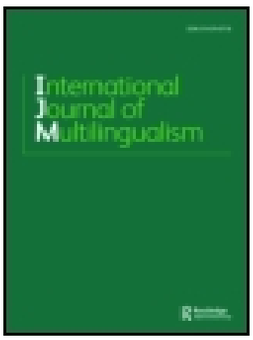

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'Selling the self': packaging the narrative trajectories of workers for the labour market

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic observations in a programme on job search training in Fribourg, Switzerland, I discuss the regimentation that is expected from job seekers on how to 'sell the self' in the labour market, i.e. on how to successfully manage a job interview. I will show how in attempting to narratively package their trajectories, the coaches' focus lies on a particular register that is aimed at the 'art of getting liked'. The job seekers are instructed in bodily and communicative behaviour that puts an emphasis on affect, positivity, and agency. In this, these practices can be understood as concurrent with neoliberal principles that involve techniques of the self as well as the activation of the individual. Yet, as a result, the potentially mobile and multilingual trajectories of the job seekers become mainstreamed in the monolingual environment of officially bilingual Fribourg, in which French is the dominant language.

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1. Introduction

Working in a research project on the valorisation of language competences in the course of unemployment a few years ago, I was browsing through the information material of a course on how to apply for jobs, when the following slogan caught my eye: 'But you will never ever sell anything more important than that which you know best: yourself!' (French original: *Mais jamais jamais vous ne vendrez pas rien de plus important que ce que vous connaissez le mieux: vous-même!*). 'Selling the self', I started wondering, is this what we are doing when trying to find a job? Are we expected to package our educational and professional trajectories, achievements and experience as 'assets', market value, etc. in order for an employer to 'buy' into this? How does applying for a job draw on other marketing mechanisms, which ones and why? And, finally, how does language come into play here?

These questions emerged in the framework of the sociolinguistic research project 'Access to the labor market, unemployment and language skills' (Research Centre on Multilingualism, University of Fribourg, 2013–2014). With the aim to understand how the value of specific language competences was institutionally negotiated in the context of public employment services in Switzerland, this ethnographic study was carried out in three

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unemployment offices in the French-German bilingual Swiss canton of Fribourg. Most importantly, this included the participant observation of bi-monthly consultations of job seekers with their unemployment consultants as well as qualitative interviews with both of these groups (30 job seekers of various backgrounds and with diverse linguistic competences and nine consultants over the course of nine months; see Flubacher, Coray, & Duchêne, 2016; Flubacher, Duchêne, & Coray, 2018).[1] Additionally, as a participant observer I attended several 'labor market measures' (LMM) that were geared to improve the linguistic and communicative competences of job seekers for the sake of their employability.

In this context, it should be mentioned that LMM are the main means of the Swiss unemployment offices (governed by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs) to institutionally support job seekers to 'permanently reintegrate into working life'.[2] They range from language or IT courses to personal coaching or stipends and are financed by the (official and obligatory) unemployment insurance. Usually the LMM are issued by consultants on the basis of the evaluation of a job-seeker's employability and motivation, rather than, for example, elected by the job seeker (see Flubacher et al., 2016; Flubacher et al., 2018 for more information on this and, in particular, on the logics of investment involved in the granting of language courses see also Duchêne, 2016). One typical LMM issued to job seekers at the very onset of unemployment, irrespective of their socio-economic or professional background, is a measure of short-duration, in which a *Curriculum Vitae* (CV) is created with the help of professionals. If this specific measure is not effective (i.e. the job seekers remain unemployed), their consultants might decide to enrol them in a longer course on techniques of looking, applying and interviewing for jobs. We negotiated access to such a 'job search training programme' (which we shall call *JobStart* here).

Based on this ethnographic data, I will tell the story of how workers are taught to narratively package their mobile trajectories monolingually in French in order to appear 'sellable' in the labour market. This labour market has been increasingly subjected to principles of flexibilisation and precarisation (Bourdieu, 1998) with activation policies targeting unemployed job seekers to take charge of their own trajectories and to actively work for their benefits (i.e. a policy of *work*fare rather than welfare). These trends are commonly labelled as 'neoliberal', creating ideal workers and job seekers in the process, with an activation framework pushed by supranational bodies such as the OECD (Duell, Tergeist, Bazant, & Cimper, 2010, p. 131). Against the backdrop of these transformations, it is the aim of this paper to contribute to a sociolinguistic understanding of what such practices entail in a larger political-economic context and what their consequences are for individuals who are caught in the current paradigm (see also Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau, 2019).

