

The societal context of Othering in linguistics

Linguistic research, as science in general, is influenced by the societal context in which it operates. Pre-concepts drawn from everyday discourse might form a part of the assumptions that structure our projects or influence how we interpret our data (Ehlich 2007). Using methods from discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer 2001, Spitzmüller & Warnke 2011) and boundary work (Lamont & Molnar 2002), this presentation investigates public discourse to uncover wide-spread societal pre-concepts about multilinguals. It thereby aims to provide the societal context in which Othering of multilinguals in linguistics, as discussed in the symposium, occurs (cf. Wiese et al. in prep).

Analyzing data from Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, I show that multilinguals are presented as:

- 'linguistic others' that lack proper competence in the language of the majority society;
- 'national others' that, despite being born and raised in the respective country, belong to a different national group;
- 'geographic others' coming from and belonging to a different place than the one they live at.

The analysis demonstrates that multilinguals will not only be characterized and labelled as different from the 'we-group', but that this difference will also be evaluated in negative terms. We find examples of anti-Semitic or homophobic attitudes being ascribed to the multilingual 'out-group' as well as them being singled out for problems in the education or health system (also related to the Covid-19 crisis). Furthermore, Othering regularly occurs without any reflection of the societal conditions in which these phenomena emerge (i.e. any possible responsibility of the 'we-group' is ignored).

The presentation will thus serve as an introduction to the symposium by carving out various pre-conceptions of multilinguals that guide public discourse and that, in one shape or another, have the potential to enter into scientific discourse.