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Life is a pitch: self-presentation in the age of corporate speak

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Success in the globalized new economy depends largely on the ability to present yourself in entrepreneurial terms. This requires autobiographical identity work (Pavlenko 2007) in all-purpose narratives of professional accomplishment and merit (Gee 2006). Such narratives present the self as a dynamic and transferable bundle of skills, experiences, and achievements across a range of mobile communicative contexts such as job applications, academic profiles and professional biographies (Urciuoli 2008, Gershon 2014). Life thus becomes a project that needs to be managed and accounted for in the standardized, corporatocratic register of CV speak.

In this paper, I engage with two educational contexts of autobiographical identity work: undergraduate college applications and graduate employment communication. I offer an autoethnographic account of two distinct episodes in my own trajectory from a student to an assistant professor of language; first as a moonlighting application ghostwriter for affluent ethnic minority pupils in Antwerp looking to attend college in the UK and the US, and second as an instructor of professional communication to ethnically diverse, but inexperienced MA students at the University of Antwerp. Both episodes are grounded empirically in textual artifacts such as emails, personal statements, professional biographies and student feedback.

In the analysis, I show how (i) students struggle with the homogenizing effects of commodified language use and the quest for authenticity in saturated attention markets; and (ii) how this discursive struggle clashes with received language ideologies of “foreign” language teaching and learning. The paper concludes with a reflection on what counts as linguistic competence in globalized, densely intertextual arenas of identity management and narrative self performance.

References

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Tom Van Hout (PhD, Ghent University, 2010) is assistant professor in business communication and academic director of the Institute of Professional and Academic Communication at the University of Antwerp. He specializes in qualitative approaches to discourse in the professions. His work on business journalism was published in Text & Talk, Pragmatics, and the Journal of Pragmatics. He is interested in supervising PhD research on the role of language as a technical skill in the workplace and as a saleable resource in the marketplace.