2. Linguistic ethnographic approaches to labour integration and job interviews

My contribution complements similar sociolinguistic research on labour integration programmes for migrants (e.g. Allan, 2013 for Canada; Del Percio, 2017; Del Percio & Van Hoof, 2017 for Italy; or Van Hoof, Nyssen, & Kanobana, submitted, for Belgium) or for refugees (e.g. Lønsmann, submitted, for Denmark) as well as research on online self-branding of job seekers for the labour market (e.g. Gershon, 2014). While following the critical tradition of these researchers and their ethnographic stance, this study

differs in that it shifts the focus onto a labour integration programme not explicitly designed for migrants or newcomers but for job seekers in general. In detail, this means that – unlike the settings analysed in the studies mentioned above – the curriculum of JobStart is not geared towards language training or the teaching of specific professional vocabulary (for which there are, in fact, other programmes available in the Canton of Fribourg).

Having said that, the issues highlighted in this existing body of research and the thereof consequences for individual job seekers remain of analytical value. Three central points will thus be elaborated in order to prepare the ground. First of all, the institutional emphasis on 'soft skills' (Allan, 2013) or culture and profession specific curricula (Del Percio & Van Hoof, 2017) disadvantages job seekers who are not familiar with the genre of the job interview, which is furthermore specified in relation to local culture and pragmatic competence. In addition, speakers of other languages have a harder time implementing these 'soft skills', as they are very language based and ask of a high metalinguistic reflexivity. As Roberts (2013) has shown repeatedly in the context of job interviews in the United Kingdom, it is usually job seekers with either working class background or with other languages who experience 'linguistic penalty', since the communicative demands of the selection process (i.e. motivation letter and job interview) may be greater than those of the job itself.

A second point to consider emerges regarding the mainstreaming of practices related to teaching 'soft skills' for the job interview genre. Mobile and multilingual job seekers are asked to conform to local monolingual practices, packaging their trajectories to a one-fits-all-recipe. One could almost talk about a standardised packaging of trajectories, which, as a homogenised individuality, basically runs the danger of losing its selling point (Gershon, 2014). The success of such packaging thus becomes questionable in the long-run, as it could be received as staged or performed without the expected 'authenticity' (see also Allan, 2013) – a staged selling of the self, so to speak.

Finally, the strategies taught for this purpose, in courses like JobStart, put an emphasis on mastering the selling of the self in job interviews. The inevitable consequence of this is typical of neoliberal conceptualisations of employability (Flubacher et al., 2018): When job seekers do not find employment, it is because they did not master the 'art of getting liked' and are thus to blame (Allan, 2013). In a sense, then, we can witness a resignification of the job interview that leads to its instrumentalisation for the responsibilisation of individuals (Gershon, 2011), who actually only have so much control over their narrated trajectories, including their prospects on the labour market. As a consequence, the question of who gets invited to interviews and for which reasons – and, more gravely, who does not –, remains underexposed in this logic (see e.g. Kaas & Manger, 2012 for a recent field experiment on ethnic labour market discrimination in Germany).

As mentioned before, these previous studies (and many more) frame this particular contribution, as they highlight these critical points implemented and implied in trainings and programmes such as JobStart. Yet, there are some differences as to the curriculum, aim and target group of this programme. First of all, as mentioned before, the participants of JobStart are not necessarily migrants or refugees, but job seekers of all kinds of backgrounds who are enrolled by their unemployment consultants. Then, it is the aim of JobStart to instruct its participants in particular linguistic strategies (rather than language teaching) that are moreover explicitly adapted from marketing. Finally, while this

programme indeed is based on the premise that job seekers 'market themselves', it gives instructions for 'traditional' ways of selling the self, i.e. in CVs and job interviews, rather than online and/or in social media (as, e.g. in Gershon, 2014). It is in this framework that I will argue that the 'narrative trajectory' emerges as a multidimensional and multifunctional key concept, around which the 'selling' is structured in a monolingual fashion (in French, the dominant labor-market language).

3. 'Narrative trajectories' as an analytical lens to multilingual workers and their mobility

Trajectories have been the object of research in order to investigate the interconnections between places, products and people across time and space. At the same time, research in itself has become mobile and/or multi-sited, in order to be able to take account of such trajectories (Marcus, 1995; Sheller & Urry, 2006). The emergence of concepts related to movement and mobility in and for research is concurring with postmodern stances, which have deconstructed fixed categories of all sorts, most importantly the conflation of language and territory.

