Tema

LANGUAGE POLICY IN SWITZERLAND'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: ANGLO CONSPIRACY OR SELF-COLONIALIZATION?

Handelt es sich beim Vormarsch des Englischen in die Primarschulen der Schweiz um einen Fall von Sprachimperialismus oder eher um eine selbstauferlegte Kolonisierung? Diese Frage wird mit einem Rückgriff auf die Geschichte des Sprachenartikels der Bundesverfassung von 2000 behandelt. Ein vermeintlicher Angriff auf den Sprachfrieden wurde von der Politik mit der Verankerung des Territorialprinzips pariert, einer Scheinlösung für die komplexe Herausforderung der Globalisierung, ausgetragen auf dem Rücken der Schulkinder.

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A photo to illustrate my point in the first paragraph.

1. Introduction

In the rural spaces of Switzerland, an invasion of sorts can be observed on signs and posters: SIDLER'S HOFLADEN, LEUZINGER'S NÄHATELIER, HIER INFO'S. The apostrophe is not alien to the German language, but clearly misapplied in these cases. Is it perhaps a sign of an insidious intrusion, symbolising the advances of English as a world language and a kind of linguistic imperialism?

If we focus on the domain of educational language policy, we are looking back over two decades in which English as a foreign language has been introduced to nearly all primary schools in Switzerland, with more than half the cantons teaching it as the first non-local language before any national L2, e.g. Zurich, Lucerne and Schaffhausen with English on the curriculum as from Grade 3, and French from Grade 5. Have we thus witnessed a victorious conspiracy of the Anglosphere, with the USA and the UK as powerbrokers, or, alternatively, a story of a self-inflicted colonialization?

If we follow Robert Phillipson and suspect a case of linguistic imperialism, that would entail "unequal resource allocation and communicative rights between people defined in terms of their competence in specific languages, with unequal benefits as a result, in a system that legitimates and naturalizes such exploitation" (Phillipson, 2009: 2). It is true that the Swiss economy is internationalised, but not obviously 'anglobalised'. For instance, of the CEOs of the 20 large companies within the Swiss Market Index (SMI), only one is from the Anglosphere, while three are from *la Francophonie* and four are from Germany or Austria while half are Swiss or have dual nationalities. Also, in immigration statistics Anglophones are at the back of the rankings. Many Swiss may see English as "the language of modernity [and] technological progress", but hardly as becoming "the language of national unity" (Phillipson, 2009: 3) such as in post-colonial situations.

Alastair Pennycook's phrase of the "worldliness of English" is probably more apt to capture the transformations that have emerged since the "Comprehensive Languages Concept" (EDK/CDIP, 1998) was inaugurated in 1998. He uses the

term to refer to the idea that English is both globally general and locally specific. The wordliness of English is "a term intended to refer to the material existence of English in the world, its spread around the world, its worldly character as a result of being so widely used in the world, and its position not only as reflective but also as constitutive of worldly affairs" (Pennycook, 1994: 33); thus, a less ideologically loaded term than Phillipson's imperialism. English is both changing the world and being changed by the world since "acts of language use always imply a position within a social order, a cultural politics, a struggle over different representations of the self and other." (Pennycook, *ibid.*). As I will set out in the following, this power struggle has left traces even in the Swiss constitution and its language article, and these traces are arguably linked to educational language policy and the issue of which languages are to be taught in Swiss schools, and in what order.

2. Constitutional upheaval

Around the turn of the millennium, the Swiss political system reacted to a perceived threat to the quiet cohabitation of its four linguistic communities, a troublesome process that I dubbed "the breaching of the peace" (Stotz, 2006). The construction of the Swiss nation state is somewhat atypical, as the country occupies, on the linguistic map of Europe, the peripheries of three large linguistic communities, and in addition, hosts a small community of Romansh speakers. The Swiss confederation is a "Willensnation", a willed nation, which cuts across not only linguistic, but also religious and topographic boundaries. One of the secrets of the historical Swiss conviviality with backs turned to each other is the principle of territoriality, the idea that each town, region or canton determines its own official language. This has always meant that the cantons decide on the language of schooling in their confines, with some regional coordination. Multilingual cantons such as Fribourg and Grisons map out linguistic territories based on the make-up of their communes.

No doubt the principle of territoriality can prevent messy issues from surfacing. Interestingly, however, it was never enshrined in the constitution up until 2000. In 1996, the Swiss voters had resoundingly adopted a new constitutional article about "die Verständigung und den Austausch zwischen den vier Sprachgemeinschaften". Simultaneously, Romansh was upgraded as an official language. The aims were more mutual understanding and more exchange, but no reference was made to territoriality.

