Working on and with the language border: The struggle for legitimacy and authenticity of tourism workers

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The aim of this paper is to show how the town Murten/Morat in Switzerland uses its situation at the intranational French-German language border for touristic purposes and what consequences this form of commodification has on questions of legitimacy and authenticity for the local tour guides.

It has been shown that the use of multilingualism as an element of distinction on the tourism market often conflicts with the risk of its performance as a potentially threatening language barrier for tourists (Duchêne 2012). This tension also appears within the promotional material of Murten/Morat, as the existence of the language border is either foregrounded as a tourist attraction, especially through the (apparently) resulting bilingualism, or completely concealed. This balancing act can similarly be found in the staging activities of "local" tour guides who present the town’s history and its particularities, such as the destination's location at the language border and/or the local bilingualism. Their challenge consists in representing the border situation in an attractive, authentic, but still comprehensible way which demands a specific linguistic formulation and language choice according to the target audience (local, national, international visitors). Drawing on participant observation and audio/video recordings of mono- and bilingual guided tours and interviews with tour guides, I will show their (legitimation) strategies for dealing with the high linguistic flexibility which is demanded in order to provide information in different languages/varieties and at the same time to embody the local bilingualism as an authenticity-marker. I will argue that the performance of the bilingualism can be conceived as an erasure and/or a “commodified” presentation of the language border. Thus the commodification of the language border and the embodiment of the “authentic” local bilingualism for touristic purposes leads to a re-hierarchization of the speakers of the different local languages and a (re)production of social inequalities.

Keywords: political economy, linguistic boundaries.