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## INTRA-NATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY: TICINESE STUDENTS AND THEIR CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES WHEN STUDYING IN GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

Der Beitrag gibt Einblick in die Studierendenmobilität vom Tessin in die Deutschschweiz. Er zeigt auf, wie GymnasiastInnen ihre bevorstehende Studienortswahl darlegen und illustriert, wie Tessiner Studierende trotz des lokalen Universitätsangebots ihre Entscheidung begründen, fürs Studium in die Deutschschweiz zu dislozieren. Weiter wird dargelegt, welche Herausforderungen die Studierenden anführen, wenn sie sich an den Studienbeginn in ihrer neuen Umgebung erinnern und welche Rolle dabei Schweizerdeutsch/Standarddeutsch zukommt. Basierend auf ethnographischen Daten und Interviews wird zudem die Frage gestellt, inwiefern die mehrheitlich einsprachige Sprachpolitik an Tertiärinstitutionen mit der mehrsprachigen Identität der Schweiz zu vereinbaren sei.

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'In the beginning I felt really discouraged!' This is what Veronica,<sup>1</sup> a young Italian-speaking woman, told me when looking back at her start at Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (henceforth: ETHZ) (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich) some months ago. When I asked her in what ways she felt discouraged, she talked about her high school in Lugano, a city situated in the Italian-speaking Ticino, with about 1000 students of which she knew the majority. She reported that she was not shy at all and was used to interacting with everybody. Upon her arrival in Zurich, however, she did not know anybody; she could not follow the lectures in Standard German and she did not understand what the other students were talking about during coffee breaks, as they spoke Swiss German. Crucial e-mails sent to her by the department were written in German and she had to forward them to her older sister based in Basel, who helped her translate them into Italian.

Veronica is one of many Ticinese students who opted to leave Ticino after having obtained the Matura, the diploma required

to enter any Swiss university regardless of language skills. In 2013, approximately 39 per cent of them enrolled at a university in the German-speaking region of Switzerland, approximately 28 per cent of them registered at an institution offering higher education in the French-speaking region and about 18 per cent chose the bilingual university in Fribourg (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2016). Roughly 15 per cent of the newcomers remained in Ticino and started studying at the Università della Svizzera Italiana (henceforth: USI) (Swiss Italian University).

Mobility across language regions in order to study has a long tradition in Switzerland, partly due to the historic development of higher education in the different language regions. In the German-speaking region in the centre and the north-east of the country, tertiary education has been offered since the 15th century. There have been universities in the French-speaking region in the west of the country since the 16th century. Since the foundation of the USI in 1995, a minority of Ticinese students select the local university; the majority still aligns with the tradition –

<sup>1</sup> All names in this contribution are anonymized.

partly influenced by religious variations and similarities between regions – established in the past centuries that favours universities in the French or German parts of the country (the number of students enrolling at a university abroad, e.g. in the neighbouring Italy, is negligible. Cf. Metzger, 2010). The option to study in Ticino, however, an option that has existed for two decades, still affects the way in which young people in Ticino talk about their academic future, e.g. by legitimizing the choice of leaving Ticino for some time and delegitimizing the option of remaining there.

### **Mobility as a tradition: hoping for success in the imagined future**

In February 2014, I spent some time at 'Orientati', a two-day event targeting all Ticinese high-school pupils one and a half years before they obtain their Matura. This yearly event takes place at the USI in Ticino and aims to help these young people to make their choice with respect to their future. All Swiss universities send Italian-speaking representatives to present their courses of study, who answer individual questions in Italian and who distribute flyers and leaflets to some extent printed in Italian with crucial information promoting their institution. In the context of my research project focusing on intra-national student mobility across linguistic borders within Switzerland (cf. Zimmermann, 2017a), I talked with pupils and the organizers of the event as well as staff and already-enrolled students from different universities.

Amongst others I got to know a young woman named Laura. Standing in front of a poster advertising the programme for 'Orientati', of which both of us were trying to gain an overview, I asked her about her choices for that day and about her possibilities after having obtained her Matura. Laura explained to me that she planned on doing her studies in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. She had not had French lessons for some time as she had to abandon one foreign language at high school and had thus opted for English and German instead. When asked about the option to study in Ticino, Laura decisively told me that this was not an option for her. 'È importante di partire, di perfezionare la lingua (tedesca) che ormai ci serve più tardi.' ('It is important to leave, to perfect the (German) language that will be useful later on.').

