Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast

Episode 13: ABOUT REPRESENTATIONS, STEREOTYPES AND THE BRITISH IN FRANCE

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About the episode

In this episode, Michaela is joined in the studio by Dr. Michelle Lawson to talk about their shared interest in UK citizens who have made rural France their homes. They discuss the work of representations and stereotypes in the way that Britons living in the EU27 are understood and represented, the misconceptions these generate, and the frustrations about these expressed by those they have worked with. While these stereotypes are longstanding, Brexit has made these frustration more acute, their reactions marking shifts in identity, place and belonging.

Dr Michelle Lawson is the author of *Identity, Ideology and Positioning in Discourses of Lifestyle Migration: The British in the Ariège* (2016, Palgrave) and a tutor at the Open University

You can download this episode of the podcast at http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep013-about-representations-stereotypes-and-the-british-in-france.

Transcript

MB   Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I am Dr Michaela Benson and today I'm joined in the studio by Dr Michelle Lawson who's an associate lecturer at the Open University. Over the last few years Michelle and I have had a series of conversations about our joint interest in the British populations who live in France. Michelle offers something quite distinctive in that she's done research on the way that these populations are represented in the media, and she's also worked closely with looking at the way that these migrants position themselves in online forums. So today we're going to focus a little bit more on those media representations and the work that they do, as well as how British migrants describe their lives and with what effect. Here's Michelle to talk more about her research.

ML   I started from a fairly similar basis to you I think, we were both interested in the British in France and how they saw their lives, their new lives, and how they represented themselves in conversation, and my starting point was from an applied linguistics starting point which is not a million miles from sociology of course, it's still a social discipline. But with applied linguistics and particularly discourse analysis we look at how

language is used as a resource when people are constructing a version of events or an identity representation or when they're talking about others. So we look at not only what's being said but how it is being said, so what I did was I gathered three sets of data, I looked at how the British in France were being talked about in the British press, I looked at about 70 or 80 articles I think it was to see how they were referred to, and I also used an online forum that was used by the British in a particular department in France, in the Arriège, and it was an online forum where people supported each other and networked and so on, and then I interviewed some of those forum members. So what I did as a linguistic analysis, I looked for common themes across the three data sets and similar to what you found I found that a lot of the British people were very keen to position themselves away from that stereotype about the Brits abroad you know, they don't speak the language, they don't integrate, that word ghettoes you know, the British live in ghettoes where they're separated from the French, all that kind of thing. People were very keen to distinguish themselves as not being one of the stereotypes so they often talked about things that were the right way to live in France and the wrong way to live in France and what the language analysis was particularly useful at doing was picking out how people constructed these representations and what was really interesting was the contradictions that came out and that's a theme in the literature isn't it, that people have these contradictions, they say it's wrong to rely on British networks and British food and British services when you're living in France, but on the other hand it's actually really difficult if your level of French isn't very competent. So what the language analysis does is looks at how those contradictions are worked around, how people manipulate them. One of my favourite examples was a couple who said we find it really sad when British people stick to eating British food, but then a while later they talked about going to British food theme nights and they represented that as being, as addressing a French expectation, the French want to know what the British eat, so we're actually addressing, we've got a duty to show them.

MB **I think that those contradictions are very common, even in our own lives when we're talking, so I think that it's really important to remind people that we all live with these types of contradictions in some ways.**

ML   Exactly.

MB **But I wondered if we could go back to the kind of the first part of the work, these kind of media representations that you worked with, and we know, I mean my observation recently, particularly with Brexit, is that the press coverage of British migrant populations in the European Union, who are essentially European citizens at the moment, is quite limited. And I wondered if this is similar, this kind of limiting is similar to what you were finding when you were looking at media representations of British in France.**

ML   Yes, I think that the balance has been more in favour of looking at EU citizens in Britain compared with the Britons in Europe and I think that's probably understandable.

MB **Post Brexit you mean yes.**

ML   Post Brexit I mean yes, but what I found quite surprising about some of the newspaper articles relating to the Brits abroad, is that the article will give one particular perspective, giving these people a voice, but then they will often use an image that refers back to that stereotype about us thinking that every Brit living in Spain is retired and sitting in the pub all day, and I know that even, you wouldn't probably expect it of something like the Guardian but even back in January there were two articles in the Guardian, one of them referred to, it drew upon some recent research that said that actually the age groups of British people in Europe, the largest age groups are those people of working age, not retired people, and guess what kind of image was accompanying that article, it was older Britons sitting in a pub where I think the wall was painted with a union flag.

