

Workshop

“Commodification”: The potential and limits of a concept

Saturday, 2 December 2017

10.00-10.30	Opening and introduction (Mi-Cha Flubacher)
10.30-11.30	Martina Zimmermann , PH Luzern: Responsible citizenship and peace as commodities? Exploring promotional discourses in a language village in the US.
11.45-12.45	Elisabeth Barakos , Aston University: Minority languages and commodification – intersecting debates over empowerment and exploitation
12.45-14.15	Lunch break
14.15-15.15	Alfonso Del Percio , University College London: Language, employability, and the commodifiability of labour power
15.30-16.30	Maria Sabate , Universitat de Lleida: The commodification of translinguistic talk in migrant-regulated businesses
16.30-17.00	General discussion and closing of first day (Mi-Cha Flubacher)

Sunday, 3 December 2017

9.30-10.30	Sebastian Muth , Universität Freiburg: Determining the value of the intangible: Commodification of language in medical tourism
10.45-11.45	Veronica Pajaro , Universitetet i Oslo: Commodification? Multilingual repertoires in job interviews
11.45-12.30	Kamilla Kraft , Københavns Universitet: Discussion of papers
12.30-12.45	Closing of workshop (Mi-Cha Flubacher)

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Seminarraum 2, 1st floor

Open to public; register until 23 Nov. 2017 due to limited capacity:

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“Commodification”: The potential and limits of a concept

Workshop organized by

Dr. Mi-Cha Flubacher, Institute for Linguistics, University of Vienna

Vienna, 2-3 December 2017

In applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, “commodification” has gained traction as a concept to explain a variety of processes, most of which address the conversion of linguistic resources into profit. This conversion is commonly understood as taking various forms, such as using multilingual or specific language skills as a resource in the production process (Boutet 2012, Cameron 2005) or for promoting a business (Muth 2015, 2017), one’s employability (Urciuoli 2008) or even a geographic region (Duchêne & Del Percio 2014; Flubacher & Duchêne 2012). In this process, certain languages are understood to gain specific value and lead to material profit and/or (social) mobility. Further commodification processes have, for example, been analysed in the context of higher education marketing strategies (Zimmermann & Flubacher, 2017) or of tourism (Heller et al. 2014), whereby authenticity is created through anachronistic regional language performances or simply through the production of sellable items, such as postcards, t-shirts, tea mugs etc. emblazed with slogans or word lists in the local (“quaint”) variety.

Against the backdrop of such diverse applications, a discussion has emerged about the utility of “commodification” as a concept and its explanatory power, especially as it often remains undertheorized (e.g., Holborow 2015, McGill 2013). Key concerns include whether there should not be a clearer distinction between approaches that focus on processes (e.g., the use of language skills in a particular business context) versus products (e.g., t-shirts with slogans in a particular variety), and, whether there are not analytical limits linked to such an indiscriminate use of the term (Park, unpublished). Further, the idea of value conversion as a result of commodification has been criticised as too simplistic and disregarding of complex contextualised processes of shifting valorisation processes (Bolander 2017). Because of the recent prominence of the term, is it losing its value, in other words, by virtue of having become a concept without theoretical definition or conceptualization? It is thus the aim of this workshop to discuss the pros and cons of applying this paradigm in research on language in society, thereby evaluating its potential, limitations, and explanatory power both with regard to theory as well as methodology in applied linguistics, (critical) sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. Thus, in this workshop, discussion will centre on examples from our own fieldwork and case studies through which we will critically examine how and why we apply commodification and under what conditions we do not make use of this concept, furthermore reflecting on the work of other scholars in the field researching similar topics.

The workshop is open to other researchers or anyone interested. It will be based on the presentations of the invited speakers, but it will also allow for an extended time of mutual work and discussion. Finally, it is the aim of the workshop to offer a detailed insight into the current debates surrounding the concept of “commodification” in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology to colleagues and students alike. On the one hand, this will be of particular interest for younger scholars at the University of Vienna, who are either working with or currently only marginally familiar with but interested in this concept, its epistemological embedding and disciplinary significance. On the other, the exchange allows for a discussion with established local scholars.

References

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