In sociolinguistics, the networking, mobility and circulation of resources and information as well as of actors and their language practices have been firmly integrated into ethnographies that go beyond one-dimensional modernist (and nationalist) conceptualisations of language communities or practices. Closely connected to this ontological shift, the concept of 'trajectory' has been introduced as 'a new conceptual compass' (Martin-Jones & Martin, 2017, p. 9; see, also, Zimmermann, 2017) or as a 'methodological tool' (Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau, 2019), which serves to highlight both the fluid and dynamic nature of trajectories (personal, professional, linguistic) as well as the historical, political and economic conditions impacting on these trajectories and language repertoires (see Heller, 2011). Such a focus not only foregrounds the lived experience of language(s) (see Busch, 2017), but also the modulation of language practices and ideologies across and within trajectories. Yet, while multi-sited and long-term sociolinguistic ethnographies have made extensive use of 'trajectories', I argue that it can also be understood as a narrative entextualisation of past, present and future life events and experiences at one specific moment in time. They thus appear as reimagined, speculative or strategic narratives when looking back or ahead, e.g. in terms of language investment, career tracks or geographical/social mobility (see also Hassemer, 2019). In this sense, trajectories are always narrated and mediated by (or for) a specific interaction, its participants and stakes involved.

In the context of this paper, rather than retracing or following the geographic mobility of multilingual research participants or practices, I will analyse how job seekers are instructed to narratively (and monolingually) package their trajectory in order to sell it in the labour market according to neoliberal principles. These principles are succinctly presented by Urciuoli's (2008, p. 224), who argues that under current political-economic conditions 'social acts are recast in a transactional or entrepreneurial frame and actors' segmented selves are recast as assemblages of productive elements, as bundles of skills'. It is this entrepreneurial logic invoked by Urciuoli that is usually attributed to neoliberal technologies of self-branding and self-marketing (see also Del Percio &

Van Hoof, 2017; Gershon, 2014). In this logic, workers advertise their knowledge and training as quantifiable and certified 'skills' (Allan, 2013; Yeung, 2016; Yeung & Flubacher, 2016), themselves turning into products to be sold on the (labour) market as a result.

Following from this, I argue that not only skills become 'bundles', but also individual trajectories, which are narratively packaged for the labour market. In other words, not the 'trajectory' of job seekers will be the focus of this paper, but rather instructions for the packaging of their 'narrative trajectory'. Thus, I will zoom in on 'trajectories' as a narrative practice of 'selling the self'.

4. Learning how to search for a job: ethnographic observations, data, and participants

Before diving into an analysis of how trajectories are packaged for the 'selling of self' (Section 5), I will present a closer description of the conditions and context of the ethnographic observations. More concretely, in the following subsections, I will describe the research site from an ethnographic perspective (4.1), give an account of the course formats and their participants (4.2), and, finally, the data for this article (4.3). As an ethnographer drawing on contextual information and on interactions with participants to make sense of the complexities observed (see Heller, 2008), these descriptions are part of the analytical process.

4.1. The research site

EduCoach[3], the course provider, is located on the two upper floors of an inconspicuous office building on a side street in downtown Fribourg, a city officially bilingual in German and French, but with a majority of French speakers. Besides the reception in a waiting lounge, brightly decorated with posters and decked out with flyers and brochures (in French only) of the course provider as well as of other public services, the main floor houses the offices of the director and coaches, bathroom facilities and the main course rooms and computer labs. The floor above speaks of successful business expansion that provides more course rooms, albeit a bit worn down, a little kitchen at the disposal of course participants for lunchbreaks and a small balcony. Ironically, the domain of professional LMM course providers such as EduCoach, which work closely with the unemployment insurance, has a double-edged quality to it: while they aim to improve the employability of job seekers, their business invariably depends on unemployment.

4.2. The course formats and their participants

JobStart has two formats, which are distinguished along the lines of professional qualifications. The format for 'non-qualified' job seekers (JobStartNQ) targets job seekers that have completed their compulsory education but do not necessarily possess a professional certification. In contrast, access to the course for the 'qualified' job seekers (JobStartQ) hinges on a certification of professional competence or higher studies. In addition, there is a

Table 1. Overview of the two course formats.

	JobStartQ	JobStartNQ
Qualifications needed	Qualified workers with officially recognised training/certificate	Workers without necessarily recognised certificates or with jobs in industry or at the assistant level
Coach	Sophia (Francophone, late 30s)	François (Francophone, 50s)
Participants	7 participants	11 participants
Languages	Majority speaks French as L1, otherwise (very) good competences	Minimum of French A2; only four speak French as L1. Very diverse
Origin	West Africa (1), France (1), Portugal (2), Switzerland (3)	West Africa (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), South America (2), South East Asia (1), South East Europe (2), Switzerland (3),

linguistic line of distinction: as JobStart is entirely in French (i.e. the dominant language in the canton of Fribourg), participants for JobStartNQ need to speak a minimum of French at the level of A2[4], while for JobStartQ advanced oral and written French competences are required. Multilingual skills do not play a role for either format.

In keeping with the principle of anonymity, detailed information on the participants cannot be provided, but Table 1 gives a brief overview of the course formats as well as their participants.

