

# Urban Traces

## A day of fieldwork in the Vlaamse Rand: strengths and limitations of the empathic methodology

March–July, 2015



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### Why study the links between language and geography?

From the beginning of the geographical sciences, the geographer Albert Demangeon (Demangeon, 1929, p. 427) presented languages as cultural parameters and essential constituents of human interactions and associations<sup>1</sup>. But he mostly described them as founding principles of political territories and nationalities. It is obvious that Modern States aspire to achieve linguistic homogeneity through one official language (Hambye, 2009). During the seventies, Roland Breton (Breton, 1975) noticed with regret that languages seem to be excluded from the field of geographical expertise<sup>2</sup> although they reflect the spirit of a society. Although R. Breton noted the importance of language for the comprehension of individuals and societies<sup>3</sup>, his analysis were overly confined to “Ethnopolitics”: languages are still analysed through the confined angle of the sovereignty of a State or seen as factors of influence for communities. Languages are obviously instruments of power, and several political scientists (Laponce, 1984) and geographers (Sanguin, 1992) were interested in this relation between the influence of an authority and the weight of an official language. This « linguistic geography », which is understood as

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1 « Certaines propriétés de l'intelligence humaine, comme le langage, agissent d'une manière aussi forte et aussi directe pour déterminer la forme et la vie de ces groupes. Instrument des relations entre les hommes, le langage leur fournit un principe d'association ; les hommes ont tendance à s'assembler selon leurs affinités de langage, et souvent aussi, quand ils sont déjà groupés, à se servir de la même langue. » (Demangeon, 1929, p. 427).

2 « La géographie des langues est parfois considérée comme un secteur de notre science qui serait marginal voire même carrément extérieur et affaire de linguistes. » (Breton, 1975, p. 513)

3 « La langue maternelle marque profondément l'esprit des individus comme la conscience collective, la vision, la mentalité et le comportement des groupes. Une écologie cohérente des sociétés devrait tenir compte d'une triple relation entre milieu (économie) culture (fondée sur la langue) et organisation politique (Région ou Etat). » (Breton, 1975, p. 525).

the analysis of social interactions in a linguistic area, is mainly a field of Sociolinguistics and not Geography. In a nutshell, the “geolinguistics” or the “geography of languages” is limited to the study of the spatial distribution and expansion of languages as much as their representative weight in a society (Pailhé, 1997)<sup>4</sup> or their regional linguistic variations. Finally, the relation between languages and geography is often summarized in a definition of “isoglosses”, in other words linguistic boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Geography appears to deal only with the question of the repartition and the protection of historical ethnic-minorities (Steinicke, 1993) and is still too little concerned with the emergence of linguistic minorities due to migration and globalisation. However, these new forms of mobility force the geographical sciences to rethink the links between territories, languages and identities, which will shake up European monolingual ideologies. Claude Raffestin is one of the first geographers who acknowledged that languages play a key role in the production of territory (Raffestin, 1995). From this perspective, social and cultural geography should examine languages and their territorial impacts; not only through visual landscapes, soundscapes or social repartition of the use of a language, the major topics of the Sociolinguistics. This work attempts to demonstrate that the uses of languages provoke territorial behaviours. They influence the specific relations between people and their territory.

### **Summary of the fellowship’s project**

My thesis work focuses on the multilingual and multicultural periphery of the Brussels-Capital Region, more exactly the nineteen bordering municipalities called “Vlaamse Rand” (“Flemish periphery”). In these municipalities, the Flemish authorities conduct policies to promote the Dutch language and Flemish culture. In particular, I analyse individual and collective day-to-day relations of the Francophone inhabitants to their municipal

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4 « Les langues, comme tout objet ayant un déploiement spatial observable, peuvent se cartographier. Les exemples ne manquent pas de cartes définissant des aires linguistiques, séparées par des isoglosses. » (Pailhé, 1997, p. 34).

