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English as a Glocal Panacea for Quadrilingual Switzerland and Multilingual Europe

Abstract

In the paper, the Swiss linguistic situation is investigated from the point of view of language contact study, shedding light on possible communication models between the various language groups. An influential model regards global English to function as a local *lingua franca*. Later on, it is shown how these patterns can be applied to describe the linguistic situation of Europe from the perspective of English, regarding Switzerland as a model for Europe in this respect.

Investigating the linguistic situation of multilingual Switzerland is an interesting and challenging task for dialectologists, sociolinguists and language contact researchers alike. In the present paper, I wish to look at the Swiss linguistic situation from the point of view of language contact study, shedding light on possible communication models between the various language groups. Later on, I would like to show how these patterns can be applied to describe the linguistic situation in Europe, regarding Switzerland as a model for Europe in this respect.

First of all, I will briefly describe the linguistic situation in Switzerland, which is a classic example of multilingual societies; a country where – as opposed to the major part of Europe – there is no one-to-one correspondence between language and nation (Schlöpfer–Bickel 2000: 11). With its four national (German, French, Italian and Romansh) and three official languages (German, French and Italian), it has by now become a model of peaceful linguistic co-existence, a widely-cited example in sociolinguistic literature. The Swiss Federal Constitution does not acknowledge Romansch Grischun as an official language, with reference to the hotly debated claim that it is not able to fulfil the requirement of serving as an instrument for debate in parliament or in the media (Watts 1999: 70). The two basic constituents of Swiss language policy are linguistic freedom (meaning that everybody can use their mother tongue freely) and the principle of territoriality. The latter means that communication between the public sphere and the individual takes place in the very language which is predominant in the given region or city (Dürmüller 1996: 12). According to the 2000 census, of the nearly 7.3 million inhabitants of Switzerland, about two thirds speak German as their native language and every fifth Swiss citizen is French-speaking. Speakers of the third national language, Italian, make up 6.5% of the population and as few as 0.5% of the people

claim to be native speakers of Romansh (www.bfs.admin.ch). Owing to everyday myths and stereotypes, one may easily think that the people of multilingual Switzerland are themselves also multi- or at least bilingual and that the relationship of the four national languages is unproblematic and there is linguistic peace in the country. However, this somewhat idealistic picture often clashes with reality. Although the Swiss are commonly known as being able to communicate in various languages, on the one hand, this does not mean equal competence in each language and on the other hand, this situation can be explained by the efficiency of language teaching at schools. This view is further supported by the fact that only 6.2% of all Swiss claim to be bi- or multilingual, mainly in the non-German speaking regions (Clyne 1995: 5). The reason for this is that the boundaries of the various languages in Switzerland are sharp and clear; most cantons are linguistically autonomous. In other words, with the exception of three cantons (the officially bilingual Freiburg and Biel and the only trilingual canton, Graubünden), we can speak about territorial monolingualism (Hoffmann 1991: 165).

In 1989, the Swiss Department of the Interior published a report on the present and future linguistic situation of quadrilingual Switzerland, in order to support minority languages. Two major demands were identified in the report: the linguistic situation of German-speaking Switzerland (that is, the delicate problem of diglossia between standard German and Swiss German dialects) and the problem of communication between the germanophone Swiss and the speakers of the other three national languages (Rash 2003: 108). In this paper, I wish to concentrate on the second issue, from a point of view of language contact study. The basic question here is whether Switzerland is indeed a multilingual country par excellence where the linguistic regions are in constant contact with each other, or it is rather an artificial construct, consisting of four linguistic regions, held together by political and economic forces (Pedretti 2000: 269). Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the famous Swiss dramatist said in 1990: “[...] the French Swiss and the German Swiss, but also the people from Ticino, do not live together at all, they live alongside one another” (cited from Dürmüller 1997: 28). Indeed, there are hardly any language conflicts in Switzerland, but this cannot be primarily attributed to the extraordinary tolerance of the Swiss but rather to the fact that the individual linguistic regions are largely independent of each other. The clearly definable language boundaries do not only constitute a linguistic issue but the existence of larger linguistic blocks is made to appear obvious in popular thinking too. This also has to do with stereotypes concerning sympathy and antipathy between the various language groups, whereby the smaller ones feel that they are discriminated by the German-speaking population. There is a clear line marking off the French-speaking part from German-speaking territories, the so-called *Röstigraben* (*Rösti* is a Swiss German national dish and *Graben* means ‘ditch’), crossing the two major bilingual cities of Biel and Freiburg. Even in them there is only rather passive bilingualism. Schools are a good mirror of the situation in these cities, for there are separate German-speaking and French-speaking schools, teaching the other language as a foreign one, respectively. Thus, these cities can also function as a small linguistic model of the whole country. Canton Wallis, also on the language boundary, has tried introducing the method of immersion teaching, successfully applied in bilingual Canada (that is, using both languages as the language of tuition), as a means of bridging the ditch (Dürmüller 1996: 36-37).