While in the course description the level of qualifications between the two formats is explicitly distinct, the assignment of job seekers to either format blurs this distinction, as it is actually linked to the number of applications and the availability of places. For example, in JobStartNQ, professional profiles are highly diverse, from no official qualifications to certifications such as butcher, personal assistant, sales clerk, etc., ultimately overlapping with the degrees of some participants in JobStartQ.

Yet, the most striking difference between the formats lies in the number of migrants as participants. Unsurprisingly, it is higher in the NQ-format, which clearly reflects the intersection of migration patterns and work opportunities in the Canton of Fribourg, where the production sites (slaughterhouses, dairies, vegetable fields, etc.) of large Swiss food companies are located, which are in constant need of an experienced but cheap labour force (see Flubacher et al., 2018). The larger percentage of participants with migrant background is concomitant with the higher occurrence of linguistic diversity in JobStartNQ: while four participants speak French as their first language, others declare Vietnamese, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Polish or Macedonian as their first (or main) language. The French competences of the latter also differ, but A2 is the official entry level (job seekers with French competence below A2 are usually enrolled in a programme with a heavier focus on language learning). In short, the trajectories of the NQ-group are a showcase of individual, often work-related geographical mobility with multilingual repertoires. These multilingual repertoires are used by participants individually or for mutual support during class, but not institutionally with course material in French only.

The course curriculum is dense, planned in 5-minute-slots, and very much language-centered – exclusively in French. Across different modules, it introduces participants to methods of assessments of the self and career, instructs them in the writing of CVs and application letters, and prepares them for job interviews. The latter is the culminating point of the curriculum: participants present themselves in a mock job interview to another course participant acting as interviewer. This exercise is staged in front of the whole group and video-recorded for a joint evaluation afterwards. The intended result

is to instruct job seekers in techniques of the (selling of the) self, which is what I call the *narrative packaging of trajectories*.

4.3. Ethnographic data

Due to our research agreement with the unemployment agency of the Canton Fribourg, we were granted access to EduCoach. Its director consented I attend the three modules of JobStartQ & NQ that explicitly refer to the 'selling of the self' (*La vente de soi*) in the fall of 2013, i.e. on three full days each (8:30–16:00, incl. lunchbreak). In the courses, I was not allowed to audio-record, but could take field notes and keep the course material (translations from French are all mine). This article draws on this data and is further informed by various conversations with the director, course participants, and coaches (mostly in French, occasionally with some German) as well as qualitative interviews with the two coaches. Everyone involved signed a consent form.

The analysis of this ethnographic data is inspired by a political-economic perspective in critical sociolinguistics (see Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau, 2019). While data excerpts in this contribution are only a selective sample, they have to be read as embedded in a larger and long-term research process (Flubacher et al., 2016; Flubacher et al., 2018), trying to grasp processes that might lead to empowerment of individuals or, on the contrary, to the reproduction of social inequality.

5. Teaching the narrative packaging of trajectories: an analysis

In the context of JobStart, the empirical questions at stake are how the narrative packaging of trajectories happens in practice and what it tells us about the current neoliberal conditions for individuals. For this, it is useful to return to Urciuoli (2008, p. 212), who argues that 'skills discourses […] offer workers advice or exhortation about acquiring, assessing, and enhancing their own skills'. Adapting Urciuoli's terminology to the particular space of JobStart, specialised 'advice' (or, given the context of unemployment, 'exhortation') is presented to job seekers. The particular set of 'skills' in question are linguistic strategies and, thus, communicative skills ('soft skills') that job seekers are urged to take on for the sake of their employability, irrespective of their individual level of professional qualifications or language competences. In the end, the 'skills discourses' invoked here are indeed used for 'acquiring, assessing, and enhancing' the skills necessary to narratively package the job seekers' trajectories.

In order to understand this specific skills discourse, I will present three sections of analysis in the following: The 'selling of the self' (5.1), 'the art of getting liked' (5.2), and the 'marketing of the self' (5.3). These sections show different ways of how the job seekers are instructed in neoliberal marketing logic in order to learn how to narratively entextualise their trajectories in order to sell themselves.