5 « Une géographie des phénomènes culturels peut-elle être autre chose qu’une visualisation représentative de la distribution des langues, des religions, des arts, des littératures ou encore d’autres phénomènes tels que ceux relevant des jeux, de l’alimentation ou que sais-je encore? » (Raffestin, 1995, p. 87).

spaces (Di Méo, 1996)<sup>6</sup> within these multicultural territories<sup>7</sup>. The French speakers in the Vlaamse Rand are both a historical minority and a linguistic group which emerged from recent migrations due to the proximity of the officially bilingual (French-speaking / Dutch-speaking) capital city of the European Union. The Vlaamse Rand is an example of “superdiversity” (Blommaert, Rampton, 2011)<sup>8</sup>. Diverse kinds of migrations and linguistic backgrounds affect this territory (Willaert, 2008), among them the Francophone historical minority joined by national peri-urban migrations, mainly consisting of French-speakers. The importance of this Francophone community is deliberately minimised by the Flemish authorities who seem to be more concerned about the internationalization of the Brussels periphery. Indeed, lots of these migrations to the Rand are international (EU citizens due to the presence of the European institutions in Brussels, non-EU citizens due to the NATO in Zaventem and more broadly international migrants due to the economic opportunities offered in Brussels and the surrounding region).

**This work is concerned with the co-constitution of languages and places, and tries to understand the re-negotiation of the Francophone identity in the Vlaamse Rand.**

This thesis is distinguished from metropolitan studies, which insist on the relations between the Brussels-Capital Region and its periphery. Its ambition is to study the daily emotional relations to the residence’s territory, beyond the metric and practical relations between the Belgian capital city and its periphery. This work is concerned with the co-constitution of languages and places, and tries to understand the re-negotiation of the Francophone identity in the Vlaamse Rand. It attempts to estimate whether language practices have concrete impacts on territorial appropriations and organization of Francophone inhabitants from their routine trips to their participation in public life in these surrounding municipalities. This doctorate should demonstrate the persistent usefulness of notions such as “experienced, perceived and conceived space” (« espace vécu, perçu, conçu ») (Frémont, 1974; Lefebvre, 1974) and focus on the idea of “place-making”.

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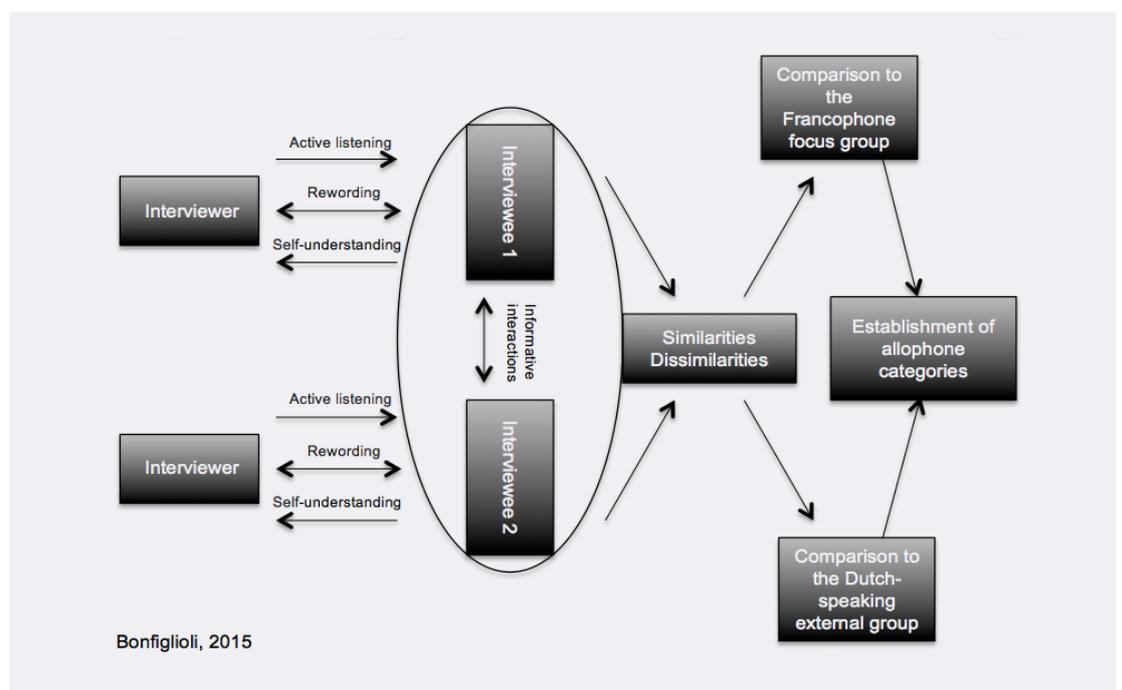
6 « Cheminements, des expériences sensibles, des contacts humains localisés qui animent la vie quotidienne et en forment le contexte à la fois matériel et social. » (Di Méo, 1996, p.87).

7 Including all the monolingual municipalities and those with linguistic facilities.

8 « A tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing market of the host society, and so on » (Blommaert, Rampton, 2011, p. 1).

