Language struggles: Representations of the countryside and the city in an era of mobilities

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A B S T R A C T

This paper stresses the role of language in rural studies research. It does so by exploring conceptualisations of the city and the countryside in a period of mobility transformations and economic crisis in Greece. We use survey data from open-ended questions asking respondents to provide words they associate with the 'village', the 'city' and the 'eparchy', a term for non-metropolitan spaces of regional scale used in the Greek language. The survey was implemented to a sample of 300 residents in the city of Athens, and 300 residents in two regional towns in Greece. Our results demonstrate negative associations with the city and generally positive images attached to non-metropolitan settings, a finding that is important in contexts similar to Greece, where the 'rural idyll' has been far from a hegemonic discourse. Furthermore, we advocate the use of indigenous and informal narratives of rurality, such as the 'eparchy', for contextualising rural spatialities and development narratives, in the context of rural mobility, and wider, rural social research. Such terms are particularly powerful because their use in international platforms unequivocally challenges, and resists, the dominance of Anglophone research.

Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt
The limits of my language are the limits of my world
Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1921

1. Introduction: Positioning rurality

This paper explores contemporary conceptualisations of the city and the countryside in Greece – a non-Anglophone research context, posing considerable challenges in writing it in English. This challenge, implicit in most research projects in non-Anglophone contexts, represents also one of the arguments of the paper: that although language matters, its importance and its complications are not critically considered in rural studies research, a field which is asymmetrically influenced by UK-US, and wider Anglophone, academic discourses (Lowe, 2012).

Social scientists have been long aware of the role of language in understanding the social and natural world, not least in the concept of discourse (Foucault, 1972). For Lisle, for example, (1985, p. 24) 'language is not simply a medium to carry concepts. It is itself the very matter of scientific observation and discourse'. Most social scientists accept that language constructs meaning and realities, that language is neither neutral nor disconnected from culture, and that it carries its own politics (Phillipson, 2011). In Fairclough's words 'a language defines a certain potential, certain possibilities, and excludes others'

(2003, p. 24). However, although few social scientists would disagree with the above assertions, there is scant discussion on the impact of English, as a *lingua academica*, in rural mobility research, despite the debates on rural definitions and concepts used across academics, policy makers and local communities (e.g. Allan and Mooney, 1998; Halfacree, 1993; Jones, 1995).

The paper draws on numerous research projects on lay representations of rurality (see for example: López-i-Gelats et al., 2009; Baylina and Berg, 2010; Willits et al., 1990), and explores the social construction of rurality in Greece in a context of mobilities linked to the economic crisis. Over the last decade, an increasing body of work has advocated a 'mobilities turn' in social sciences, reflecting increasing levels and new forms of mobility, thereby placing mobility as omnipresent feature of social life (e.g. Cresswell, 2006, 2010; Elliot and Urry, 2010; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). As Cresswell (2010) highlights, this literature combines ways of thinking and conceptualising that 'foreground mobility (of people, of ideas, of things) as a geographical fact that lies at the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the micro-geographies of everyday life' (p. 551). For Cresswell and others, a mobilities perspective is essentially relational: it moves beyond more narrow fields, such as transport or migration studies, to embrace all forms of mobility (material and immaterial), from small scale personal and even transient movements (or

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even immobility experiences) to the global flows and of capital and labour (see also review in Scott et al., 2017). In this mobility era, researchers have investigated diverse representations, practices and experiences produced by mobilities, such as what mobilities mean and for whom; what representations are embodied through mobility; how they might change our understanding of places; and what power struggles and inequalities they might produce across intersectional identities:

> […] mobility is more than about just getting from A to B. It is about the contested world of meaning and power. It is about mobilities rubbing up against each other and causing friction. It is about a new hierarchy based on the ways we move and the meanings these movements have been given (Cresswell, 2006, p. 265)

A large body of literature has explored the 'mobilities turn' in rural studies (see for example: Milbourne, 2007; Smith, 2007; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Stockdale, 2016) and, more recently, efforts have been made to attach mobility research in the context of crisis and debates around sustainability and resilience (Camarero et al., 2016; Murphy and Scott, 2014). This refers to contributions for example on the interplay between mobility and crisis through decline in public funding for infrastructure and transport, which for rural residents means that they might need to travel even further for accessing services that they need, but also what the crisis might mean for spatial justice (Oliva, 2013; Bock et al., 2015).