As an analogy for *Röstigraben*, some researchers also speak of a *Polentagraben* between the Italian- and German-speaking regions, but it seems rather unfounded, as this boundary is by far not that clear. As for the scarce Romansh-speaking population, they do not form a distinguishable group, for they live scattered in Canton Graubünden and most of them are bi- or trilingual. Thus, it can be claimed that it is they who correspond mostly to the national

ideal of the multilingual Swiss (Coray 2003: 29). Although there is a standardized Romansh language, speakers of other national languages do not tend to learn it, on account of its low communicative value. It is a global tendency that linguistic adaptation is upward-moving, which means that speakers of minor languages (in Abram de Swaan's terminology, of languages with a lower communicative value) have to adapt themselves to the major languages and not the other way round. De Swaan's economically and sociologically oriented theory about a global language system can be well applied to describe the linguistic situation in Switzerland. The theory is based on the idea that the individual language groups are unequal participants of a competition, taking place at various levels of a global linguistic context (2003: 28). In Switzerland, this competition occurs at the national level. The so-called *Q value*, which de Swaan also terms as *communicative potential*, is higher in the case of major languages because by learning that particular language, speakers of other languages gain a communicative advantage or benefit (idem 44). On the other hand, languages with a lower Q value will have to adapt to those with a higher communicative potential. In Switzerland, German has the highest and Romansh the lowest Q value.

Having seen that the four national languages are significantly different in their proportions of native speakers, the question of a common language of communication seems inevitable to emerge. Statistically, one would expect German to be the language of intranational communication, both because of the great number of its native speakers and because of its high Q value. However, in practice this does not seem to be the case. Based on personal experience, I can claim that it is much more common for a German-speaking Swiss to speak French or even Italian than for a speaker of French to be able (or rather willing) to communicate in German. Although both language groups have to study the other language at school, it is rather a question of attitudes and in this respect, the German-speaking Swiss tend to be more flexible. The above mentioned facts can be linked to one of the strong models which aims to describe communication between the various language groups, the so-called **partner language model**. According to the stronger version of this model, both participants of a conversation should be able to communicate in the language of the partner. However, the weaker version also allows the participants to use their native language, but in this case they have to know the other one too, at least in a passive way. High as the level of foreign language teaching may be in Switzerland, it would be rather naïve to posit that the stronger version can work well, i.e. that every speaker can use the language of the partner for the purposes of communication. As for the weaker version, it seems somewhat more feasible but given the fact that Switzerland is a quadrilingual country, it cannot work in every relation between all languages. The partner language model offers a realistic description of the bilingual dialogue in countries like Canada or Belgium, where only two languages take part in the communication (Dürmüller 1996: 82). However, the linguistic situation in multilingual Switzerland seems to be too complex to be described by this model.

Communication between the linguistic regions of Switzerland is not only complex but it is also constantly changing. Despite cross-cantonal migration and exchange programmes designed to study in a region with another official language (similarly to all-European exchange programmes), the number of natural bilinguals has diminished lately (Manno 2003: 50). This fact also speaks for the difficulty of the implementation of the partner language model.