During my fellowship, I was especially engaged with the research group Cosmopolis (Centre for Urban Research) and the interdisciplinary Research Centre on Brussels BRIO. The cosmopolitanism of the metropolitan area constitutes one of the main research topics of Cosmopolis. This cooperation was essential for a better understanding of the co-productions of identities and places following a geographical approach. But due to the specifics of my research subject, I mainly benefited from the expertise of the BRIO center. These two research structures gave me the opportunity to discuss my research during a joint seminar (on 10 June 2015). There were several round tables organised at the BRIO center; I was also invited by the Brussels Studies Institute to deliver a lesson on the linguistic issues in the Vlaamse Rand.

The main objective of this fellowship was to conduct surveys in the Vlaamse Rand. During three months (end March-early July 2015), I held semi-structured interviews with twenty Francophone families living in the Rand by applying an empathic methodology focused on their personal experience and daily territorial perceptions. Questionnaires were used in my previous work (Bonfiglioli, 2013; Bonfiglioli, 2014; Bonfiglioli, 2015) but this time the qualitative methodology appeared more relevant for investigating territorial perceptions (Béaud, 1996). This relatively unstructured and non-directive framework offered opportunities for the respondents to speak more freely about their personal experience (Bondi, 1999, 2003; Bondi and al., 2002; Rogers, 1951; Rose, 1997; Schwartz, Jerry, 1979). Guided walks with inhabitants on their municipal territories were also used to facilitate the evocation of feelings regarding the places (De Certeau, Giard, Mayol, 1980; Pérec, 1974). Collective interviews with all the members of a family were useful to reveal contradictions, dissimilarities or, on the contrary, similarities between the members



Schematic presentation  
of the methodology  
(Bonfiglioli, 2015)

of the same family in their everyday territorial experiences (Aitken, 2001). During the interviews, it was not unusual for a family member to ask the others about their feelings. These interactions facilitated the work of the researcher and guaranteed the non-directive orientation of these interviews.

The statements of this Francophone focus group were compared to some political and ideological positions affecting the territorial representations of the Flemish residents

and explaining some stereotypical conflicts in this suburban area.

It was an essential prerequisite for the study, even if the subject of these political conditions had already been broached by a number of Belgian historians (Wils, 1996; Witte, 1983; Witte, Craeybeckx, 1987; Witte, 1993; Witte, Van Velthoven, 2000) and political analysts (Delwit, 2009; Farhat, 2012). The collection and analysis of

the qualitative data, such as language use and perceptions in a specific location, provide sociolinguistic profiles for Francophone residents.

In compliance with this non-directive approach, I participated in the public life of these municipalities only when some Francophone inhabitants invited me to follow them in their daily life. This methodology respects the empathic position of the researcher, originally laid down by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1951). My main objective was not to live like an inhabitant but to profoundly understand the views of the inhabitants. Empathy is a methodology free of prejudices, which obeys the neutral axiology defined by Max Weber (Weber, 1917).

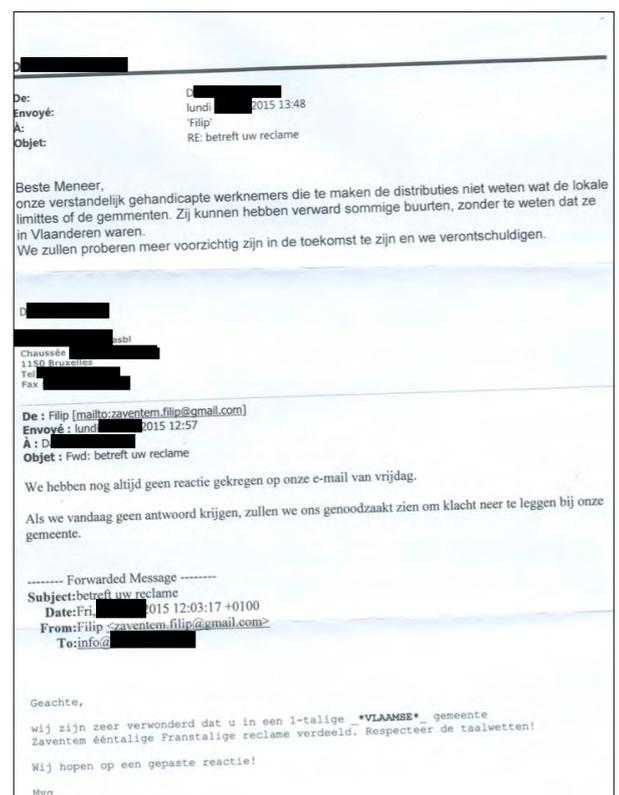
The following subsection presents some aspects of the fieldwork which are often underappreciated in academic publications, and which illustrate some challenges and strengths of the empathic methodology.