5.1. 'Selling the self': job interviews as sales interaction

Marketing strategies centring on the 'selling of the self' serve as the conceptual framework for JobStart. This becomes evident already in Excerpt 1, which is published on the cover page of the course material:

Excerpt 1: Apply marketing strategies to job search

There is no shame at all in applying marketing strategies that have proven their worth. On the contrary. It is equally valid – if not more – to fall back on methods that have been developed with great care and work well for any kind of product as this is about enhancing your own marketing.
[French original: Il n'a aucune honte à appliquer des stratégies marketing qui ont fait leurs preuves. Au contraire. Avoir recours à des approches élaborées avec grand soin, qui fonctionnent bien pour n'importe quel type de produit, est tout aussi valable – sinon plus – lorsqu'il s'agit d'assurer votre propre marketing.]
Source: Course material JobStartQ, Introduction, Fall 2013

This excerpt is part of a longer text, signed by a Swiss marketing consultant and coach, who offers books and workshops on the 'marketing of the self'. In this particular text, he encourages job seekers to consider the 'selling of the self' as a professional challenge. Praising marketing strategies as successful for 'any kind of product' – in line with the skills discourses described by Urciuoli (2008) – he expands the notion of product to the job seeking subject. In other words, it is the self that is in need of marketing. The marketisation (i.e. the adoption of marketing principles) of the self aligns with stereotypical neoliberal reasoning according to which anything can become a commodity (see Polanyi, 1944). Following from this – even if the 'self' is not turned into a sales commodity as such on the labour market, as would be the case in slavery or prostitution –, the 'self' (and its trajectory) needs appropriate narrative packaging in the form of sales marketing.

As noted in my field notes, no attention is paid to this cover page on the first day of JobStartQ. Rather, after a first round of introductions and following a discussion on expectations and goals of the participants, Sophia, the coach states that the course aims to teach them the *marketing de soi* ('marketing of the self') or, in other words, *la vente* ('sale'). This will become relevant for the exercise of the job interview, for which, as she announces, *on va faire de marketing* ('we will be doing marketing'), which happens on the fourth day of the course. Here, Sophia returns to the idea of self-marketing, and explains that this is closely connected to a positive presentation of the self. Underlining this idea, she elaborates that interviews work like sales interactions, where the 'product' in question is the job seeking self. They read the explanation together, which is summarised in Excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2: Interviews as sales interaction

Aim of the interview

For the candidate: getting hired. Position: seller
For the recruiter: successfully hiring someone. Position: buyer
When interest is raised, the positions reverse. Power is transferred.
Candidate: buyer
Recruiter: seller
*[French original: **Objectifs de l'entretien***
Du côté du candidat: se faire embaucher. Position: vendeur
Du côté du recruteur: réussir à l'embaucher. Position: acheteur.
Quand l'intérêt s'éveille, les positions s'inversent. Le pouvoir est transféré.
Candidat: acheteur
Recruteur: vendeur]
Source: Course material JobStartQ, p. 407, Fall 2013 (adapted)

Sophia insists that as candidates, they can inhibit a position of agency and, potentially, power if only they acquire the necessary skills. At another instance, Sophia had actually described her professional aim to me as providing job seekers with the relevant 'keys' for professional reintegration. With these 'keys', job seekers should be equipped to turn the tables in a job interview. What the keys are, how they are taught, and in what way they are related to the narrative packaging of trajectories will be the focus of the following sections (bearing in mind that all of this is happening in French).

5.2. 'The art of getting liked'

As Gershon (2014, p. 287) has argued, job seekers are introduced to job applications and interviews as 'genres of speech events in which the applicant is supposed to indicate their competent use of the genres, at the same time as distinguishing him- or herself as a unique and suitable individual for the job position'. This tension between standardisation and individuality is far from new but actually firmly embedded in capitalism. However, what is new is the neoliberal addition to this equation, namely the 'self' that needs to be managed and promoted in this tension (see Gershon, 2014, p. 287), which is the exact focus of JobStart. Participants are initiated in the genre of the job interview that comes with specificities on how to appropriately communicate and behave. The following 'six golden rules' for the 'art of getting liked' (*l'art de se faire aimer*) are laid out in JobStartQ:

Excerpt 3: The art of getting liked

Six golden rules:

- Learn to know yourself
- Establish relations with your interlocutor
- Ask questions and listen to your interlocutor to understand their needs
- Be flexible and adapt your offer to their needs
- Show concrete examples of your abilities and competences
- Pay attention to details: punctuality, appearance, looks, posture, physiognomy, vocabulary, speech rate, etc.

[French original: Les six règles d'or:

- *Apprenez à vous connaître*
- *Créez des liens avec votre interlocuteur*
- *Posez des questions et écoutez votre interlocuteur pour comprendre ses besoins*
- *Soyez souple et adaptez votre offre aux besoins*
- *Démontrez concrètement vos aptitudes et vos compétences*
- *Portez attention aux détails: ponctualité, apparence, physique, posture, physionomie, vocabulaire, débit de paroles, etc.]*

Source: Course material JobStartQ, p. 400, Fall 2013

As these 'six golden rules' exemplify, the job seekers are asked to reproduce the hyper-reflexive conduct desired in the postmodern labour market, encapsulated by the rule 'Learn to know yourself'. Listed as the first of the six rules, it can be considered as a prerequisite for the rest, which, again, is employing marketing strategies in that it directs attention to establishing 'relations' (*des liens*) with the interlocutor, and to 'adapting to their needs'.