Between 1999 and 2000, the entire constitution was revised and made more readable. However, the articles pertaining to languages underwent more than just a cosmetic change. In Article 70:2, the principle of territoriality now makes an appearance: "the cantons shall designate their official languages". And even more tellingly, "[i]n order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, they shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages, and take into account the indigenous linguistic minorities." The official English translation indeed uses the word "harmony", in French it's "l'harmonie", in German "Einvernehmen", and in Italian nothing less than "la pace linguistica". This multilingual embedding of a teleological state of blissful accord in the constitution is an interesting discursive construction which sheds light on a changing public and political mood.

In order to understand what happened between 1996 and 2000, we need to distinguish between three related discourse clusters (Stotz, 2006). On the one hand, a '*confederate discourse*' seeks to maintain the plurilingual nation state, propping it up on cultural diversity and mutual understanding in a nicely partitioned territory; it often stands in a slightly tense relationship to the interests of the cantons, which govern their own education systems. The '*federalist discourse*' cluster, on the other hand, tends to defend the traditional anti-centralist intentions of the old "Bund" and the principle of subsidiarity (in brief: we solve our problems locally). However, in the late 1990s it had become increasingly difficult to overlook the globalising forces which were tied to popular culture (Hollywood, Broadway musicals, Cool Britannia), to the expanding Internet, ERASMUS and other mobility schemes and, significantly, to the English language. In other words, as elsewhere in Europe and beyond, a *globalising discourse structure* was emerging as evidenced in the business world, where big companies based in Switzerland chose English as their corporate language and asked many of their employees to certify their English language competence with diplomas.

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These three discourse clusters came into competition precisely in the field of education and its language learning policies. In the eyes of the proponents of the globalising discourse, the school system was lagging behind. In the Canton of Zurich, for instance, English in secondary school was an optional course only, made compulsory as late as 2000. Up to that point, school-based language learning in Switzerland had piggy-backed the confederate discourse: in the interest of national cohesion, Swiss pupils had to learn the other major national language first, i.e. French or German as a foreign language usually starting in Grade 5. Basic competences could then be expanded during a stay in Lausanne as an au-pair ("jeune fille") or a stint in the vineyards of Lake Geneva. Typically, the second national language was also called *langue partenaire*.
My claim is that the reason for the additions to the languages article in the revised constitution is plainly the threat that English poses to "harmony" and "la pace linguistica". Language peace seemed threatened both by ethnification – especially Swiss Germans using dialect and refusing to speak and write the standard form of German – and by globalisation, which is linked to the increasing use of English in the world of business, science, youth culture and entertainment.
The confederate discourse cluster sees the balance of power as a matter of equalising differences between majorities and minorities. It avoids certain sensitive issues such as a possible lack of motivation among learners to grapple with the morpho-syntactically complex second languages German and French.
It also contends that using English as a lingua franca within Switzerland leads to an impoverishment of the relations between the language communities, or to total failure: "Le recours à l'anglais, langue étrangère à l'ensemble des locuteurs, est indubitablement un constat d'échec. S'il permet d'engager un dialogue d'égal à égal entre élites, il n'en est pas moins réducteur des spécificités des autres cultures" (Knüsel, 1997).

3. "Early English": The normalisation of a revolt

Amid this uneasy state of peace came the big bang. In January 1998, Director of Education Ernst Buschor announced Zurich's Project 21. English was to be taught experimentally in a partial-immersion framework, with parts of curricular subjects delivered bilingually from Grade 1 in primary school. The Zurich government breached the peace without prior consultation with the other directors of education, a unilateral move which was met with hostile reactions from the EDK/CDIP, the French-speaking cantons and even many Zurich teachers. Appenzell Innerrhodes quickly followed suit.
The main arguments that Buschor and his advisors brought into play were the demands of parents and businesses. While the confederate discourse around mutual understanding and exchange mainly staked symbolic territory, new globalising configurations had a much more worldly impact: kids were being sent to private English courses, universities started using more and more English in lectures, and some companies which had declared English to be their corporate language no longer translated documents into the local language. Instruction in English was supposed to level the playing field: *Chancengerechtigkeit* was the motto of the day, though only for one subject. More insidiously, Mr Buschor admitted freely: "We began with English because motivation for French among the young is worse than for English" (statement in the documentary film "Zwischensprach", Samir 2004, my translation).
In sum, Zurich and Appenzell's unilateral decisions clearly called the confederate consensus into question. It was particularly the idea of immersion-type second language education (or English-medium instruction) that would undermine the principle of territoriality. The self-styled sovereignty of these cantons and the lack of coordination by the EDK/CDIP opened the floodgates to language policy by popular preference. Symbolic politics, in the guise of a confederate discourse enacted through the school system, thus yielded terrain to the powers and allures of globalisation. Incidentally, no one ever deemed it necessary to prove that four more years of learning English measurably improved the opportunities of teenagers on the job market or in vocational education.
Some years later, the need to implement the constitutional article in a languages act ("Sprachengesetz", 2006) would have been an opportunity to cement the will declared in the constitution to promote harmony among the language communities by strengthening school-based language learning. Yet it pronounces only about linguistic and cultural exchanges,

