‘Discovering’ the world and the challenges of migratory experiences of female au pairs in the 21st century.

We are residing in what Urry and Elliot have termed ‘the golden age of mobility’ where “massive social changes are implicated in the ever-increasing movement of people, things, capital, information and ideas around the globe” (2010: ix). As a result, language as a resource - whether symbolic, interactional, material or ideological - flows, changes and is used by individuals in their every day lives and workplace settings. This study centers on the latest conditions of language learning, multilingual practices and the performance of identities among young female au pairs in the 21st century as a result of the new globalized economy (Heller 2003; Romero et al. 2014).

The perspective taken in this study is that while globalization and transnational migration are not new, they have and continue to affect the rise of a new globalized economy and thus ‘new’, international division of labor. Among other corollaries, this effects how socio-cultural practices such as language is being utilized, conceptualized, learned and managed in innovative and different ways (Blommaert 2010; Otsuji & Pennycook 2010; Pietikäinen et al. 2016) thus contributing to individuals’ performances and depiction of their dynamic identities to both themselves and their potential employers while at the same time serving as a means to co-construct a narrative of conflict due to the social, cultural, linguistic and economic challenges of residing in a different country (although temporarily).

This pilot study is situated within a broad interdisciplinary theoretical framework of globalization (Coupland 2003), mobility (Urry 2007; Adey 2010), language learning and identity that draws on poststructuralist perspectives of multilingualism (García 2009; Canagarajah 2013; Kramsch 2014) within the 21st century. I adopt a mixed methodological approach consisting of critical ethnographic methods (Gardner and Martin-Jones 2012) over a three year period (2014-2016) that includes participant observation and in-depth interviews from au pairs hailing from the UK, Australia and Brazil, who resided in Austria for 6-9 months and worked as an au pair for a multilingual and mobile family.

In addition to analyzing three very different case studies utilizing a discourse analytic approach, text analysis of one particular website is also considered in relation to how female au pairs present themselves linguistically online and documenting how they actually feel about moving to a new country, learning a new language and the expectations of this type of ‘care’ work (Yeates 2005) before, during and after the actual au pair experience. Preliminary results indicate that despite the advertising and thus performance of young female au pairs as ‘outgoing’, ‘adventurous’ and ‘open’, which are specifically used to target employers, au pairs admit to the difficulties and challenges faced of the actual migratory experience in terms of language learning, integration and their overall performance of identity, which did not coincide with how they initially depicted themselves before their journeys, namely, as young, independent women ready to discover the world.
References