The other possible model to describe intranational communication in Switzerland is the **lingua franca model**. This suggests that one language is placed hierarchically above the others by regulations of language policy (Dürmüller 1996: 74–78). In the present case, it

seems impossible to elevate one of the four national languages above the other three so only a fifth, neutral language can come into play. When looking into possible models of communication between the various linguistic regions, we should not disregard the fact that Switzerland has the highest proportion of foreign residents in Europe, many of whom speak English at least as a business language (Hoffmann 1991: 171). It is Canton Geneva that has the highest number of foreigners: 38.1% according to the 2000 census (source: http://www.geneve.ch/statistique/recensement/etrangers/canton_0.asp). If we also take into consideration that English is today's international language (in de Swaan's terminology, the only hypercentral language); it becomes quite clear that the only candidate to be the *lingua franca* in Switzerland can be English. The attitude of the Swiss towards English is not uniform: while its opponents claim that it is and will always be only a foreign language, others argue that it is already the language of work – in many large companies at any rate. This can be explained not only by reasons of prestige but it also has practical arguments – thanks to the high number of foreign employees at multinational companies. According to official statistics from 2005, whereas in 1990 about 15% of employees used English at work in Switzerland, this number had grown up to almost 22% by 2000 (source: *Tages-Anzeiger*, 13 April 2005, p. 1). Another important factor supporting the use of English as *lingua franca* is that it not only serves as a language of intra- but also of international communication, especially in the financial and academic world. The debate on the spread of English is not only of a linguistic nature but it also concerns everyday life. Hardly a day passes by without a newspaper article or a report on TV on the issue and it is also a common topic of conversation in everyday situations. Also, the early introduction of English at schools is an object of fervent debate, as Canton Zurich launched a pilot project whereby children start English before French – a previously unprecedented example. An expert on the topic, Richard Watts (himself a native speaker of English) suggests that owing to early English at schools, a kind of Pan-Swiss English would develop, an endonormative (non-native) form, similar to English in India or Singapore (Watts–Murray 2001: 3). My view is that this fear is still somewhat exaggerated but it is beyond doubt that using English as the major means of intranational communication results in an oversimplified, often erroneous variety.

Despite all observable tendencies, current Swiss language policy opposes the introduction of English as a *lingua franca* because it would work against the principle that all four national languages and minorities are supported by the state at the federal level (Franzen 2001: 17). Also at the everyday level, many Swiss regard English as the major enemy of linguistic harmony and cultural identity, in spite of its popularity and high acceptance. This can have several reasons: while some people associate English with the business and media elite of Zurich that they have a negative opinion of, others reject the entire Anglo-American culture together with the language and speak of a *McDonald'sization* of the country (Coray 2001: 175). José Ribeaud, who sharply criticizes the spread of English in his paper *Das schlechte Beispiel von Zürich* ('The Bad Example of Zurich'), goes as far as to say that although Switzerland has four national languages, two other ones are used in reality: English and the Zurich dialect of Swiss German (Ribeaud 1998: 40). Needless to say, this view is far too exaggerated, just like the one according to which it is a threatening sign that the new Swiss passport does not contain information in all four national languages but apart from German, French and Italian, also in English (Hohl 1997: 4).

We have seen that neither of the two proposed models can offer a perfect description of intranational communication in present-day Switzerland. Although it seems impossible to be introduced at the official level, still it is the *lingua franca* model that seems to work at the

level of everyday life. Likewise, it seems to be the only possible alternative to today's multilingual Europe.

Just like in Switzerland, the question also arises at an all-European level: is hypercentral English a potential threat for language harmony or does it, on the contrary, offer a practical alternative for international communication? Although it is quantitatively not the largest language of the EU, its importance in international dialogue cannot be denied. Its special status can also be supported by the fact that it has a higher number of non-native than native speakers worldwide. However, the figures provided by various statistics sharply differ. While David Crystal claims that English has 427 million native speakers in the world (Siguan 2001: 126), Peter Trudgill estimates that there are 300 million people who speak English as their first language (Trudgill 2001: 27). It is even more difficult to judge how many non-native speakers a language has, for there are no exact criteria to determine who is a speaker of that language and who is not. Widening our perspective to a global one, it may be interesting to look at the status of English in various countries of the world. English is an official or co-official language in as many as 45 countries, followed by French (30 countries) and Spanish (26 countries) in this list (Siguan 2001: 126). However, when analysing these data, it should also not be forgotten that Spanish is the only official language in almost all those countries, whereas English has only co-official status in most of those 45 countries. This is, of course, due to their different ways of historical development.

