

English in Switzerland: a double-edged sword?

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Questo articolo discute l'avvento dell'inglese in Svizzera, considerando se si tratti di una vera e propria minaccia o piuttosto un necessario passaggio verso un mondo globalizzato moderno. Per mettere in luce alcuni ambiti della sua utilizzazione, si discute il contenzioso relativo al suo successo in particolare nel contesto scolastico. A dispetto del fatto che gli Svizzeri vengano considerati tolleranti e disponibili dal punto di vista linguistico, l'ascesa dell'inglese costituisce una seria sfida per la diversità linguistica del Paese. Il francese ha dovuto cedere il passo come prima lingua straniera in numerosi cantoni della Svizzera tedesca, mentre l'italiano e soprattutto il romancio quali lingue minoritarie sono estremamente sotto pressione. Ci sono delle colpe da attribuire all'inglese oppure c'è qualcosa di incauto nel fatto di metterlo per così dire sulla graticola? Il contributo si conclude con alcune riflessioni sul come le autorità svizzere potrebbero uscire da questo impiccio.



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Previous references to the advance of English in Switzerland range from that of a Trojan horse or tsunami to a gateway to the modern globalised world and hence provide an expedient summary of the salient English language issues that Switzerland must confront today. As with many countries the world over, Switzerland has had no rejoinder to the unstoppable march of the English language. This massive encroachment into numerous aspects of Swiss life has evoked strong emotions; Switzerland's linguistic diversity, generally regarded as a prime example of successful language management, is being challenged to the core.

In this article, I address the ascendancy of English in Switzerland that has led to this increasingly heated internal debate. Unsurprisingly, the linguistically unique advance of English has resulted in positive interactions as well as tensions between global and local forces and has had serious linguistic, ideological, sociocultural, political and pedagogical implications.

The Rise of English

The ubiquitousness of English in Switzerland is relatively new, in that before World War II

English could only be heard when citizens of the Anglosphere countries, particularly Britain, came into contact with Swiss nationals. It is no secret that English has spread so extensively throughout the world chiefly due to two factors: the expansion of British colonial supremacy and the emergence of the United States as the superior economic power of the twentieth century.

As for current estimates of the number of English speakers in the world, Crystal (2008) has revised upwards his estimates in the direction of two billion, which equates to over a quarter of the world's population being *speakers* of English. The incommensurability of such figures aside, this colossal amount can only substantiate the claim of English as a global language, given the influential areas of the world where it plays a decisive role.

Some Domains of Use

According to Mackenzie (2009: 223), "English is widely used for international communication in business, finance, science and technology, international relations, diplomacy and military missions, higher education and research, sport, design and fashion, all forms of mass media, the entertainment industry, and travel and tourism". The fact that this list is not specific to Switzerland tells its own story in that the global has become increasingly local throughout the world. Switzerland is axiomatically renowned for its banking, in which English plays a pivotal role, but many other companies outside of finance adopt English for reasons of prestige and to remain competitive on the global market. Besides English being embraced as the official language of many companies (for example, Swiss Re, ABB and Swisscom), it is frequently used in company names, again for the purpose of global appeal. However, the use of English intranationally within companies is not quite as widespread as

one may think. In Andres et al's (2005) extensive study of over 2,000 businesses and their staff across Switzerland, he found that English is only used by approximately one in three companies at least once a week in the French and Italian-speaking parts. By contrast, he found that the use of French and English was more or less similar in the German-speaking part, with approximately 40% of businesses using one of the two regularly.

Moreover, Switzerland is widely known for its hosting of international organisations and conferences, with English again playing the main role as the working language. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs website states that "together with New York, Geneva is currently one of the two largest centres of international cooperation in the world. In terms of the number of international conferences and meetings held in the city every year, it is number one". Today, Switzerland plays host to thirty international and around 250 non-governmental organizations that have consultative status with the UN.

In relation to mass media in such a small country as Switzerland, it is actually more profitable for advertisers to promote in one language rather than three, which is what they frequently do. By using English, the product can be placed on an international level at the same time. Furthermore, advertisers have to move with the times and English is exceedingly "cool" and "in", meaning that it would be amiss of them to do otherwise.

