

Research Project

The first five words: Multilingual cities in Switzerland and Belgium and the grammar of language choice in public space

Third-party funded project

Project title The first five words: Multilingual cities in Switzerland and Belgium and the grammar of language choice in public space

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This project studies how unacquainted persons spontaneously engage in interaction in multilingual cities in Switzerland and Belgium, thereby shedding light on language practices in present-day, urban environments. Officially multilingual cities, such as Fribourg (Switzerland) and Brussels (Belgium), have received extended attention with regard to how language policies are locally implemented. Little is known, however, about how people choose and negotiate the language of conversation when addressing an unknown person – who might speak the local language, but also a language of immigration or tourism.

Based on video-recordings collected in bilingual cities (Fribourg, Brussels), in touristic locations (Lugano, Ghent) and in areas of multiple contacts (Basel, Eupen), this project documents everyday language practices in public space. It focuses on encounters between unknown persons within two types of events: (1) Symmetrical Ordinary Encounters, which happen when people going about the same activity (e.g. sitting on a bench, walking the dog) start talking to each other; (2) Asymmetrical Institutional Encounters, during which someone requests something (e.g. a signature, political support, money) from a passer-by or offers something (e.g. a flyer, a product sample). It shows how, during the opening phase of an encounter, individuals progressively discover the linguistic options they have for efficiently engaging in interaction (ranging from the choice of one common language, to a mode of interaction in which speakers alternate languages, to conversations in which each individual speaks a different language, etc.). The diversity of resources speakers deploy in order to establish focused interaction with each other is analysed from a multimodal perspective, taking into account how linguistic resources are embedded in the individuals' embodied actions.

Using multimodal conversation analysis and interactional linguistics, this project will provide the following results: (1) it will contribute to the analysis of conversational openings by systematically taking into account the individuals' embodied resources; (2) it will provide a situated analysis of language contact "as it happens" and show that the speakers' language choices are sensitive to the social categorisation of the interactants; (3) it will describe urban public space as a locus of multilingualism, hence challenging the present-day image of public space (often associated to fear and insecurity) in contemporary societies, by showing its relevance for pro-social ways of living; (4) it will also engender methodological guidelines for video recording in natural public settings of interaction

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