From desire to experience and back again: sociolinguistic trajectories of British migrants in rural Brittany (France)

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Since the 1980’s regular waves of British migrants have settled in the French countryside, attracted by a rural lifestyle (Barou and Prado 1995; Benson and O’Reilly 2009). In rural Brittany (western region of France), the phenomenon was at its peak in 2005, and British migrants are now the first foreign population. With a critical ethnographic perspective on this migration, I will argue that it is embedded in a housing market, mass media and tourism industries, and that the desire to migrate is linked to the commodification of social practice and the fetishism of rural lifestyle. In these processes, local languages can be integrated as commodities (Heller 2011) and as potential resources for social distinction (Bourdieu 1979; Benson 2011). But they also tend be underestimated, or avoided, as issues that migrants can meet in their new neighborhoods, through the British representation of rural areas as a mute and empty landscapes, and the apparent possibility of speaking English in touristic areas. The second part of this presentation would therefore show that, in the experience of socialization in rural Brittany and interacting with locals or compatriots, migrants chose – and sometimes struggle through – various strategies to adapt to the local sociolinguistic practices and becoming legitimate. However, the autochthones’ desire to enhance the attraction of their territory and to expand their linguistic resources tends to be an advantage for building of the migrants’ legitimacy. Therefore, I would argue that the loop is closed, when, as English speakers, the migrants’ sociolinguistic resources is spotted by local agents, and used either in the making of territorial marketing, through advertising campaign or tourist orientation, or in helping the locals to acquire the English language, a marker of social distinction.

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