Contesting the Boundaries of Authenticity: The Promotion of Profitable Bilingualism in Ireland

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This presentation will address the dynamics of two Irish-language advocacy organisations’ business-oriented promotion of the Irish language and the challenges this emerging promotional strategy poses for the traditional definition and boundaries of linguistic authenticity in Ireland.

The organisations studied here encourage their local business communities to capitalise on the commodifiable authenticity of Irish, particularly as a means of attracting tourists and investors. Mobilising the increasingly prominent discourses concerning the added value and market differentiation imparted by language and multilingualism, they promote Irish-English bilingualism as a ‘unique selling point’ allowing for strategic positioning as ‘authentically’ Irish destinations. Both organisations, however, operate in urban areas located outside the Gaeltacht, the largely rural Government-defined Irish-speaking regions that have long been perceived as the home of the ‘real’ native speaker and the repository of Ireland’s linguistic heritage. Such market-minded promotion thus contests the historical position of the Gaeltacht in seeking to access the symbolic and economic capital associated with the ‘authentic’ language.

This presentation will question the role of this promoted commodification in the (re)negotiation of Ireland’s linguistic boundaries as the use of Irish declines in the Gaeltacht and the population of ‘non-native’ speakers outside these regions grows (O’Rourke & Ramallo, 2011). By focusing on the strategies of the two organisations, it will also examine the circulation of economic discourses on language and their practical implications for local language policy. Grounded in critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2011), the presentation will draw on textual analysis and data generated through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ireland as part of ongoing PhD research.

References


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