterdam. These pre-set walks have been used to capture the immediate sensory experience of linguistic diversity and to discuss and reflect upon the relationship between linguistic diversity and the experience of encounters with spatial and social diversity in Amsterdam.

From May 2016 until January 2017, I have conducted 13 linguistic sound walks with 27 participants through the inner-city of Amsterdam. In terms of the linguistic soundscape of Amsterdam, one will likely encounter different languages depending on different districts, neighbourhoods and streets of the city. The linguistic sound walks have therefore been conducted in the inner-city of Amsterdam (see figure 1), from Waterlooplein to Elandsgracht, which is known as a site of rapidly increasing urban tourism (Pinkster & Boterman, 2017) and, accordingly has a distinctive character. With 17 participants, the main language of the linguistic sound walk was Dutch (of which 10 had a multilingual upbringing), while 10 participants opted for English as the main language of the walk (of which only 2 had English as their heritage language).

Figure 1: Itineraries of 2 linguistic sound walks



Walking in public space results in more intimate ways to engage with the environment that may bring about insightful ideas about both place and self (Solnit, 2001). It is suggested that a great advantage of interviewing participants while walking produces important insights into individual experiences, attitudes and knowledge about places (Evans & Jones, 2011). A study by Hitchens & Jones (2004) showed that participants often find it easier to speak about their experiences and feelings when they are 'in place', resulting in richer data.

*'Sometimes you instantly know what language someone is speaking, but often this is hard because of other noises in the city...for instance the tram or loud music. If I don't know [what someone speaks], I listen to the melody or the tone of the language. Every language is different and sometimes you just hear it through this. Most of the time you just guess.'*

*'My partner and I often do a kind of exercise when we walk. Sometimes we both don't recognize the language that we hear and then we try to guess it. It might sound strange, but we kind of follow the persons that are speaking, just to try to figure out what language they are speaking. It is a fun exercise and I know, a bit silly maybe.'*

## Illustrations of immediate sensory experience of linguistic diversity

As an important marker for identity, the sound of spoken language gives clues on the nature of the social environment one finds himself or herself in. While some participants emphasized being visual persons, others highlighted that they specifically listen to languages in public space. Quote 1 and 2 illustrate how participants encounter everyday linguistic diversity.

Other participants have claimed that encounters with known languages stick out in public space, especially those tied to heritage languages or languages learnt along the life course. This was often met with different feelings. Sometimes it was met with feelings of comfort and nostalgia, while at other times this could be a source of annoyance and irritation. For one participant encountering Serbo-Croatian in public space reminded him of the years he spent living in Bosnia. Although this participant has Dutch as his heritage language and as he himself noted 'looks like a 'normal' Dutch young man in his late twenties' he feels sentimental when he overhears people speaking in Serbo-Croatian and at times even mingles in the conversation to show his bond to the language and the people he encounters. This is an embodied experience, which can be seen as 'a process of reproducing oneself within a constant negotiation between past patterns and present experiences' (Isцен, 2014, p.125).

Figure 2: Rembrandtplein



## Illustrations of linguistic diversity and the assessment of spatial and social diversity

Assessing the linguistic soundscape of the city does not happen in a vacuum: listening happens in concrete places and individuals use elements from their direct urban surroundings in their assessment of the linguistic diversity. During the linguistic sound walks, it was often stressed how listening to language also builds on seeing clues from the social and spatial environment, but also on place representations. On Rembrandtplein (see figure 2) for instance, participants stressed hearing languages typically associated with tourism as their direct sensory experience matched the place image of the square being a place for urban tourism. Sometimes there is a gap between the image of a place and the actual sensory experience of being there, which built on the linguistic soundscape of the places visited.

Many studies on everyday diversity stress that living in diversity has become such a normalcy that it tends to go unnoticed. Sennett (2010) for instance pointed out that 'the encounter with diversity has become so commonplace that it doesn't much register' since 'it lacks disruptive drama' (p.269). The linguistic sound walk has given clues to the opposite idea: the linguistic soundscape can indeed be a potential source of a disruptive effect as it often catches one's attention and may spark various experiences in place. It seems that especially when the outcome of urban encounter is surprise, and the linguistic soundscape does not match the actual imaginaries about places, one is inclined to register this difference. Individuals seem not to be deaf about spatial and social diversity and language is an important source in understanding these phenomena.

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