Language Policies, Multilingualism and Migrations: Towards a Polycentric Approach to the Values of Portuguese in European Space

Maria Clara Keating¹, Olga Solovova², Olga Barradas³

¹Faculty of Letters and Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal  
²Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal  
³Instituto Camões, United Kingdom

Written in collaboration by three authors, we argue for a polycentric vision of Portuguese in Europe by framing the use of this language in the migration processes, the resulting multilingual contexts, and the language policies involved in the local contexts of action and observation. We intertwine insights from three ethnographies, based in different sociolinguistic spaces – Portuguese migrants in London and Eastern European migrants in a middle-sized Portuguese city – jointly exploring the concept of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). Comparative work highlighted three aspects: the role of Portuguese in linguistically diverse contexts; the existence of contexts resulting from overlapping mobilities in space and time; emergent language policies at institutional and informal scales addressing those polycentric contexts. This allowed us to posit the place of European Portuguese as a language of structure, a language of action, and a language of mobility for minority migrants. Drawing on two sets of policy documents issued by the same government and used in distinct community spaces – Portuguese speakers abroad and speakers of other languages in Portugal – we look at the construction of linguistic value, both as language of migration and heritage for the diaspora, now significant commodity with market potential; and as language of a monolingual nation state and target for linguistic integration. Both positions corroborate general orientations towards policies of modernisation, under a new political economy celebrating the institutional value of lusophony, by means of monolingualisation mechanisms driven by discourses highlighting separate monolingual spaces, with the risk of destroying already established multilingual practice. We look beyond institutions and cross our focuses on the various agents and mechanisms of linguistic legitimacy to emphasize the importance of multi-sited and critical research that not only recognises the fundamental role of ”subalteren voices” but also legitimises and empowers them towards the possibility of transformative action.

Keywords: linguistic ideology, polycentricity, Portuguese.