Trudgill, accordingly, further divides those countries where English is used: those where it functions as an L1, those where it is an L2 and there is also a third group of countries where English is a foreign language, that is, an international lingua franca (Trudgill 2001: 32). In a sense, Switzerland also belongs to this latter category, even if it can also be considered a problematic case, for English does not only serve as an international, but also as an internal lingua franca – up to a certain extent.

There are many possible ways of describing the present status of English. Most commonly, it is called an international language, in the colloquial sense of the word. Others refer to it as a global or world language, while a linguistically more precise way to call it would be a new lingua franca. De Swaan, as already mentioned, terms English a hypercentral language (the only such), which he places on top of his 4-level hierarchical model of the global language system. It is English, in his view, that has been keeping the entire global language constellation together, for about 50 years now (de Swaan 2004: 15).

Larry Smith introduces the term *English as an international auxiliary language*. He considers it important to distinguish an international language (one which is used by people of different nationalities to communicate with each other) from an auxiliary language (one, other than the first language, used by nationals of a country, for internal communication), which is frequently English. These two categories do not necessarily intertwine, as there are countries where English is important as an international language but not so much as an auxiliary language (e.g. Japan) and the other way round (e.g. the Philippines) (Smith 1983: 1). If we accept this distinction and focus on the European situation again, it will be clear that English mostly serves as an international language in Europe but there are also clear signs of it taking on the role of an auxiliary language too, just like in the case of Switzerland.

Whatever we call the current status of English, it is beyond doubt that no language of wider communication has ever been shared by so many people and has been so widely distributed. It is not an easy task to explain the world-wide dominance of English in the last 50 years. What can be taken for granted is that it is neither due to its relative grammatical simplicity and easy learnability, nor to the high number of its native speakers. As a

counterexample, one could think of Latin or later French, both of which have a very rich inflectional system and they still became lingua francas. Most likely, the strongest factor in English having acquired the status of an international language is the present position of the United States as a political and economic superpower and the centre of globalisation. In Crystal's terms, the reason why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it, rather with who those people are (Crystal 2003: 7). Paul Bruthiaux argues that English has such a strong position at present that other major languages (like French, Spanish, German or Chinese) can only challenge this at regional level (Bruthiaux 2003: 9). The position of English in our days is not even comparable with the former status of Latin, for various reasons. Most importantly, Latin was only used by a small elite, which is certainly not true of English; only few records exist of its vernacular use and at the time when Latin functioned as a kind of lingua franca, language planning didn't exist, which is an important factor responsible for the spread of English (idem 10).

Although it is not the aim of the present paper, I still consider it crucial to give an insight into the problem of why and how English has achieved its present status. Indeed, it is so special that some researchers have started to describe the contact of English with other languages using unique terms. Ehlich, for example, uses the term *intection* (which he coined from the Latin root *integere* 'to cover') to describe the contact of any other language with English as a new political and institutional superstratum language, laid over the areas of other languages (Ehlich 1994: 111). The significance of this distinction is to emphasize that it is an entirely different type of contact from any other language contacts.