for which the cantons are responsible. English is not explicitly mentioned but appears under the guise of "another foreign language" ("einer weiteren Fremdsprache"). Most significantly, the law does not mention the EDK strategy's postulate that pupils reach comparable levels in French/German as well as in English. They simply have to have "competences in at least one second national language." This is by no means a guarantee that pupils will learn enough French to make mutual understanding possible. The expectation, expressed in various official documents and curricula, that pupils by age 16 will reach the same levels of competence in the second national language as in English no matter the starting age, is ill-conceived. Clearly, we will have to wait for the results of the large-scale evaluation study ("Überprüfung der Grundkompetenzen") until we can corroborate this rather pessimistic expectation. But even so, the EDK strategy of 2004, which stipulates comparable school-leaving competences in French/German as L2 and in English can be said to be a rather threadbare compromise.

4. Concluding remarks

Looking back from 2018, the revolution of leveraging English into the primary school curriculum in some Swiss-German cantons seems to have run the path of normalisation. The private English courses for kids have mostly disappeared. The curriculum has been aligned with the Common European Framework for Languages. Training all the teachers is big business for the *Pädagogische Hochschulen*, which actually have a monopoly on state schools.

My contention is that English as a new subject has been sucked rather than pushed into primary school, as a result of a partial vacuum, which in turn might be a consequence of the weak spots of the confederate and federalist discourses, i.e. a tendency to shunt questions of national cohesion to the educational domain and to supercharge the question of language sequences with symbolic value. If the actors responsible for this discourse had carried through their priorities confidently and with sufficient clarity, they could have shored up their defences, as the example of the *Passepartout* cantons shows, where French is taught first – and where no one seems to complain about English being second. The Comprehensive Languages Concept failed to set a clear priority to start with a national L2. At the time, there were outspoken protests of the French- and Italian-speaking cantons against the proposed "flexibility" in the sequencing and attainment levels of L2 learning (e.g. "le déclassement des langues nationales au profit de l'anglais est de nature à compromettre sérieusement le lien confederal" EDK/CDIP 1998: 11), but they were barely addressed. Ironically, an interesting and almost visionary caveat came from the English-friendly Canton of Thurgau, which pointed out that an "English only" solution would not be economically viable: "Denn wenn alle Englisch können, ist besser dran, wer auch Französisch spricht" (EDK/CDIP, *ibid.*). Indeed, in a time when everyone speaks some kind of locally tinted World English, a profit of distinction can be gained only by speaking another one or two languages – and not necessarily for the narrow concerns of quiet cohabitation within a multilingual nation state.

In the light of recent language policy history and the contested argumentation of the various factions, it appears that the advances of English into the school curriculum are more to do with an act of self-inflicted colonialization than with visionary politics. In hindsight, an intensification of L2 language teaching and an earlier start with the more complex national L2s (French and German) might well have been a better option also for those regions of the country which have chosen English as the first foreign language. Given that the motivation for learning English is widespread among youngsters, a start in Grade 7 in combination with media-based and real exchanges would probably have led to good or at least acceptable results. This scheme would also have prevented the numerous initiatives against two languages in primary school, which, all in all, have poisoned the debate more than they advanced it. It is regrettable that in this peculiarly Swiss language conflict, several innovative concepts such as bilingual/CLIL teaching approaches and novel forms of exchanges have been put on the back burner, although they are listed in a new set of recommendations (EDK, 2017). However, all is not lost, and in a consolidated structure such as the HarmoS system with Lehrplan 21, progress can more easily be made than in a conflictual and ideology-driven discursive space.

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