More importantly, participants receive instructions to 'show *concrete* examples of your abilities and competences' (emphasis mine), i.e. to package their experiences and trajectories not only in positive but also illustrative ways, which would render them more relatable and credible. For instance, Sophia elaborates: 'You don't lie, you just don't have to tell everything' (*On ne ment pas, mais on n'est pas obligé de tout dire*). This instructive remark is indexical of how past trajectories are expected to be narratively adapted to each interaction and thus become entextualised versions of the self. Finally, embodied rules are touched upon as well ('appearance, looks, posture, physiognomy'), which are explained and emphasised repeatedly in class – most particularly Sophia insists on the importance of the smile, professional appearance, and self-confident posture.

While the curriculum touches on all of these rules, the focus still lies on the two last rules ('concrete examples' and 'attention to details') – were only them considered teachable? Especially in JobStartNQ, the rule of 'attention to details' is presented at length. In their folder, the participants receive two-page-long instructions on what to do and how to behave before, during, and after the job interview. This is addressed on three levels: 1) physical hygiene and appearance (e.g. 'I take a shower', 'I put on a bit of deodorant', advice regarding nicely coiffed hair, clean fingernails, etc.); 2) organisational issues (e.g. 'I make sure to have clean shoes and a full tank', 'I bring something to write and a list of my questions'); and 3) mental preparation (e.g. 'I arrive 5 minutes early', 'I switch off my phone').[5]

On the basis of this list of exhortation, job seekers are interpellated through techniques considered as 'disciplining activities' (e.g. Del Percio, 2017), which are emblematic of the contemporary labour market for the importance put on the presentation of the self. In other words, in order to be 'liked', job seekers will need to embody that specific 'self' just as they will need to learn how to narratively package their trajectories, especially considering that they are not obliged to mention *everything*, as their coach had emphasised.

Remembering Urciuoli's (2008) words, while 'hard skills' as well as one's professional and personal trajectory become part of one's bundle, it is the communicative packaging that becomes the requirement for successful integration in the labour market. Hence, it is not your professional trajectory that counts, but *how* you talk about it that will get you a job (Roberts, 2013). It is therefore the aim of the interview to present one's (potentially mobile and multilingual) trajectory in 'likeable' ways, which is why specific linguistic strategies are needed. This become even more salient to users of other languages, as the imagined language of the sale is French.

5.3. 'Marketing of the self': The narrative packaging of trajectories

About a week in, on the second day of my participant ethnography, the NQ-course reaches the module 'Marketing of the self' (*marketing de soi*). In preparation for the mock interviews a week later, the participants are asked to present themselves along the questions of 'who are you, what have you done so far and what would you like to do?' (*qui êtes-vous, qu'avez-vous fait et qu'aimez-vous faire?*). In other words, they are asked to package their trajectory as a narrative according to marketing ideals. In order to do so, the group is instructed in linguistic (5.3.1) as well as monolingual (5.3.2) strategies, which EduCoach considers adequate for the genre of the job interview.

5.3.1. 'Verbs of the heart'

Before the participants launch into their self-presentations of five minutes one after the other, in varying levels of French competence, expertise and self-confidence, François, the coach, silently draws a heart on the whiteboard as well as a plus-sign. He explains that the heart symbolises what you love to do (*ce qu'on aime faire*), while the plus-sign is a reminder to stay positive. An ideal narrative includes both of these points, he argues, as this shows individual motivation. He urges the participants to heed these two points for their self-presentations and, at the same time, not to judge the others, but to give advice (*on ne juge pas, on est là pour donner d'avis aux autres*). After each turn, the group complies and gives feedback in an encouraging manner in a somewhat giddy atmosphere, even if some participants are visibly nervous and insecure. At the very end, François lists three elements in need of improvement, which he deems particularly relevant: 1) exhibiting a smile and joyful attitude as part of a positive and motivated self; 2) describing favourite activities as part of the narrated professional trajectory, and, 3) avoiding 'taboo words', i.e. 'negative' expressions.

Relating these items to the symbol of the heart still on the whiteboard, François introduces 'verbs of the heart' (*verbes du coeur*) as the central linguistic strategy. He explains that these verbs (or expressions) should be employed in job interviews, ranging from 'love' (*aimer*) or 'adore' (*adorer*) to 'having the opportunity' (*avoir l'opportunité*) or 'being lucky' (*avoir de la chance*), etc. Their purpose is to package future and former professional activities in a positive narrative through emphatic phrasing (e.g. 'I loved working in … ') rather than factual statements ('I worked in … '). The coach frames this strategy as contributing to a positive impression, complemented by the embodied practice of pleasantness (smiles, eye contact, firm handshake, etc.). It could be argued that participants are asked to merge their personal with their professional self (i.e. to the effect of loving their work) and to present the trajectory of a positive and active self.

