

The sociolinguistic economy of Berlin

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In this paper, we report on Anglophone practices in Berlin (Heyd and Schneider in press) and the various ways in which they are connected to and intersect with the larger sociolinguistic economy of Berlin (Heyd, Schneider and von Mengden in press). The history of English in Berlin is on the one hand specific and highly localized, through factors such as the presence of the Allied Forces in post-WWII Berlin and the emergence of an Anglophone creative class in the 1970s. On the other hand, present-day Berlin lends itself to comparison with other cities perceived as transnational, drawing in diverse global workforces ranging from highly mobile elites and creative industry members to precariously employed service workers, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

Based on data from very different settings, such as the Anglophone New African Diaspora in Berlin on the one hand, and English-coded elite practices of consumption such as Third Wave Coffee and Craft Beer on the other hand, we emphasize that English – and other forms of linguistic practice in Berlin – is first and foremost to be understood through an appreciation of the sociolinguistic economy that shapes the city. Thus, the perspective that we propose here reveals diversity, translocal ties and inter-ethnic relationships that go well beyond established categories of diasporic pockets or ethnic speech communities. The role of contemporary discourses on the instrumental or social value of languages also comes to the fore. We see that the way linguistic resources can be commodified – or not – impacts on their possibility to become visible and on the way their presence is discursively negotiated. Thus, Heller's and Duchêne's work, showing that value is no longer only attributed to languages on grounds of expressing national/ethnic pride and solidarity but can be based on their potential to gain economic profit (Heller and Duchêne 2012), is relevant to interpret the translocal indexical meanings of English and other languages in Berlin.

The importance of economic ideologies in framing indexical values, as it emerges from our data, leads to a critical questioning of the 'city' as an a priori frame of analysis for linguistic variation and change. We argue that traditional assumptions about language and the city – such as its inherent cosmopolitanism and role as a platform for contact, but also the notion of "urban exceptionalism" that posits an essential difference between urban language use and assumed non-urban contexts – need to be reexamined for a better understanding of language in society in the 21st century.

References

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