As far as the Swiss government is concerned, there is no legal requirement for documents to be made available in English. However, even though according some kind of partially official federal status to a non-indigenous language could set an unwelcome precedent for other world languages, an official translation unit responsible for the translation of texts of particular or international interest was initiated in 2002. A reason given for this decision was the importance of the government to be able to communicate with non-indigenous minority language groups. Such a move, despite the probable ensuing controversy, speaks volumes for the inroads that English is making in multiple spheres of Swiss life.

Education

The adoption of English around the world within academic circles, particularly in the natural sciences, also sees it playing an increasingly important role at Swiss universities. Even though many Bachelor courses are taught in German, use of English is expanding in many faculties depending on the course itself. However, it is at Master's level where English has become prevalent. At the University of Zurich for example, all Master's degree programmes at the Faculty of Science are conducted in English, in addition to numerous economics-related or computer science degrees. This increasing use of English can be observed at many other tertiary institutions, especially when the course is internationally relevant. This not only serves the purpose of attracting international students but also strengthens an institution's ties with the international academic community.

This increasing use of English at tertiary level has resulted in the proliferation of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) or immersion programmes at secondary level, by way of preparing students as well as possible for what lies ahead. The popularity of this programme is exemplified at Baden Upper Secondary School, where since 2003 two or three classes per year have been taught a variety of subjects in English. Sixteen upper secondary schools in the Canton of Zurich offer such programmes, whereas contrastingly, only two schools offer German/French immersion and one offers German/Italian immersion. Former immersion students now at university have been complimentary about how being in an English immersion programme prepared them well for English at university. That is, in contrast to some of their peers, they had no problems understanding the lecturers and textbooks, and were also able to pose questions at ease. Others mentioned the advantage of being able to draw on a vast range of both English and German sources for their papers.

Regardless of English being widely taught as a foreign language at secondary level and appearing in different guises as mentioned above, it is the elementary/primary "grassroots" levels that have involved many impassioned exchanges. In 2004, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), in an effort to harmonise compulsory schooling, promulgated that all Swiss cantons introduce two languages at the elementary school level (between school years 3 and 5). According to the EDK binding mandate, which should have been implemented no later than 2012, one of these languages must be a Swiss national language. In order to achieve national consensus, each canton can decide when to introduce each of the mandatory two languages, although by year 9, students are expected to be equally proficient in both languages. Thus, fourteen Swiss German cantons have chosen English as their first foreign language, the remaining seven Swiss German cantons and Ticino have selected French, while the four French-speaking cantons have chosen German.

Resistance to English

The relentless global advance of English unsurprisingly divides opinions in the academic world. On one side are those who claim that its ascent represents an essentially progressive phenomenon. On the other side of the discursive divide, the rise of English is primarily thought of in terms of imperialism and linguistic domination. Actually, much discourse on the global position of English falls somewhere in between these conflicting views. According to Phillipson (1992: 1), 'Once Britain ruled the waves. Now it is English which rules them'. He adds that there is 'a division of the world into a dominant Centre (the powerful western countries and interests) and dominated Peripheries (the underdeveloped countries)' (ibid., 52). Phillipson's key arguments include: English is the language of international capitalism, so it necessarily accompanies global capitalism; it is not possible to impart the language without assimilating the values embedded in it; English kills off other languages; we need to talk of linguistic rights as part of wider human rights. More recently, Phillipson (2008) also coined the term "lingua frankensteinia" in reference to English. However, his initial model of linguistic imperialism is rebuked (Pennycook 2001) for being too deterministic because it fails to consider how such "linguistic imperialism" may actually be received by those on the periphery. In other words, Phillipson is more concerned with global, structural domination than local effects, which is inadvisable due to the local complexities that each country presents. Others also accuse his Centre-Periphery model of ignoring the material realities that can in no way be explained in terms of that opposition. The rise of the East Asian tiger (including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) is a prime example of the periphery not being uniformly stifled by the centre. Further contradictions arise when considering the growth in some of the other so-called Newly Industrialising Countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Mexico.