She added that USI was foremost chosen by rich Italians and those Ticinese not wanting to leave, further delegitimizing the option to remain in Ticino for her studies. Laura's main interest at 'Orientati' was to get answers/information from advanced students who had opted for a university based in German-speaking Switzerland. She wanted to find out how they had managed the challenges resulting from having to use another language. She explained to me that her competence in German was rather limited despite getting adequate marks at high school.

Similarly, Sebastiano, a young man in the process of reflecting on potential choices, told me about his plans for enrolling at a university within Switzerland but beyond the borders of his canton of origin, Ticino. However, he was not sure yet where to go. His mother was French-speaking and he emphasized this advantage on which he counted on profiting from when envisioning future study in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Nevertheless, he referred to the different languages and their economic power in Switzerland and stated that his father had recommended he opt for a German-speaking university instead, which might be more of a benefit to his professional life after his studies. Sebastiano pictured himself becoming a psychiatrist. He would, however, not be working professionally as a psychiatrist for about ten years if everything went according to plan. His reflection, however, was very much in line with an imagined future in which certain language competences are placed at a higher level in the hierarchy and associated with more potential professional success.

The conversations with Laura and Sebastiano exemplify the ways in which the young people that I have encountered in my project refer to the languages and their value in Switzerland. They also illustrate that mobility is required if one wants to claim to be undertaking 'serious study', which implies not only leaving Ticino but also choosing the right university in the region where the dominant language coincides with the majority language of Switzerland.

### **'It is much harder than I thought...'. What Ticinese newcomers say about their start at universities in German-speaking Switzerland**

Once these young people from Ticino have opted for studies in the German-speaking

The minority status of the Italian language in Switzerland and in the German-speaking city chosen for their studies contributed to the social bonds and mutual support amongst the members of the association. Seminar papers would be swapped, second-hand books would be passed on and empty rooms in shared accommodation would be announced.

Very little thought is given to students like Carolina, Dario, Sebastiano, Laura and Veronica, who are not proficient in the language dominant in the chosen region.

part of Switzerland, they have to find a place to stay (e.g. in a shared flat) and have to get settled in their new city as well as in their institution. For many of them, it is also the first time they have lived without their parents. Admittedly, it is not only newcomers from Ticino who are confronted with numerous changes (e.g. not having a set timetable anymore at university, moving away from home). When interviewing Ticinese newcomers after having taken up their studies in the German-speaking part, they would often closely relate the experience of their start to Swiss/Standard German and the involved challenges with which they are faced in their new environment.

Sending out questionnaires to newly enrolled students from Ticino (N=130) registered at universities elsewhere than in Ticino, interviewing several of them and doing participant observation at a Ticinese student association in Bern turned out to be beneficial for understanding the role these students assign to the languages when reconstructing their start in their new environment (Zimmermann, 2017b). Carolina was in her second semester of chemistry ETHZ when we met for the first time. When describing her first weeks, she frowned and said that the challenges had started well before moving to Zurich. Even when trying to find a room, she felt disadvantaged. She had to travel to Zurich several times to present herself at shared flats; even making the arrangements for a date and time was complicated for her in German. Once there, she had to try to convince her potential flatmates of her suitability with the added difficulty of speaking in Standard German. As she had been invited together with competitors who were all proficient in Swiss German, she had a hard time understanding the conversations. When thinking about her first weeks at the lab, Carolina remembered the professor's assistant giving all the instructions in Swiss German. She was the only one from Ticino and hence alone in her complaints about the absence of Standard German. Her peers often had to explain to her what was expected. Carolina also recalled spending many hours on the weekly lab reports yet constantly being reminded that her conclusions and descriptions of procedure were not sufficiently specific. Dario, another interview partner studying law at the university of Berne, recalled his start as disastrous. Besides not having the juridical terminology to even understand the basics in the lectures, he explained

that he found the administrative issues hard to deal with. He expressed that he never felt really sure if he had given the right answers when filling in the different forms sent to him by the registration office. For instance, he requested a postponement of his military service shortly after the start of his studies. Having submitted the required form, he got a letter back in which he was asked to be more specific in his answers. As he did not understand the questions, he called the number on the letter. The person replying to his call, however, only spoke Swiss German and Dario described the information provided as most unhelpful. It occurred to him only after the conversation that he could have used the Italian version of the form ('Domanda di differimento del servizio per i militari ancora impegnati negli studi' – Request to defer military service for students) that was on the Swiss army's official website. On the university's website however, the form was only available in Standard German.