### March the 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, a day of fieldwork in Zaventem

A Francophone inhabitant of Sterrebeek (a part of the municipality of Zaventem) invites me to talk about her daily routine trips on March the 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. At the end of the day, I

E-mails from Filip to a  
Francophone entrepreneur  
from Brussels (March 2015).

**My main objective was not to live like an inhabitant but to profoundly understand the views of the inhabitants.**



attend the municipal council on her advice. She explains that a question should be asked about a fictional e-mail address “zaventem.filip@gmail.com”. “Filip” does not seem to be an employee of the municipality of Zaventem. He however sends a lot of e-mails to deter any person from using any other language than Dutch on the territory of Zaventem. A local elected Francophone politician has sent me an example of Filip’s communication.

In March 2015, this Francophone company from Brussels works several days in Zaventem and posts some Francophone advertisements (Screen capture 1). Despite no official role, Filip urges the Francophone entrepreneur to stop displaying any advertising material in French on the territory of Zaventem. This example reflects the importance of the language to define identity and territory in the periphery of the Brussels-Capital Region. In this situation, a Francophone elected decided to ask the town council if Filip really has an official position in Zaventem. But an intervention of the Taal Aktie Komitee occurs at the beginning of the council, which will be elucidated in the following passage. At the moment when this event happened, I did not know the cause. But it appears particularly interesting for both the results and the methodology of my work.

### An intervention of the Taal Aktie Komitee (TAK)

The Taal Aktie Komitee is a nationalist organisation, which claims to protect the Flemish identity of the municipalities surrounding the Brussels-Capital Region. During a town council meeting, this nationalist organisation decided to protest against Francophone flyers, which were distributed by a Francophone association called “Citoyens de Zaventem”. Just before picture 2 was taken, various crumpled flyers from this association were thrown at a Francophone elected (Picture 1). They showed subsequently numbers of signs on which was indicated “Welkom in onze Vlaamse Gemeente” [“Welcome in our Flemish municipality”]. On the second picture, this elected woman demands that the activists leave the council (Picture 2). This woman is a member of the association “Citoyen de Zaventem”, which was created in 2015 to assist the Francophone inhabitants of Zaventem who do not speak Dutch well enough.

Crumpled flyers of “Citoyen de Zaventem” (Bonfiglioli, 2015).

The verso of the flyers of “Citoyen de Zaventem” (Bonfiglioli, 2015).

The recto of the flyers of “Citoyen de Zaventem” (Bonfiglioli, 2015).



Activists from the TAK  
face the Francophone elected  
during the town council  
(Bonfiglioli, 2015)



## Relevant information acquired from this event

### Dutch-speaking press of Belgium

- « TAK uit onvrede over propagandafolder tijdens gemeenteraad » (HLN, March 31<sup>th</sup> 2015), <http://www.hln.be/regio/nieuws-uit-zaventem/tak-uit-onvrede-over-propagandafolder-tijdens-gemeenteraad-a2270815/>
- « TAK bezorgt folders 'Citoyens de Zaventem' terug aan FDF » (Ring TV, March 31<sup>th</sup> 2015), <http://www.ringtv.be/nieuws/tak-bezorgt-folders-'citoyens-de-zaventem'-terug-aan-fdf>

### French-speaking press of Belgium

- « Deux conseillères communales francophones prises à partie par le TAK » (7 sur 7, March 31<sup>th</sup> 2015), <http://www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1502/Belgique/article/detail/2271038/2015/03/31/Deux-conseilleres-communales-francophones-prises-a-partie-par-le-TAK.dhtml>
- « Zaventem : deux conseillères communales francophones brutalisées durant le conseil » (La Dernière Heure, March 31<sup>th</sup> 2015), <http://www.dhnet.be/actu/belgique/zaventem-deux-conseilleres-communales-francophones-brutalisees-durant-le-conseil-551a6c703570c8b952f58ad5>

Belgian Francophone press highlights frequently the problem of language use issues in the Brussels-Capital Region periphery and this intervention by TAK has not been the first or the only one. But the treatment of this event by the press is still important for understanding the territorial ideologies, which define the inhabitants' experiences of the Vlaamse Rand (Board 1).