Returning to Switzerland, the intense debate about the continuous infiltration of English into Swiss life is still raging, despite the country not having a colonial past. The most passionate discussions are concerned with the upsurge of



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English in the sphere of primary and secondary public education. In fact, back in 2003 when the Canton of Zurich designated English rather than French as the first foreign language taught, it resulted in a national furore, especially as eight other German-speaking cantons quickly followed suit. French, a national language, was suddenly threatened with being relegated to that of a third foreign language in much of German-speaking Switzerland. However, Haenni Hoti et al (2009) actually found that 'early English' improved the listening and reading skills of those starting with French later already after one year, in comparison to those who started with French first. The plot continues to thicken as the Canton of Thurgau has proposed to drop the compulsory teaching of French at primary level from the curriculum by 2017/18, whereas the Canton of Nidwalden recently voted to keep it.

Stotz (2006) sees the increasing prominence of English as a sign that the national language policy of learning a second national language has had its time and failed to some extent in that parents and the economy want English. He argues that "[e]ven if it allows elites to engage in a dialogue among equals, it nevertheless reduces the specific features of the other cultures" (ibid., 254). For him, the pushing through of English as the primary foreign language has triggered considerable momentum, but has also torn apart what belongs together, and is in fact "an attack on the second national language and harmony among the linguistic communities" (ibid., 260). English is also seen as a particular threat to Italian because it is already in third place after German and French, far ahead of Italian, as far as the language competence of the Swiss is concerned. However, the minority languages of Italian and especially Romansh were already under extreme pressure due to the decreasing number of speakers. Even though English is thus assigned the role of scapegoat, the accusation that it threatens minority languages is unjustified. Linked to this, the French-speaking opponents to the English boom see the decision to oust French as a

further example of the arrogance and lack of sensitivity of the German-speaking Swiss and especially of the wealthy Canton of Zurich. Obviously, there are other complex political issues at play here, with English somewhat unwarily having been thrust into the firing line.

A further area of discontent concerns the quality of English being taught as a foreign language in that many Swiss school leavers are deemed unable to engage in English conversation at a higher level. However, this is certainly not the case in all contexts but somewhat school and programme dependent. Having conducted placement tests with final year classes at several upper secondary schools in the Cantons of Aargau, Thurgau and Zurich over the last ten years, I (and others; see Browne 2012) have found that immersion classes typically finish school with a C1–C2 level of the Common European Framework. By contrast, non-immersion classes generally leave the school with a B2 level of English, implying that the level of English outside the cantonal school environment is lower than this. As for the two foreign languages at primary level, further studies in the years ahead should shed light on whether the disputed targets of equal proficiency in both have been attained or not.

As is the case elsewhere, the rise of English in Switzerland is typically cast in terms of a promise-threat dichotomy. The issues mentioned here undoubtedly raise difficult questions, which inevitably provoke even larger ones. Therefore, this debate ineluctably still has some time to run.

Final Thoughts

As for the future appearance of the Swiss educational language map, the points raised in this article predicate that the further away from the

German–French language border and the more monolingual people are, the louder the call for English is. The Swiss authorities should continue to actively support and invest in the Swiss national languages, in addition to acknowledging the crucial role English plays both intranationally but especially internationally. It is the former usage that probably concerns the Swiss the most because if English were to become the main intranational *lingua franca*, its use could discourage mutual linguistic reciprocity across the four language areas. I can appreciate this concern even though it is much too early to say that English is awash in this context. Further research and public discussion are required but I feel that the *status quo* will remain for some time to come.

In sum, the fact that English has no territorial base in Switzerland and hence cannot be associated with any clear collective, means that it is predestined to play the role of a scapegoat. English, however, cannot be held responsible for the demise of Romansh and to a lesser extent Italian. A perpetual drive towards modernisation dictates the political choices as to which minority languages are promoted. Switzerland is well practised in resisting external pressures, being at the heart of Europe but not part of the European Union. It would be prudent to apply the same prescient approach when it comes to addressing the encroachment of English into Swiss life; that is, despite it not being a double-edged sword, adopting a “handle with care” mentality that never ignores the local idiosyncrasies that make Switzerland so unique but still seizing the opportunities that English presents. Love it or loathe it, English is unlikely to be dislodged in the near future from its position of global predominance, even with the world becoming increasingly multipolar. More succinctly, the more learners English has, the more beneficial it becomes, and the more beneficial it is, the more people desire it.

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