As I have already pointed out, the unstoppable spread of English in Europe is a frequently debated issue, both among linguists and among ordinary people. Undoubtedly, there are certain factors indicative of English becoming a lingua franca. The view about Switzerland, according to which there is a potential danger of isolation within Europe without an adequate promotion of English (Watts-Murray 2001: 5), can be projected onto an all-European level too. English is already in the process of becoming the "Euro-language", not only at the institutional levels of the EU, in the financial and academic world, but also in everyday communication between people. The language situation in the present form of the European Union is a very complex and delicate question. At present (June 2007), it has 23 official languages, of which German has the highest proportion of native speakers (18%) but English is the most commonly spoken language (13% native speakers and 38% speaking it as a foreign language), as well as the one which Europeans consider to be the most useful to learn, i.e. the language with the highest communicative value, in de Swaan's theory (www.europa.eu.int). Although the EU regards all of its official languages as equal, it would be impossible to treat them equally from a practical point of view, especially at the institutional level. In European bureaucracy, English and French are used as working languages but recently, English has outgrown French. Although the multilingual system at the institutions of the Union seems to be an ideal solution, in its practical implementation, the high number of combinations for translation and interpretation would make the functioning of the system impossible. In other words, the more languages are present in the EU, the more English is used (de Swaan 2004: 157).

Apart from the practical aspect at the institutional level, there are other factors which support the promotion of English as a lingua franca in Europe. Crystal argues that if a language becomes global, nobody will own it anymore, or, on the contrary, everybody will own it (Crystal 2003: 2). Following his line of thought, we could conclude that the use of English as a complementary medium of communication does not bear in itself any threat for

other languages, also because international English is said to be neutral and culturally unloaded (Siguan 2001: 177). However, representing the other end of the scale, we could also reason that although English may not be culturally loaded for those who speak an oversimplified “Euro-English”, it is indeed strongly associated with English-speaking countries; for most people with the USA. In this sense, countries of the EU argue on other grounds against the overall spread of English than the countries of the postcolonial world. The latter are more likely to see the expansion of English in association with colonial dependence, whereas people in Western European countries tend to look upon English as a carrier of American values (Siguan 2001: 137).

The major fear is seen in English as a “killer” of mother tongues and cultures (Joseph 2004: 19) – a view that is often exaggerated to the extent as some researchers speak about *linguistic genocide* when describing the phenomenon that English poses a threat for other languages. According to a less dramatic version of the theory, the same process is called *linguistic curtailment*, referring to the fact that the usage of other languages is qualitatively and quantitatively curtailed by English, which pushes them out of the way, both in their written realisation and orally, in the mass media (Pennycook 1994: 14). Even if we try to avoid such extremist formulations, the concepts of *linguistic homogenisation* and *loss of linguistic diversity* still have to be mentioned, due to their frequent use in connection with the idea of globalisation. However, there are two major forces operating which make linguistic homogenisation impossible to take place. On the one hand, the imperatives of individual linguistic identity (i.e. the individual demands variation and prefers comprehension) and on the other, those of national linguistic identity impede the loss of linguistic diversity. The latter force means that every nation has a great need to establish and maintain a kind of “imagined community” (Joseph 2004: 30). Obviously, these are factors speaking strongly against the view there could be one and only one lingua franca in Europe. It is precisely the diversity of cultures and languages that makes Europe really European. At this point, a glimpse back to Switzerland seems necessary: also the myth of Switzerland and the essence of being Swiss lie in the fact that it is a pluralistic and diverse country with four different languages and cultures.

Consequently, strong as the influence of English may be on the linguistic scenario of Europe (and even necessary in certain fields), it is exactly the identity issue that will make it impossible for English to intrude into all areas and serve as a lingua franca in Europe. This sort of linguistic globalisation would lead to the loss of linguistic diversity, which would be impossible to imagine under the current circumstances.

Language policy and foreign language education also have a great responsibility, for it is mainly through official measures that a language can acquire a special role in a country where it is not (yet) official. On the one hand, it can be made into an official language or it can be made a priority in the country’s foreign language teaching (Crystal 2003: 4). Also in Switzerland, it is a current problem. The measure that some cantons have recently introduced English as the first foreign language, instead of the traditional policy of giving priority to the country’s other official languages, is rather symbolic, but of great importance. The 1997 decision by Canton Zurich (which was later followed by some other German-speaking cantons too) that English is compulsory at secondary schools and that it is introduced before French in primary schools offended the French and Italian parts of Switzerland, for they have seen this measure as the first major step to destroy linguistic peace in the country (Murray 2003: 92). Education experts in Zurich argued that English is not only easier to learn than French (due to its structure, as well as to its modern teaching methods and materials), but it

