"In love with Barcelona": An exploration of mobility, class and identity in the narratives of lifestyle migrants to Barcelona

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Lifestyle migration (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009), a growing social trend that challenges received notions of migration, i.e. as driven by economic considerations, has received little research attention in the field of sociolinguistics. It is generally construed as stemming from (1) the increased reflexivity of the self typical of late modernity and the key role of lifestyles in identity-building projects (Giddens, 1991); (2) the individualisation drive of neoliberal societies and their concomitant discourses of self-actualisation and self-realisation; (3) the growing importance of emotional satisfaction and pleasure linked to expressive capitalism (Urry, 2010); and (4) mobility as epitomising individual freedom in the collective imagery of the 21st century (Elliot and Urry, 2010: 8).

The present paper analyses the narratives of mobility told by individuals of various backgrounds, national origins, age groups and gender who, over the last ten years, have chosen to live in Barcelona. In their life stories, they account for their decision to relocate to Barcelona on the basis of their appreciation of, among others, a slower pace of life, an outdoor lifestyle, the city’s warm weather and its seaside location. In this paper, I attempt to do two things: first, I consider the multiple ways in which this type of mobility is classed, as it embodies individuals’ differential possibilities of self-actualisation based on the mobilisation of specific types of economic, cultural, social and network capitals (Elliot and Urry, 2010); second, I examine how, despite an anti-materialist rhetoric which downplays occupation and economic status as life concerns (Oliver and O’Reilly, 2010), class issues play an important role in shaping lifestyle migrants’ trajectories in their new social environments. By focusing on social class, I follow recent pleas for the reinstatement of this construct in sociolinguistics and the study of identity in transnational contexts (Block, 2014).

Keywords: social class, mobilities, lifestyle.