Adding to this research, this paper seeks to explore conceptualisations of rurality through a mobility lens. Our quantitative fieldwork took place in the shadow of the financial crisis in Greece and the observed representations are likely to have been influenced by the wider socio-economic environment shaped by the crisis (see a review by Anthopoulou et al., 2017). Greek researchers for example have discussed 'reverse mobilities', involving urban-to-rural relocations, related to the financial crisis associated with new roles and expectations about the countryside (Kasimis and Zografakis, 2012; Kasimis and Papadopoulos, 2013; Gkartzios et al., 2017), although there is a debate over the underlying drivers and the magnitude of these mobilities (Anthopoulou et al., 2017). Gkartzios (2013) used the term 'crisis counterurbanisation' to describe mobility experiences related to the financial crisis, while Remoundou et al. (2016) further observe the potential of wider mobility processes (inclusive of counterurbanisation too) associated with the economic crisis. In this paper, we aim to explore the discursive construction of certain words associated with different spatial scales in a context of crisis. Instead of downplaying the linguistic medium of carrying out the research (i.e. the Greek language), we make a clear point about the social and cultural construction of different terms in specific languages, by using words that correspond to the socio-linguistic context of our case, and specifically avoiding the term 'rural'.

Empirically, we draw on two household surveys that were implemented independently; first, in the capital city of Athens and, subsequently, in two regional towns of around 10,000 people. Following primarily the quantitative empirical works by van Dam et al. (2002) and Rye (2006), we asked respondents in both surveys to name up to three words they associate with the words 'village' (χωριό; transcription: chorio), 'eparchy' (επαρχία; transcription: eparchia) and 'city' (πόλη; transcription: poli). We purposefully used the lay term 'eparchy', which could be also translated as the province in English, referring to a 'non-metropolitan space of regional scale' (as suggested by one of the paper's reviewers) for two reasons. Firstly, to make a specific point about the value of indigenous terms which challenge the hegemony of Anglophone research. A key difference for us is that the term 'eparchy' essentially implies and includes both urban and rural spaces (from small villages, to medium-size towns, and regional cities) avoiding an artificial distinction between the urban and the rural, which is so characteristic in the English language and culture (e.g. Williams, 1973; Sharp, 1940). Secondly, we use the term 'eparchy' in an empirical research design to advocate its use as a more useful discourse to discuss

non-metropolitan social phenomena in Greece. We felt uncomfortable using the term 'rural' in a context that the term is not commonly used to describe a spatial identity – at least in the way that the term rural is discussed in English rural studies. We should acknowledge though that while the 'eparchy' is a term that is associated with identities (also in negative terms, such as implying parochialism), it does introduce another distinction, this time between the metropolis and the periphery, which is more pronounced in Greek than in English. Our aim, therefore, is to explore the lay characteristics, symbols and ideas that these different spatial terms encompass in the Greek context. In the following sections we review the role of language in rural studies research, both internationally and in the Greek context, and then discuss the literature on contemporary mobilities in the Greek settlement pattern. The methodology is then presented drawing on two household surveys. Our results and conclusions are then discussed, suggesting that people in both surveys hold positive images for non-metropolitan settlements and negative perceptions of urban life. These representations are likely to be influenced by the wider socioeconomic environment and expectations about the future economic situation shaped by the financial crisis.

2. Language politics and rural studies

Perhaps most polemically, Phillipson (1992) introduced *linguistic imperialism* to criticise the role of English language within a neoimperial and neoliberal project that strengthens the interests of the transnational capital class. For Phillipson (2016, forthcoming), calling English a neutral *lingua franca*, simply underestimates its hegemonic cultural and economic implications. He argues for example that the English language embodies corporate business practices, Hollywood consumerist ideologies and universalises such values in asymmetrical terms when compared to national traditions and cultures. Similarly, in the academic context, he criticizes the use of English, a *lingua academica* as he argues, for assuming that it can universally explain human behaviour and social phenomena. Such assumptions run the risk of excluding realities from academic scrutiny, while portraying certain phenomena as universal truths. Along these lines, the sociologist de Swaan (2001, p. 78) also points out:

> the English language may single out and impose the experience of the English speaking societies, of the United States in the first place, as the standard of human interactions and the model of social institutions: the American experience presented as universal human destiny

Apart from the fallacy of trying to understand and explain the social world in one, in fact *any* language, many language problems are commonly observed particularly in international comparative projects where the English language is the communication medium between researchers. In these cases, English also serves as the foundation for conceptualising and debating research questions, theoretical frameworks and methodologies, given that most authoritative and credited works are published in English. It is also not uncommon that many comparative research projects draw on Anglophone counties, given the communication that a common language enables and that comparative research is a particularly opportunistic research field, i.e. researchers conduct comparative analysis in contexts their linguistic skills or networks allows them access to.

On the other hand, parochial academic monolingualism renders invisible works that are not written or translated (or translated well enough) in English (Mendieta et al., 2006). Mangen (1999) reviews a series of limitations in relation to the use of language in international research projects: for example, the linguistic competences of researchers are downplayed, although they are central to translating empirical data; the interpretation of emotional responses is problematic across different cultural contexts; even when translation is professionally made, conceptual equivalence can be problematic. Ungerson (1996) discusses how the language of international dissemination can