Carolina's and Dario's narratives illustrate the ways Ticinese students reconstruct their start at university in relation to the languages prevailing in the German part of Switzerland. They shed light on the language policy dominated by Standard German and Swiss German that Italian-speaking students are confronted with at institutions of higher education. The power of these two varieties shapes the discursive reconstructions of Ticinese students who have learned Standard German as a foreign language at school. The students describe their level of proficiency as insufficient at the beginning of their studies; nevertheless, they are expected to keep up with their peers who are proficient in German.

Focusing on these narratives, one needs to keep in mind, however, that these students – despite being at the beginning of their studies – have so far all been successful (e.g. they have not disappeared or stopped studying). Some of their discursive reconstructions are thus also accompanied by a touch of pride when describing *a posteriori* their start as difficult. They stress that they were, so far, successful enough to cope with the challenges thrown at them. These reconstructions also have to be seen in connection with dominant beliefs (or language ideologies, cf. Irvine & Gal, 2000) in relation to Swiss German and Standard German (cf. Watts, 1988), e.g. when constructing Swiss German as very difficult (or impossible) to understand by non-native speakers.

## “My friends from back home always helped me out.” How Ticinese students cope with their challenges in German-speaking Switzerland

While focusing on Ticinese students in German-speaking Switzerland and learning about the challenges they are faced with in their new environment, I became interested in how they dealt with them<sup>2</sup>. What are their coping strategies?

One prominent strategy applied by many students was to rely on relationships back in Ticino. Carolina, for instance, who was mentioned earlier, eventually found a room in a shared flat thanks to her cousin who knew somebody from Ticino looking for a new flatmate in Zurich. Ticinese student associations exist in almost all university towns, providing support to students from Ticino. They organize cultural and entertainment events and offer students the opportunity to help each other on a personal level, e.g. in the context of academic studies. Newcomers are all contacted at the beginning of the academic year and made aware of the pre-existing Italian-speaking network, to which one can turn to for informal and constant help. This network facilitates the making of new acquaintances in a linguistically foreign environment, where Italian-speaking students from Ticino would not be able to draw on pre-established social bonds. While undertaking participant observation in the Italian-speaking student association in Bern for a year (2011–2012), I realized how important this network was on many levels. During many social events (e.g. barbecues, weekly beers, movie nights, parties, staff meetings, general assemblies) relationships between students – who only had their origin and their linguistic background in common – were established and intensified. The minority status of the Italian language in Switzerland and in the German-speaking city chosen for their studies contributed to the social bonds and mutual support amongst the members of the association. Seminar papers would be swapped, second-hand books would be passed on and empty rooms in shared accommodation would be announced. Dario is one of many students whom I got to know during fieldwork and who emphasized the importance of the association right from the beginning of his studies. When questions arose, he always turned to members of the association who had helped him out.

## Multilingual country – mostly monolingual policy at university?

Switzerland is a country where diversity is celebrated and extensively promoted. Swiss multilingualism is regularly mentioned as one of the pillars of Swiss identity. Investigating intra-national student mobility across linguistic borders, however, raises questions on how this diversity is dealt with. It seems that universities – like many other institutions – stick to the monolingual principle established in the territories. Very little thought is given to students like Carolina, Dario, Sebastiano, Laura and Veronica, who are not proficient in the language dominant in the chosen region (Zimmermann & Flubacher, 2017).<sup>3</sup> This is partially due to the unequal political-economic power attributed to the Swiss languages, an argument that was also reproduced by the students. It is this relationship between assumed future success and certain language competences, and the nearly unquestioned (in most areas) monolingual language policies linked to territories that, on the one hand, excuses the institutions of higher education from fundamentally re-evaluating their policies (an exception is the adoption of English, as it enables international mobility and the attraction of foreign students) and on the other hand, results in a lack of any significant protest by students not fully proficient in German.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Meyer (1999) for one of the rare contributions on failure statistics at universities in Switzerland.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the University of Lucerne is an exception in the way it welcomes and deals with Italian-speaking students. For instance, the University produces promotional material in Italian and offers introductory courses in Italian for law students. This procedure, however, can be seen from a critical perspective, as it serves foremost to increase student numbers, which leads to more financial support provided by the state and the canton (cf. Fritschi & Spycher, 2003; Bundesgesetz über die Förderung der Universitäten [Federal law on the promotion of universities] 2013; OECD, 2004).

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