A similar argument emerges in the context of the third element emphasised by François, i.e. 'taboo words' to avoid in job interviews, e.g. 'unemployment' and 'unemployed'. Instead, in a rhetoric move to display positivity, François proposes phrases such as 'I'm looking for a new position'. Similarly, verbs of obligation should be avoided, e.g. 'being obliged/having to' (*être oblige-e*), 'forced to' (*forcé-e de*) in example phrases concerning work tasks ('in my former job I had the opportunity to … ' rather than 'in my former job I had to … '). François explains that such rhetoric strategies emphasise individual willingness and motivation.

In the end, the display of willingness and motivation seem to be central for François, overriding other factors. For example, a young woman from French-speaking Africa, whom we shall call Aby, had prepared her presentation on a piece of paper to read aloud, as she was very insecure about her performance. Rather than criticising the paper in Aby's hand, François actually rates it as indexical of her earnest preparation and willingness to perform well – if only she could 'use the heart more'. Needless to say that if Aby, a French speaker, lacks confidence, the others are even more nervous about 'marketing' themselves in French for a whole five minutes and trying to remember the strategies learnt before. It is thus highly informative to see how participants with other main languages work with their linguistic repertoires and what feedback François gives them.

5.3.2. Monolingualisation strategies for the selling of self

In the following, I will focus on one emblematic example of a job seeker with a multilingual repertoire, who is asked to conform to monolingual practices. We are talking about Iago, a certified butcher from Portugal. A big man with a booming voice, he carries himself confidently and freely narrates his trajectory as a mobile professional (working in England and in German-speaking Switzerland, before being recruited to Fribourg as butcher), searching for French words and expressions here and there, sometimes inserting English items, e.g. numbers or 'knife', which clearly mirrors his professional multilingual trajectory.

In his evaluation, François positively remarks on the 'use of the heart', as Iago managed to present his motivation in spite of linguistic difficulties, and encourages other participants who struggled linguistically with their self-presentations to appear likeable in underlining positive experiences. Still, François picks up on the English interferences occurring in Iago's self-presentation and recommends learning the most relevant professional vocabulary (and numbers) in French to make a good impression. After all, as François argues, the 'knife' is Iago's central tool and while job seekers need not speak French perfectly, they should know 'enough' for their job.

In this emblematic instance, the 'monolingualisation' of trajectories which job seekers experience becomes evident. Even if job seekers have varied experiences and multilingual repertoires due to their mobile trajectories, they are asked to erase these traces on their linguistic level in order to comply with an imagined, monolingually-oriented work environment – irrelevant if this work environment really is monolingual or recruiters actually request French competences. In fact, Iago later insists that his language competences (or lack thereof) never impacted on his professional performance or his ability to find employment. Participants in JobStart are thus not only instructed monolingually, they are also advised to sell themselves monolingually. Ironically, Iago has actually adopted several local expressions, which he integrated in his narrative trajectory (*boîte* for company), which François topicalised and rejected as too informal.

This double insistence on monolingualism is striking as it contradicts the work experiences of many workers in Switzerland, especially from Portugal, who often work in teams composed of compatriots or with speakers of the same language (see Flubacher et al., 2018). If Iago's multilingual repertoire could be interpreted in a neoliberal framing as valuable flexibility, e.g. in terms of team assignment, in this context it becomes an index for unemployability.

While it is not my point to criticise neither the coach, the programme nor the institution, this example actually illustrates how job seekers might find themselves in a tension between expectations and experiences on different levels (most importantly, linguistic, metalinguistic, behavioural, or professional ones), in which they need to produce appropriate narrative trajectories. What complicates matters further is that apparently it is not of primordial importance what the trajectories actually entail, but rather how they are packaged. Finally, the relevance of reformulations with 'verbs of the heart' and the avoidance of 'taboo words' render individual narrative trajectories not only more positive but actually place the self in a more agentive position (i.e. active, in charge). A trajectory thus becomes an embodied and stylised narration as indexical of a positive take on the past, a pro-active stance on the present, and an optimistic outlook on the future.

6. Concluding remarks

In my contribution, I focused on one particular programme (JobStart) designed to teach job seekers how to apply and interview for a job. I focused on 'narrative trajectory' as an emblematic manifestation of what is expected of these job seekers in this specific framework. While the programme does not necessarily represent the 'reality' of the labour market and does not always correspond with previous experiences of job seekers, it sheds light on the discourses and logics prevalent in institutions mandated with the management of unemployment. First of all, the strategies taught in JobStart, conceptualised as 'selling the self', 'the art of getting liked' and 'marketing of the self', are adapted from marketing and sales guidelines. They thus carry further the 'techniques of the self', already criticised by Foucault (e.g. 1988) as enterprising individuals, and take it to another extreme in that they treat the self in itself as marketisable.