MB   **I know exactly which picture that was.**

ML   Do you know that one yes.

MB   **The stock image that keeps being used to refer to British people in Europe.**

ML   Yes, there was another article in the same month by the Guardian where the founder of Remain in Spain was saying we really need to move against these perceptions that everyone over here is fine, they're having a good time, they're retired, firstly because people who are retired are often vulnerable to these kind of changes, but also many people are working over there, so I think it's good that the media is giving some attention to the British in the EU but they need to be fairly careful that the images they're using are not contradicting and giving an underlying message that is actually not very balanced at all.

MB   **And do you think that that's true also of the headlines, because quite often the headlines can be quite misleading I've realised.**

ML   Yes I haven't looked in detail at any of the headlines, I've been really taken by the images and I think sometimes people will, as you say, just read the headline and just look at the image without even reading the article. So yes it could be the case.

MB   **Yes, I was particularly struck also by the exclusions, what's not being said about British populations who live in Europe. But I wanted to take you back to the research, when you were doing your PhD research when you were looking at media representations. What were the kind of common themes that were coming out through those media representations that you were talking, that you were looking at then?**

ML   There were two or three common themes, the major themes, and they were that when Brits move or Britons move to France, they do it in a very unprepared way, I mean one word that occurred many times is the word dream, and it usually colocated with words like reality or nightmare so that the dream has gone sour, as being a nightmare. My favourite was a half-baked dream which I really like that phrase.

MB   **And how had that been used?**

ML   That when Britons get to France they find, but they can't live on a half-baked dream, you know, they haven't thought it through basically, and I have to say I did meet and interview people who hadn't even been to France when they bought their house, they were really just looking for the right house, the right view and so on, but lots of people do think it through. There are people who've spent years and years travelling around finding the right village or town to live in. So these themes, obviously can be very biased and misleading so that one was the Brits are unprepared. Also a common theme which I'm sure you saw yourself was that the Brits don't integrate, and that word ghetto kept popping up, that all the Brits want to do is sit around drinking red wine and eating sausage and mash and so on. And very little acknowledgement that actually that's normal, what's actually wrong with using things that are familiar to you, and calling on people who speak your language, people who've been through a similar process, and this is where the online forums are actually very useful to all kinds of migrants wherever they are.

MB   I suppose what you're drawing attention to is the kind of the moral framing of that discourse, the moral, the moral frame that the idea of the ghetto calls to mind, and the exclusion of, of the complexity of people's lives which as you know on one hand of course they might sit down and occasionally have some sausages and have a glass of wine, with some other British people, but that probably isn't the only thing that's happening in their lives, it's just the thing that's been fixated on there.

ML   Exactly, and people were so keen to make out that they, you know, they didn't know other British people, they didn't network, but of course I knew all the people who I interviewed, they pretty much all knew each other and they'd all seen each other for dinner last week and so on, so I wondered at the whole point of trying to avoid the stereotype when actually it's, one man said you can't, you can't cast off all these things that you've grown up with and lived with all your life, so I do, I did question the sense of positioning yourself against the stereotype when actually some of it is quite understandable.

MB   So d'you want to talk a little bit about the work that you were doing on online forums because I think that's quite different. When I did my first research it was just as they were starting to introduce I think dial-up internet to rural France, so if anyone remembers dial-up internet. So online forums weren't really something that same very naturally to my research, although subsequently I have become aware of the large number of forums online whether that's Facebook or something else, things that precede that, that people are turning to for a variety of reasons, for support, to get information, all of those types of things. So talk to me about how those online forums, how you did that research and what you found so intriguing about it.

