

Book Review

PhD dissertation “Talking In and Out of Place: Ethnographic reflections on language, place, and (un)belonging in Limburg, the Netherlands” by Lotte Thissen

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Thissen's, *Talking in and out of place: Ethnographic reflections on language, place, and (un)belonging in Limburg, the Netherlands*, is a reflective ethnography which takes the reader into three different locations in the Dutch province of Limburg. This PhD dissertation uses a grounded theory approach to answer the central question 'how do people, by engaging in language practices with other people, give meaning to the everyday places they inhabit?' (p.16). The author shares numerous anecdotes and stories about her experiences as well as those of her participants, some of which are humorous and others which are intriguing. The grounded focus of the research on locations allowed Thissen to avoid essentialist notions of language, place, and body and instead encouraged the use of four central sensitizing concepts. These four concepts include 'centre-periphery dynamics', 'place-making processes', 'politics of (un)belonging', and Thissen's coined term 'foreignness'. It was important for the author to not completely ignore

essentialist language ideologies as these notions were often expressed by her participants and became an important part of her empirical data. Thissen scrutinizes the fixed connections between, language, place, and body by documenting people's actual language practices and by adopting the perspective that language is a resource (p.16–17). Furthermore, she provides insight into how people use language in everyday locations and interactions to shape place-making processes, politics of (un)belonging, and feelings of 'foreignness' within various centre-periphery dynamics perceived to be dominant by the participants.

The book consists of ten chapters of which chapters three to nine are divided into three parts according to the three fieldwork sites. In her introductory chapter Thissen uses short anecdotes to reflect on how notions such as language practices, place-making, and belonging have been present throughout her life (p.16). The author's personal experiences come up frequently throughout the book,

giving the research a sense of honesty and making the analysis more digestible for the reader. In fact, a strength of this book is the accessible way in which Thissen presents the research. The reader need not be an Anthropologist or Sociolinguist in order to engage with the theoretical and empirical material of the book.

As part of the introductory chapter Thissen provides an overview of her research location, Roermond (a city in the Dutch province of Limburg). Although this contextualisation is relatively short, it gives the reader a good idea of the historical issues in the area as well as how Limburg is perceived today (an 'un-Dutch paradise' (p.21)). This brief overview is an effective backdrop for Thissen's more in-depth thick descriptions of each fieldwork site later in the book. The contextualisation is followed by an exposition of the four central sensitizing concepts used to address the research question (p.22–29). In each case she explains the concept thoroughly yet concisely and demonstrates how these concepts were used in her ethnographic study. Importantly, Thissen introduces the reader to her coined term 'foreignness' (p.28). She explains that the concept is an attempt to capture those feelings of 'belonging through *un*belonging' (p.29). This concept is explained and defined in more depth later in the book. Towards the end of the chapter, Thissen makes explicit the perspective on language which the book adopts, namely a 'language as resource perspective' (p.30). According to the author, this perspective is better equipped to capture people's actual language practices and moves away from fixed connections between language, where people are from, and people's appearances.

Chapter 2 outlines and describes Thissen's methodology. The author leaves no ambiguity when it comes to her various ethnographic techniques. To add to these techniques, she used her body as a type of 'research instrument' as well. This means that her embodied experience formed part of her understandings of the fieldwork locations (p.50). I find this approach refreshing. The researcher is very aware of the influence her presence has in the space and instead of only noting this in an insignificant footnote, she turns it into a research tool to learn more about her fieldwork locations and the opinions of the people she met in these locations. This approach was essential in helping her maintain her aim of producing 'incomplete images of the world and the practices within it as they are interpreted by the ethnographer' instead of producing an 'objective view' of a culture or a language (p.42).

Part I of the book, '[c]arnival celebration practices at De Katers in the former village of Maasniel', looks firstly at how people shape understandings of community by engaging in 'carnavalesque' place-making practices (p.76), and secondly analyses the role of linguistic varieties in meaning-making processes at a specific carnival event (p.101). This fieldwork location is a great jumping-off point for the book because it illustrates some of the challenges faced by ethnographers. Thissen is very honest about the challenges she faced at this location like noise when trying to record an interaction and the somewhat unfriendly and aloof attitude of the members in the early days of her involvement. She also faced some resistance because of her skin tone and gender which illustrates the necessity for her reflexive approach to her ethnography. Thissen even admits to some mistakes she made while interacting with the De Katers members.

This honest nature of the book pulls the reader into her journey and gives useful insights for future ethnographers.

Part II of the book consists of a conversation the author had with two men in Roermond city centre's *Munsterplein* plaza. These chapters demonstrate the dynamic nature of place-making processes and how language may index both feeling in and out of place. This fieldwork location presents Thissen with her first experience of people having a sense of belonging through unbelonging. The empirical data in part II of the book is very intriguing. The author shows that while the two men explicitly say that they do not feel they belong in Limburg, their choice of linguistic forms indexes the opposite (both men used the Limburgian dialect) (p.130). The author demonstrates that the men engaged in ambivalent place-making processes and that this ambivalent process also produced politics of (un)belonging. Furthermore, Thissen highlights that this interaction clearly illustrates the arbitrary relationship between place, language, and body and that instead people constantly engage in 'linguaging' (p.147).

Thissen's final fieldwork location is Dost Market, a supermarket in the suburb of De Donderberg in Roermond. Part III of the book brings the reader into a 'Turkish' supermarket (p.150). The author worked in the supermarket as a volunteer for nine months while conducting her research. This location is very complex and is characterized by its linguistic diversity. It is in these chapters that the author explores and explains, in-depth, her coined analytical concept of 'foreignness'. Thissen defines 'foreignness' as "a feeling existing between two or more persons based

on some kind of shared otherness in comparison with others who define themselves as natives or as naturally belonging to the place where they live" (p.177). She continuously highlights that 'foreignness' can be felt by *anyone* (p.177,222). This is important because, as Thissen remarks in her concluding chapter, the concept aims to problematize the dominant Dutch discourse (and in my opinion, global discourse) of the split categories: '*autochtonen*' (natives) and '*allochtonen*' (non-natives) (p.226). Subsequently, the analytical concept encourages society to think critically about the effect of such labels on people.

Chapter ten gives the reader a brief summary of the findings at each location. Although it was challenging at times to follow the unravelling of the four central sensitizing concepts, Thissen provides four clear central conclusions. Her conclusions can be summarised as stating that one's body and birthplace does not determine one's language practices, place-making processes determine the norms of a place and how people draw boundaries between one another, and lastly that 'foreignness' is not exclusive to those who fall in the category of 'non-native'.

This book has been an absolute delight to read and review. Thissen's accessible writing style helps her readers grasp complex theoretical notions and allows one to journey with her through the fieldwork sites. I was pulled so deep into her work that I found myself giggling at the humorous events and cringing at some of the mistakes or controversial comments of participants. I recommend this book to any budding ethnographer or any person interested in questions of language, place, and belonging.