also responds more to the needs of present-day economy. In addition, by introducing English as the first foreign language, a social division can be prevented, that is, everyone is given an equal chance on the labour market by being provided with the commodity of English (Bühlmann 2003: 87). On the other hand, critics of the decision tend to speak about a new language division in Switzerland apart from the *Rösti ditch*: English creates a so-called *Big Mac ditch* inside the country (ibid). It is interesting to note that the very term *Big Mac ditch*, as well as the previously mentioned process of *McDonald'sisation*, clearly indicate how strongly English is associated with American culture, which, in popular thinking, is oversimplified to mean fast food culture.

Even the International Meeting of Teachers of German agreed in 2001 that there is no contradiction between using and supporting a lingua franca (e.g. English) and a living multilingualism in other fields. However, the first foreign language should be chosen from the physical surroundings of children (in the case of German-speaking Switzerland, clearly French). The teaching of English should also be guaranteed but not as the first foreign language because it could strengthen the illusion in the children that no other foreign language is necessary (Schneider-Clalüna 2003: 14-15). The same is true of any other European country: the fact that the teaching of English should be supported (a tendency of our age which cannot be ignored, also due to its global importance) shall not mean that the national languages are to be abandoned. On the contrary: the two can, and should, live next to each other, mutually supporting each other. The same idea can also be formulated and interpreted as referring to the whole of Europe as "English is necessary but not enough" (Salverda 2002: 7).

Some sociolinguists speak of a new diglossia situation in Europe: English as a high variety (used in the fields of economy, politics etc.) and the national languages as low varieties (Salverda 2002: 6). Abram de Swaan also mentions this phenomenon; however, he does not call it diglossia but a new kind of bilingualism (de Swaan 2004: 164). If we stick to the original, Fergusonian definition of diglossia, then de Swaan's approach seems to be more adequate, for diglossia usually implies the use of two, functionally different varieties of the same language. In present-day Europe, the national languages still prevail in most domains of life, and the spheres in which they and English are used, are largely fixed. However, in the areas of fashion, music, entertainment, sports or advertising there is a strong competition between English and the national languages (de Swaan 2004: 164). This delicate balance should not be disturbed and as long as English does not make inroads into the domains of the national languages, this special situation will be maintained. National languages are not threatened and this unique kind of bilingualism (or diglossia) will not be disturbed because the European states strongly support national languages and consequently, European languages are too powerful to be degraded to a low variety.

Projecting this view onto German-speaking Switzerland, we are confronted with an even more complicated picture, for there is another, more obvious type of diglossia between Standard German (used mainly in writing) and the Swiss German dialects (primarily spoken). Positing that there is a new kind of diglossia with English would result in a situation of double diglossia so for the present moment we wish to disregard the traditional Swiss diglossia between standard and dialect and just concentrate on any of the national languages as low and English as high variety. Georges Lüdi describes a dark future as a possible consequence of early English at schools. According to this view, national languages would belong to the lower layers of society, used in a regional context, in a locally bound way, with minimal to limited communicative range. English, on the contrary, would be associated with

the middle and upper classes, used overregionally, even in an international context, with maximal communicative range (Lüdi 2003: 278). Nevertheless, this is unlikely to happen in the near future, mainly because – just like other European countries – the Swiss state also gives strong support to its national languages and its people also feel to be identified with them.

We should also add that English also tends to function more and more as the common language of communication between two Europeans of (almost) any nationality. At the same time, we should remember that English is not the only means of international communication, especially in the case of areal contacts close to borders, like in Southern Slovakia, for example, where a native speaker of Hungarian will have to learn Slovak because English will by far not serve as a means of communication for them.

This new global as well as European tendency also challenges the earlier views of language contacts; especially the status of areal contacts seems to be changing these days; so in the mirror of seeing English as a new international language (not necessarily as a *lingua franca* yet), language contact study may have new findings and some of its traditional terms and models may have to be reinterpreted as well.

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