Second language learning and couple: shaken identities and legitimation of the social agent

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A common social representation implies that one of the best ways to learn a new language is to be in love with a native speaker. But such a relationship also implies tensions, shaken identities and transformations of social representations and categorisations. Learning a new language and being in a relationship thus have something in common in that they both produce inconsistency and otherness. It therefore appears interesting to investigate exolingual couple relationships in order to better understand how a person works over time and through social settings to re-build what they consider their own consistency. The attempt at sorting out their identities, may help a person gain a satisfying balance and to live in their new language.

Oral and written language trajectories of adults living in the francophone part of Switzerland and who are in a relationship with a native French speaker will be presented and discursively analysed. This will help to point to some of the sociolinguistic dynamics that underpin second language acquisition. Indeed, as an essential place of identity reconstruction, these narratives highlight ideologies and representations which are at the base of the second language learning-process.

First results have shown strong links between socialisation experiences lived by the non-native speaker, their acquisition of French and their sense of legitimacy as a French speaker. The effective mastering of the language does consequently not appear to be the unique legitimation of the second language learner. Rather, the way in which they work on their social identities and representations may help the learner not to consider themselves only as such, but also as an integral agent in their social space. Acting in the social space in French, and thereby improving their use of French, hence enables the alloglot to enter a positive dynamic of acculturation and legitimation.

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