

Labelling multilinguals as Others: common topoi in linguistic publications

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Othering of multilinguals is often realised through labelling practices that construct multilingual speakers as members of an out-group. Such patterns are not restricted to public or ‘lay’ discourse, but are also evident in our own publications. In my talk, I analyse common topoi of Othering in published work from linguistics and related fields of sociology and education, and show that labelling practices in academia reflect those found in public discourse. Labelling found in such publications reveals three pairs of topoi:

- “Perpetual Migrants”: Multilinguals are migrants.
“Not from Here”: Multilinguals have a foreign origin.
- “Foreign Nationals”: Multilinguals are Turks, Chinese,
“Not Our People”: Multilinguals are not German, Dutch,
- “Not Native Speakers”: Multilinguals are not native speakers of Spanish, Dutch,
“Not of Our Language”: Multilinguals are not German-, ... speaking.

I show that each pair of topoi feeds into one of three main, interrelated strands: (1) Othering with respect to territorial belonging constructs geographic Others; (2) Othering with respect to national group membership constructs national Others; (3) Othering with respect to linguistic ownership constructs linguistic Others. These strands mirror the ideological nexus of ‘one country, one people, one language’ that goes back to 19th century European nation-state building.

Examples come from publications across different perspectives, subdisciplines, and research domains, underlining how widespread such practices are in our field. I argue that avoiding such labelling practices is not only important from the point of view of scholarly terminology, but also for our research perspective: if multilinguals are constructed as Others, this can lead to an implicit bias that can have negative effects on our research.