It should be pointed out that the Francophone newspapers insisted on the act of aggression against the Francophone council member. Conversely, the Dutch-speaking press outlines the act of distribution of the flyers and the political origin of this undertaking (Board 1). The traditional opposition between the territoriality principle<sup>9</sup> and the personality principle<sup>10</sup> appears clearly in the press treatment of this event. According to a large majority of Francophone people living in the Vlaamse Rand, the e-mails from Filip or this intervention of the TAK demonstrate disrespect for the freedom of choice and use of the language of communication (Article 30 of the Belgian Constitution). The interviews with the Francophone families from the Vlaamse Rand conducted during the Fellowship (March 2015 – July 2015) revealed that most of them feel they have to subject to their territory of residence. Because of the fear of reprisals, most of them practice their mother tongue on their residential Flemish territory discreetly.

Three categories of Francophone inhabitants were defined on the basis of the qualitative interviews<sup>11</sup> conducted during my fellowship at the BCUS (March 2015 – July 2015). All these results will be published in my PhD thesis to be defended by the end of 2016.

1. First group. The most Francophone people know foreign languages (in particular the Dutch language) and express positive attitudes to multiculturalism, they don't support the Flemish language policies aimed at obtaining a unilingual territory. They express anger at the rigidity of some Flemish language policies and call for linguistic tolerance.

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<sup>9</sup> According to the territoriality principle [or territorial principle], language uses should strictly correspond to the administrative borders of a territory.

<sup>10</sup> According to the personality principle, language policies should be adapted to the sociolinguistic reality of a territory.

<sup>11</sup> Thirty families were surveyed between March 2015 and July 2015.

2. Second group. Francophones whose skills in Dutch are weak do not present a high spirit of protest. But if they feel embarrassed by their ineptitude, they support the actions of the Francophone political parties or Francophone associations such as “Citoyen de Zaventem”. They deem it necessary to defend their linguistic rights.
3. Third group. People who present an intermediate level or an advanced level in Dutch composed the last group. Some of them had to learn this language at the beginning of their adulthood (mainly for work). Some others spoke *Brusseleer*<sup>12</sup> during their childhood. A small number of them learned it during retirement having free time. They sometimes severely judge other Francophone inhabitants who do not speak Dutch.

However, they all expressed an attachment to the freedom of choice of the language of communication. They are all profoundly disturbed by actions such as those by Filip the TAK. Nevertheless, the members of the second group consider some Francophone actions as provocative and mention a number of visible signs, such as the Francophone flyers. At the same time, most Francophone people have subjected to the constraints of a supposed unilingual territory. Despite their disapproval of the Flemish linguistic process, it appears that most non-Dutch speakers are law abiding. They seem to unconsciously integrate in their behavior the unilingual environment. The Francophone inhabitants establish a kind of crypto-geography. For instance, the self-financed francophone associations or libraries in the *Vlaamse Rand* never indicate their location or put up a banner. This crypto-geography of « hiding places » is more the result of social pressure than of official Flemish language policy, even though they are correlated. French-speakers are afraid of vandalism but they are also clearly concerned about the fact that unofficial associations like the TAK could stigmatize them. « *On est obligé de se cacher comme au Moyen Age !* » [“We have to be hidden like in the Middle Ages!”] (Interview with a Francophone elected of *Vlaams Brabant*, July 2015).

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<sup>12</sup> The « *Brusseleer* » is a dialect from Brussels which mix Dutch and French.

The Dutch-speaking newspapers and the Flemish political parties judged this action of “Citoyen de Zaventem” as provocative (Ring TV, March, 31<sup>th</sup> 2015). They did not support the TAK actions<sup>13</sup> and they still do not support them today, but they were shocked by the innuendos of “Citoyens de Zaventem”. They consider Zaventem as a peaceful municipality and the drawing of the dove of peace on the flyer of “Citoyens de Zaventem” (Picture 1) reflects the image of a conflicted territory, which should be pacified. According to the TAK leader Roel De Leener, the dove of peace constitutes a declaration of war<sup>14</sup>. Both Flemish political parties, CD&V and N-VA, denounce a flyers’ distribution orchestrated by the pro-Francophone political party FDF / DéFI<sup>15</sup>. Before this intervention of the TAK, Eric Van Rompuy (member of the CD&V elected in Zaventem) reiterated this attachment to the territoriality principle (Ring TV, March, 27<sup>th</sup> 2015). According to him and the N-VA, these flyers in French offering assistance to Francophone inhabitants above all dissuade them from learning Dutch<sup>16</sup>.