ML   Well actually the online forum was the thing that drew me into the research in the first place, so I happened to come across it and I was absolutely fascinated by the way not only that people supported each other, but also how they positioned themselves as being a particular kind of experienced incomer against the newbies if you like, and common responses were things like, oh make sure that you invite your French

neighbour round for a drink and don't be dependent on the Brits but of course that contradicts the whole idea of the forum where these English speakers were asking each other questions. And some of the questions were really complicated, things like the tax returns and the different taxes, but it was clear that some people got very annoyed by the very basic questions that some of the newcomers were asking, things like where's the best place to buy groceries, where do I get firewood, that kind of thing, so people didn't like the fact that they were expected to be like a constant source of information, and some of the newcomers would introduce themselves and just say please keep any advice coming, any advice good or bad, well what kind of thing are they expecting. So some of the experienced members got quite annoyed by this kind of thing and that's what really fascinated me, and then I managed to interview some of the members and to ask about how they saw this kind of online forum and they referred to it as a little comfort blanket, one lady said, because of the support, again people who've been through similar things to them, but quite a lot of others said oh don't ask the Brits anything you'll get all kinds of different answers, it's much better to go to your French neighbour which again depends on your language skill doesn't it. But was a form of networking and people would even meet up offline, they would have Christmas gatherings and things.

MB **Translated into face to face encounter.**

ML It did yes but only with a very small portion of the membership. But it was noticeable that use of these local forums has really declined, I surveyed two, one of them closed down, the other one seems to be a lot quieter now, I had a look the other day and I was wondering if post Brexit people are now turning to the larger forums, the ones that are more national say for British people in France rather than the regional ones which I was interested in, because I think people must feel that they're now part of this community of British people abroad and maybe they need to feel a bit closer and have more national connections. I spoke to one of my former interviewees last week and she said she now felt a dislocation with the UK after Brexit. So something I was wondering about was, compared with when we did our research when the Brits felt that they didn't really want to be seen as part of a British community and the other Brits were very much the other, now I'm wondering if that's going to change and if British people in France and Spain and so on are actually going to feel that disconnection with the UK and turn back to the expat or migrant communities because they feel they need to mobilise, to make sure that their rights are maintained. So I think there could be a shift in how people see themselves.

MB **I mean that certainly maps onto some of the kind of the discussions that I've been having through the podcast about political mobilisation among the British abroad which I don't think we've ever seen to this extent, I mean there have always been, you know there's always been political parties with overseas membership but I think we're now starting to see something quite different, this kind of clubbing together of Britishness and that's kind of what you were talking about, which is why do online forums at the stage that you were doing your research are so, so interesting. And I**

think it is, it is also probably to do with a decline of those types of fora that you were looking at in your initial research, being replaced by things like Facebook and other types of social media, but it might also be as you say a change in the current I suppose.

ML   Yes. I do think, I think if I interviewed people now I think the way that they represent themselves if you like, or self identify, could be a little different as feeling more a part of a British community abroad. This woman I chatted with last week, she said I would never dream of going back to the UK now, and I feel European, she's actually searching about getting Irish citizenship because she does have some family heritage way to do that, so yes I think all that is, we're going to see when we start interviewing people.

MB   Yes, so you think that this marks a moment then where those discourses that you were looking at before by which you kind of interpreted people's identities, understood people's identities, they're shifting. Do you think that that means that their identities underpinning those are shifting or d'you think it's just the ways in which they nuance those are changing?

ML   Well I think it could be both actually because I think if you feel different, if you actually feel that you've been almost dislocated from the UK because of the vote and because it was so sort of alien to you, I think that's also going to come out in your language in how you represent yourself so I think it could be, could be a bit of both really. People, if you feel that you absolutely don't want to go back to the UK now more so than you've ever felt, then that's a shift in identity isn't it, it's your feeling of place and belonging has now shifted so yes, I think so.

MB   I think that idea of dislocation is a really strong one and captures very very clearly the kind of common themes that are coming out through the stories that we've been sent in to the project from British people who live in the EU 27 and also in the interview material that I've been collecting with British people in the Lot over the summer, so I think that's a really strong point. So thank you very much Michelle for coming in and talking to us about discourse, particularly and representations when it comes to these British populations. I think that's a really really useful contribution, thank you.

ML   No thank you very much, it's been an absolute pleasure.

MB   Thank you for listening to the Brexit Brits abroad podcast. If you've enjoyed what we've been talking about today and want to find out more, check out our website, www.brexitbritsabroad.com, or you can follow us on social media via Twitter @brexpatseu and on Facebook. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on iTunes and I'll speak to you again soon.