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Authenticity, a double-edged sword

Location: FU Berlin, JK 31/239
& online via Webex

<https://fu-berlin.webex.com/fu-berlin/j.php?MTID=m695f34ab1cff93a246e21b72288db30f>
Meeting-Kennnummer: 2788 679 8414, Meeting-Kennwort: Z23UxCVyun4

Authenticity is a value characteristically reserved for minorities and minority languages, in contrast to the anonymity of hegemonic languages. What is authentic is viewed as the genuine expression of a community, or of an essential self. That gives authenticity a central role in cultural and identity politics and often underpins claims to resources within state structures. In the arguments put forward in favour of the revitalization of minority languages, their very survival is frequently made dependent on their perceived authenticity.

In this seminar I will try to reflect on the notion of authenticity in language and its social effects from a minority-language perspective. Using the Basque case as the point of departure and based on examples taken from Basque public contexts such as social networks, pop culture, and Basque media, I will try to show that authenticity has become a legitimating ideology of Basque at local and global levels. In fact, in order to be considered a true Basque, one must sound like the kind of person who is valued as 'natural' and 'authentic', as someone who able to talk in a local dialect. Authenticity also lies at the heart of the 'coolness' Basque culture and language aim to acquire in global markets, which on the other hand has local consequences. Indeed, a greater economic investment is being increasingly made in small languages, and specific opportunities have emerged as a result of their rising marketing value.

The logic of authenticity reverses the hierarchies between languages, varieties, and speakers, but this does not always benefit the revitalization of minority languages. With the example of Basque, I would like to bring to light and reflect on the perverse side of this logic of authenticity, and on the risks it entails. In particular, I will focus on the inequality between speakers of Basque from a local view, but, broadening our perspective to a more translocal and even global context, I also wish to make us think about the dangers of these discourses that mythologize and folklorize Basque as 'authentic', and forewarn that the symbolic or visual worth of a small language such as Basque may eclipse its communicative value.