Language shift and phone sex

Ever since I left my native village in the Bavarian Forest more than 25 years ago, I have been returning for regular, even if infrequent, visits. Over the years, there have been many changes and two of them have been particularly noticeable to me:

(1) **Language shift:** When I left, I knew how to read and write German but I couldn’t speak the national language. In that I would have been a typical representative of my generation. This has changed dramatically since then and most people I meet are now bilingual and switch between German and Bavarian with various degrees of comfort. Additionally, there are now young parents who have made German the language of the home and speak only German to their children (again, with various levels of proficiency). In sum, this rural and relatively remote area of South-East Germany has experienced rapid and extensive language shift over the past quarter of a century.

(2) **Commercial sex:** When I left, the availability of commercial sex was invisible. For all I know, it didn’t exist. Now, as you travel east from Munich on the autobahn, there are numerous billboards signaling the presence of the sex industry, including a huge structure saying “Sex shop” somewhere close to Landshut that is visible from miles away. With the commercials in the papers and the fliers advertising for the sex industry, the semiotic landscape is similar to the one I described for Switzerland in this article. Furthermore, tales of the exploits of men who visit prostitutes just behind the border in the Czech Republic and the marriages that have fallen apart as a result of all this are now a ubiquitous part of village gossip.

Until my most recent visit for the 2011 Christmas holidays, it had never dawned on me that the language shift and the sexualization I had been observing were in any way connected. That changed when my mother and sister took me to the cinema to watch *Eine ganz heisse Nummer*, a German blockbuster that was released in October 2011 and that has attracted the kinds of viewer numbers usually reserved for Hollywood movies. The title translates as “A really hot number” and features the story of three women in a small Bavarian village who run the village grocery store. Facing bankruptcy because of competition from the supermarket chains in the nearby market town and cities and because of the overall economic crisis besetting the region, they decide to become phone sex providers to turn their fortunes around.
The economic crisis depicted in the movie is real enough and has entailed a fundamental change from an agricultural and industrial production economy to a mixed service-welfare economy. In the 1970s and 1980s most people in the village were peasant farmers living on 40-50 smallhold farms and in multi-generation households, with the male head of the household supplementing the family income with some seasonal factory work, as my father did. Additionally, the village supported an elementary school, a church with a parish priest, three saw mills, two general stores, two butchers, a communally-owned slaughterhouse, a baker, two banks, two mechanics/car dealers, a black smith/hardware store, a carpenter, two or three builders, three inns and a few other businesses. That’s all a thing of the past: now there are only 3 farms operating; there are so few children that the school has closed and the remaining ones are bused elsewhere; the last parish priest has passed away and the Catholic Church has decided that the parish is too small to import a priest from Poland or India, as has happened in nearby larger villages; the businesses except one saw mill, two inns, the baker and one car dealer have disappeared. The only new businesses that have been operating successfully for any length of time are a small recycling operation, a hair salon and a massage parlor.

So, how do people support themselves? Farming and factory work have become minority occupations although a few men (and even fewer women) do hold production jobs within a 100-km radius. They thus commute along with the somewhat larger number of service workers in the retail and tourism sectors that still call the village home. Many more people have moved away, as I have, and most of those who have stayed, particularly the elderly, depend heavily on pensions, welfare payments and other state subsidies.

The change in the economic base directly relates to language shift. The locally integrated village in which I grew up had relatively weak ties to the national level and even weaker ties to the transnational world (the Czech border is only a few kilometers away but was closed off by the Iron Curtain back then). Speaking the local language was closely tied to this locally integrated economy. People have always been emigrating from the region, and emigration is part of the cultural imagery of the Bavarian Forest (e.g., songs such as this one) but language shift did not facilitate traditional emigration because emigration ‘only’ led to farming and production jobs elsewhere. Language was not a necessary skill enabling those moves: a passive competence in German was enough to work as a farm hand, bricklayer or logger in other parts of Germany and possibly even further afield, including the US (as, for instance, Lucht, Frey & Salmons (2011) show).

With the disappearance of a locally integrated village economy based on agriculture and industrial production, Bavarian has now become a drag on people’s ability to support themselves. They now operate in a service economy that is almost exclusively based outside the local and where economic participation is explicitly based on linguistic performance: in order to engage in trans-local service work (and that’s not only phone sex services ...), it’s essential to speak in ways that are trans-locally recognizable.