Erasing and constructing boundaries: lingua francas in public service interpreting in Finland

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Immigration has brought dramatic modifications to the linguistic landscape of Helsinki and other larger cities of Finland during the past two decades. The consequences of these changes are also visible in language professions: while conference interpreting is becoming obsolete due to the widespread use of English as a lingua franca, the importance of public service (community) interpreting has grown steadily. But lingua francas such as French and English are widely used in public service interpreting as well. Indeed, in most lingua franca situations, both interpreters and their clients, i.e. immigrants, are second-language or lingua franca speakers. This creates complex situations in which multilingualism is at the same time powerfully foregrounded and made invisible.

The activity of interpreting, originally conceived as bridging linguistic boundaries, may actually (re)construct boundaries linked to divergent ideologies of language prevalent among the participants (interpreter, client, public service provider) which attribute different value to linguistic varieties and repertoires. At the same time, the use of lingua francas erases (i.e. renders invisible) the actual multilingual background of the involved persons.

The way in which extremely complicated and diverse multilingual repertoires, itineraries, and historical bodies are simplified in public service interpreting settings raises important questions about the fuzzy boundaries of categories such as "native speaker" and "mother tongue,” "language skills,” and "authentic language.” Based on participant observation as a public service interpreter of English, French, and Spanish in Greater Helsinki area, I wish to explore these recontextualizations in connection with the economic value attributed to different languages and linguistic and discursive repertoires, the professional role of public service interpreters as language experts, and the power relations among the participants in such interpreter-mediated communicative events.

Keywords: boundaries, language ideologies, public service interpreting.