### **The question of empathy, neutrality and detachment**

Finally, such experience confronts the researcher involved in fieldwork with ethical questions. Cases of physical or moral violence can expose the researcher to emotion and

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13 « Vous ne devriez pas parler des actions du TAK. Une action du TAK, cela nous ruine cinq ans de travail ! » [“You should not talk about the TAK actions. One action of the TAK shatters five years of our work !”] (Interview with an employee of the “Huis van het Nederlands Brussel”, December 2015).

14 “Het logo van de vzw Citoyens de Zaventem mag dan wel een vredesduif afbeelden, het pamflet kan alleen maar gelezen worden als een regelrechte oorlogsverklaring aan het Vlaams karakter van Zaventem” (Ring TV, March 31<sup>th</sup> 2015).

15 The FDF [Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones], recently renamed « DéFI », is a Francophone political party which mainly defends the Francophone rights in the Brussels periphery.

16 « Volgens Eric Van Rompuy (CD&V), schepen van Vlaams karakter in Zaventem, worden de taalwetten in Zaventem correct toegepast. Zaventem is een Vlaamse gemeente zonder taalfaciliteiten. Franstaligen hebben dus niet het recht om hun contacten met de gemeente in het Frans te laten verlopen. Vlaams parlements lid Lieve Maes (N-VA) vindt dat de folder lijnrecht ingaat tegen alle inspanningen die Vlaams minister Ben Weyts doet om burgers in de Vlaamse rand zoveel mogelijk aan te sporen om Nederlands te leren. » (Ring TV, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2015).

URL : <http://www.ringtv.be/nieuws/cdv-en-n-va-hekelen-franstalige-folder-citoyens-de-zaventem>

value judgements (Morelle, Ripoll, 2009). Moreover, he/she can be asked to take sides in a conflict, as shown in the example below).

E-mails from Francophone people who assisted on the city council of Zaventem

Some Francophone politicians knew that I attended the city council of March 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. They suggested that I should send the pictures and movies of the TAK action to a journalist of RTL. This kind of proximity is unavoidable result from an empathic approach that stays as close as possible to the inhabitants of this territory.



Thanks to this fellowship, I obtained the time required to collect qualitative data simultaneously as I clarified my empathic methodology and hence more my positioning (Bonfiglioli, 2016). This example questions effects induced on the research by the French and Francophone identity of the researcher. Empathy does not mean identification (Demazière, 2008 ; Narme, 2010 ; Simon, 2009 ;

Vischer, 1927). It must allow for profound understanding of the psychology of the others, their unknown interiority. All these identity representations, which sometimes include the researcher, prove to be relevant supporting qualitative data. They provide useful additional information about the very foundation of collective identities and territorial ideologies. Therefore, it appears necessary to take into consideration all these representations and attitudes brought about by the research. For the moment they are still too often neglected by human sciences.

### Conclusion

This paper invites to reflect on the positioning of research in human sciences. A human and social geography, which is focused on the link between languages, identities and territories, is irrevocably marked by the transition from a positive Science (strictly based on neutrality and detachment) to the development of a reflective approach.

### **Academic background and research fields**

I graduated from the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne (URCA) with a bachelor's degree in Geography and a master's degree in Political Geography. Then, I acquired a national education diploma and became a teacher of literature, history and geography in secondary education. Retaining this multidisciplinary approach to my geographical research, I obtained a doctoral contract funded by the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research in June 2012, and joined the team "Habiter" of the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne (France).

Since my Master degree, my research has been focused on the links between identity, culture, language and territory following a psycho-sociological (Frémont, 1976; Moles, 1972, 1998), phenomenological (Buttimer, 1979, 1980; Dardel, 1952) and humanistic approach to Geography (Tuan, 1974, 1977). I am also inspired by environmental psychology (Moser, Weiss, 2003) to study the human intents and feelings regarding places, spaces and neighbourhoods. Combining social and political geography, I analyse more precisely the influence of culture and the official language on the way that people perceive and organise their living space. Using the concept of "Habiter" (Hoyaux, 2002; Frelat-Kahn, Lazzarotti, 2012) – which refers to the way people build their living space – I determine the impacts of language policies, multilingualism and multiculturalism on the daily cohabitations, the territorial practices and the representations ("territorialities"), despite the fact that at present languages are not commonly considered a geographical topic. Since January 2015, I am also a member of the transdisciplinary European FP7 Program MIME (Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe).

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