Urban multilingualism: individual experiences of linguistic soundscapes in Amsterdam

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Interdisciplinarity and the future of multilingualism research
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Task 2.3
Research question

How does the linguistic soundscape of Amsterdam’s inner-city affect one’s sense of place and feelings of belonging?

– LS as opposed to landscape (instead of signs/landmarks etc.)
– LS as specific urban sound (instead of nature, music, cars etc.)
– Strongly embedded in phenomenology and qualitative methodologies
Methods: linguistic sound walks

AMSTERDAM

N=27
Linguistic sound walks

• From May 2016 - January 2017
• 13 linguistic sound walks with 27 participants
• 17 participants, the main language of the linguistic sound walk was Dutch (of which 10 had a multilingual upbringing)
• 10 participants opted for English as the main language of the walk (of which only 2 had English as their heritage language).
Listening to LS

• Different ways of listening: informed by individual biographies and linguistic skills
  – Some listened to known languages (heritage language, languages learnt);
    • ‘If you would go to Italy and hear Dutch...it surprises you, doesn’t it? Well, that’s what I have with Japanese, it sticks out.’
  – Others to unknown languages (game and interest)
Place perception vs direct sensory experience

‘9-straatjes’

rembrandtplein
LS in microsetting

Pictures of Rembrandtplein (two upper pictures) and De 9-Straatjes (two pictures below)
Linguistic soundscape and belonging

- Depends on languages encountered:
  - English often mentioned: celebrated and disliked
    - Dutch speakers: ‘feels like I am part of a big city’ vs. ‘whose city is this?/I cannot speak my own language at home’.
  - English speakers: ‘I don’t have to speak Dutch to feel at home’ vs. ‘how am I ever going to feel at home without Dutch’?
• Heritage language: disliked and celebrated
  - Negatively:

    ‘When I hear Italians, I never speak Italian. They frustrate me because they only drink and do drugs you know.... I don’t want to be associated with Italian tourists, they don’t know the city like I do.’

  - Positively:
    - Nostalgia, enthousiasm, curiosity...
Future?

• Other places:
  – ‘own’ neighbourhoods, no pre-set walk.
  – Semi-public spaces

• Other people: non-English speakers.
Thank you.

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