How are Amhara Ethiopians in New Zealand constructing cultural identities for themselves?

There has been a growing interest in global villages (Hall, 1992) and third spaces (Bhabha, 2012), referring to the blurring of ethnic group boundaries, the detachment of identities from specific locations and the hybridity constituting the identity of an individual or a context. At the same time, immigrants’ entry into a new country is often marked both by the need to adjust to the majority culture and possibly a desire to maintain their own culture. In New Zealand, an increasingly multicultural country based on a bicultural foundation, ethnic communities have responded differently to this challenge, yet research has continually highlighted the complexity involved in migrants’ identity positioning (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006; Walker, 2011). Further, the link between identity and language has often been theorised (Fishman, 1985; Smolicz, 1992), pointing to language as a potentially strong marker of ethnic identity. Attempts to uphold cultural identity may thus be accompanied by a commitment to maintain the heritage language, since it can function as a tool to transmit cultural values, as well as a marker of cultural identity (Starks, Taumoefolau, Bell, & Davis, 2005).

As the first study about Amharic language maintenance in New Zealand and one of the few studies worldwide concerned with identity constructions and language use in Amhara Ethiopian families, this presentation provides insights into the preservation of cultural identity by mothers and children in Wellington in the enterprise of language maintenance efforts. Findings form part of a wider study on the family language policies (Spolsky, 2012) of two refugee-background communities in New Zealand. Guided by principles of linguistic ethnography (Creese, 2010), the data in this presentation is based on ethnographic observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 14 caregivers of children under 12, and with eight children between six and 12 years. The data is analysed using three approaches to the description of ethnic identity: self-positioning of participants through reference to cultural categories, enacted identity through behaviour that indexes cultural norms and values, and co-construction of cultural identity through interactions with the majority society. Concerning the maintenance of Amharic as a marker of cultural identity, complex connections with the practices of the Orthodox Church were identified, while recurring themes tended to show a pragmatic view of English as linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) alongside maintaining Amharic in the family and at the church where a monolingual Amharic space has been created for the children to foster Ethiopian identity. The results illustrate a complex interplay of actors and practices that constitute caregivers’ and children’s multi-faceted identity constructions.


