"Turning back the language clock": constructing multilingualism as problem in the Dutch- and French-medium written press in Belgium

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As "lightning conductor" in socio-economic, demographic and political developments, language profoundly influences Belgium's outlines and polarises the Dutch-speaking Flemish and French-speaking Walloons (Nelde, 1997; Wils, 2005). Throughout the long 19th and 20th century, which represent a tumultuous context of nation building and concordant language-ideological thinking, the tensions between Dutch- and French-speakers were canalised by ideals of strict territorial monolingualism. As a result, there currently is a federal state structure consisting of three language communities and three socio-economic regions shaped by a constitutionally determined language frontier. In the present phase of intense globalisation, however, various forms of societal and individual multilingualism become increasingly visible and challenge the delicately balanced state structures and their foundational ideals.

This presentation focusses on multilingualism as problem constructions (Ruíz 1984; Hult & Hornberger 2016). Conceiving of the media as a meaningful actor in (re)producing and naturalizing such discourses (e.g. Johnson & Milani 2009), we aim to answer the following questions: (a) in which news topics emerges the multilingualism as problem orientation in the Dutch- and French-medium written press, (b) by which linguistic strategies is it discursively constructed and (c) which language ideologies echo in these strategies? Following Milroy (2001: 538), we thereby seek to understand the historical and contemporary logic of these ideologies, but also to deconstruct their apparent neutrality and authority, by no means treating them as an idiotic or paranoid illusion.

Using a concordance analysis of 2241 media articles from the GoPressAcademic archive containing the keyword 'multilingualism', we identified 317 occurrences of a language as problem orientation. These are significantly distributed over the Dutch- (233) and French-medium (84) press. The texts in which this orientation is present, are then subjected to a critical and pragmatic analysis based on the principles of the *Discourse Historical Approach* (Reisigl & Wodak 2016). The analysis sheds light on the topics these texts exhibit and on the precise linguistic nomination, predication an argumentation of the 'problem'.

Three general systematic patterns appear from the analysis: (1) intensified language and verb passivation that evokes urgency and overwhelm, (2) metaphors and temporal adverbs that display shifting language relations as linear and teleological, and (3) argumentative fallacies presenting mono- and multilingualism as a false dichotomy. This suggests that multilingualism as problem orientations in the Dutch-medium press are deeply rooted in a one nation-one language logic of community language protection that stems from the decades-long emancipatory 'battle' of the Flemish in Belgium. The French-medium press seems to be remarkably aware of this sensitivity and disdainfully presents as 'typically Flemish'. The results, in sum, show how Belgian language discussions have to been seen as the slippery tip of a more complex iceberg of sociohistorical developments between two "fragile majorities" (McAndrew 2010).

References

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