I argue that these strategies have to be read as 'verbal hygiene', as critically examined by Cameron (1995, 2000). In her analysis, she embeds the teaching of linguistic conformity to a moral and aesthetic standard within a particular ideology that 'express deeper, more amorphous anxieties about the loss of standards in an increasingly permissive society' (Cameron, 2000, p. viii). In light of this explanation, the detailed instructions on personal hygiene, organisational issues, etc., re-emerge as ideological instances that anticipate concerns regarding the appearance and behaviour of job seekers as indexing unproductive selves. Yet, as Cameron also points out, verbal hygiene seldom is the real point of concern. Rather, she argues that '[r]egimes of verbal hygiene that centre on "communication" are inseparable from changing concepts of identity, agency and society' (Cameron, 1995, p. viii).

In light of these insights, shared by a large body of scholars (see Section 2), it was the aim of this paper to highlight the concept of narrative trajectories as institutionally framed projections embedded in larger societal and political-economic conditions. These projections, again, are based on the tenets of neoliberalism and related to the skills discourse, proposed by Urciuoli (2008). The narrative trajectories, carefully instructed and executed in monolingual repertoire, thus become marketised and marketisable entextualisations of the self in the past, present and future, which erase elements considered as indexical of negative experiences (e.g. words such as 'unemployment') or unprofessional persona (e.g. multilingual interferences). Furthermore, the thus produced narrative trajectories are inscribed in a clearly regimented logic of verbal hygiene (how to speak: positively, formally) and linguistic regime (which language to speak) that adhere to ideologies of monolingualism and the standard. The concept of the ideal worker emerges among the various instructions and exercises: active, positive, and professional – and while not monolingual, at least competent in the local language.

Now, while criticising these institutional practices of verbal hygiene from a researcher's point of view, we should also take into consideration the individual stories in such spaces. In the context of JobStart, I find it necessary to remark on the sense of solidarity that continuously grew among the participants over the duration of the programme. I witnessed the exchange of job ads, encouraging words for less confident group members, and appreciative feedback of each other. One striking example in this respect is Bian, a shy Asian woman in her late 50s. She hardly spoke or participated at the beginning of the programme, but gradually overcame her timidity, especially when speaking French. The

others kept reassuring her, commenting positively on her French competences, while the coach gave her space and time necessary to prepare for the exercises. At the end, she even confided in me that the course had given her the necessary self-confidence to become independent from her estranged husband.

Concluding, us researchers of such settings are often faced with ambivalent observations and analyses. On the one hand, it remains questionable whether the strategies of the 'selling of the self' are helpful for individuals in the labour market, since they erase structural and systemic issues, and shift the responsibility onto the job seekers through an emphasis on the value of particular narrative trajectories. On the other, participants seem to profit from this programme on a personal level, even finding hope for employment. Yet, whether their trajectories will take a positive turn as a result, this is another question.

Notes

1. In essence, the unemployment insurance is obligatory for anyone legally working in Switzerland (paid equally by employee and employer and complemented by the state). Eligibility for benefits and LMM arise after 12 months of work, as regulated in the Federal Unemployment Insurance Act 837.0 (German version: Arbeitslosenversicherungsgesetz. https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/19820159/index.html). Thus, also people with employment can register as job seekers and benefit from certain LMM, if deemed necessary.
2. Information online on unemployment and the LMM: https://www.arbeit.swiss/secoalv/en/home/menue/stellensuchende/arbeitslos-was-tun-/arbeitsmarktliche-massnahmen.html.
3. All institutions, programmes and individuals are given pseudonyms.
4. The unemployment LMM in Fribourg are never officially bilingual but cater to either the French- or the German-speaking population. Migrants are usually sent to French-speaking LMM unless explicitly demanded otherwise.
5. French original: 1) Je prends une douche. Je mets un peu de déodorant. J'évite le parfum car il ne pleura peut-être pas à mon interlocuteur. Je vérifie que mes cheveux soient propres et bien coiffés, voire attachés pour certaines fonctions (ex. : aide de cuisine). Je me rase de près. J'évite le maquillage trop lourd. Je vérifie que mes ongles soient propres. Je prends un repas léger. 2) Je vérifie la propreté de mes chaussures. Je vérifie que j'ai assez d'essence. Je prends de quoi écrire et ma liste des questions. 3) Je relis ma lettre et mon CV. J'arrive 5 minutes en avance. J'éteins mon natel [Swiss expression for cell phone]. Je me présente (prénom, nom) à la réception de l'entreprise et je donne le nom de la personne avec qui j'ai rendez-vous.

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