

The Hierarchization of Regional Languages in the Linguistic Landscapes of Brittany

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Moriarty (2015: 196) has convincingly shown how the linguistic landscape is a key component of the touristic space, where landscapes “... get embellished for aesthetic appropriation” (Urry 2002: 174). In her case-study on a Gaeltacht town in south-west Ireland, Moriarty further highlights the locally controversial nature of the decision to rename the local service town using its Irish-language form only – An Daingean (formerly Dingle) – following the Government’s application of the Placenames Order (2004) to having monolingual signs in traditional Irish-speaking areas (Moriarty 2015: 197). That such a move was locally seen as controversial, in an area officially designated as Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) in a state where the first official language is Irish, points to a complex semiotic relationship between language planning and revitalization on the one hand, and economic and touristic needs on the other.

Such linguistic and semiotic complexity exists in other minority language regions as well. In Brittany (north-west France), French is the sole official language of the French state, and yet this has not prevented the emergence of local initiatives to promote the use of Brittany’s two regional languages – Breton and Gallo – in the linguistic and semiotic landscapes of public signage. In comparison to other regions of France (e.g. Corsica), the presence of Breton in the linguistic landscape is “overshadowed by Corsican” (Blackwood 2011: 117), though the presence of Breton seems to be increasing (in the view of the authors). The authors will argue, through a critical sociolinguistic lens, that a clear hierarchization of regional languages emerges as a result, whereby Celtic Breton indexes Brittany much more ‘authentically’ than Romance Gallo does. The paper will consider, in Brittany, “what resources are circulating, what resources people are competing for, as well as the conditions that make them available and valuable; ... how their distribution is organized and how it works, and how people position themselves with respect to them” (Heller 2011: 39) The authors will conclude with considering how the visualization of the legitimacy of one regional language over another has implications for the symbolic presence of each minority language in the linguistic landscape, but also how this visualization can have very real consequences for the competition for limited resources available to linguistic minorities in contemporary France.

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