Belonging to the old and unsuccessfully aged: language practices in a nursing home in Maastricht, The Netherlands

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For older people who make the transition to a nursing home creating a place and experiencing feelings of belonging are not taken for granted (Boelsma et al. 2014:48). Belonging in this paper is approached as an analytical concept which contains both an intimate feeling of being “at home” in a place (place-belongingness) and a discursive resource to construct, claim or resist forms of inclusion and exclusion (politics of belonging) (Antonsich 2010:646). Older people who live in a nursing home encounter many difficulties in their experience of belonging. One important difficulty that residents encounter are the stigmatized assumptions about older people that are perpetuating in the Dutch society (McHugh 2003:179). One existing assumption is for instance that older people are deaf. Moreover, older people are confronted with discourses on successful aging (Katz & Calasanti 2015:27).

One way in which representation of aging is communicated is through language practices (Lagacé et al. 2012: 336). Representations on aging are reflected through assumptions on language skills such as inevitable decline in language skills of older people in one or more language varieties (Idem.). Moreover, representation on aging is reflected through modified speech such as elderspeak and babytalk. This paper explores how the language practices of the nursing home staff towards the residents in a nursing home include elderspeak and babytalk, and how elderspeak and babytalk become an indexical character for belonging to the old and unsuccessfully aged. Correspondingly, this paper explores how elderspeak and babytalk contribute to the experience of belonging in a nursing home.

The data for this paper are in the process of being collected in a nursing home in Maastricht through ethnographic fieldwork complimented with methods such as participant observation, informal interviews and audio recording. I have been conducting fieldwork from July 2015 onwards and collected up to now 120 hours of recorded speech. Maastricht is the capital of the province of Limburg in The Netherlands, and is known for the high vitality and prestige of their local dialects (cf. Cornips 2013). Many residents of the nursing home in Maastricht are bidialectical, speaking what they perceive as standard Dutch (a language learned when entering school) and Maastricht dialect (as their home and native language).

This paper aims to answer the following questions: How are representations on aging reinforced through language practices? And, how does elderspeak and babytalk contribute to the experience of belonging in a nursing home?