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# The Value of English in Multilingual Families

Sarah Chevalier

In multilingual families, not all the languages available are necessarily spoken to the children. Some parents make the decision to not use one (or more) of their languages. Other families, by contrast, decide to add a language. This essay seeks to examine the motivations for such decisions. Specifically it asks: In multilingual families, which languages are cut, which ones are added, and why? The theoretical framework is based on Spolsky's tripartite model of language policy as consisting of language management, beliefs, and practices, as well as De Swaan's *global language system*, in which of all languages English has the highest value. The data consist of semi-structured interviews with 35 multilingual families in Switzerland. Results show that while parents do sometimes abandon languages, English is almost never one of those abandoned. Further, if a family adds a language, it is always English. Such language policy decisions are largely shown to be motivated by parents' belief in the opportunities available in a globalised world, opportunities for which English is felt to be the key.

## 1. Introduction

The present study is concerned with the status of various languages in multilingual families, and in particular the value of English. I would like to introduce the study via a description of one of the families who took part. This family consists of a Swiss mother, a Belgian father, and their

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daughter Lina.<sup>1</sup> The mother is a native speaker of Swiss German, and the family live in German-speaking Switzerland. The father, who grew up in Flanders, was raised bilingually from birth in Dutch and French. Lina's parents thus have three native languages among them. As such, a condition exists for a possible trilingual upbringing for Lina: potentially she could grow up exposed to Swiss German, French and Dutch. And Lina is indeed growing up with three languages; however, they are not precisely these three. Rather, Lina is growing up exposed to Swiss German, French, and English.

Two questions thus arise: Why English? And why not Dutch? With regard to the first question, Lina's parents use English between themselves as a couple language. It is the language they used when they first met on holidays in an English-speaking country, and it remains the strongest foreign language for both of them. Thus force of habit (see Barnes 91 on the difficulties a couple may have in changing their language of communication), as well as proficiency, play a role. But there is also another reason. Lina's parents made a conscious decision to keep English, and English only, as their couple language in order to provide their daughter with a "pure" model of English in the home. While they recognised that it would have been advantageous for Lina's father to practice his German with his wife (either the dialect or the standard variety) since they lived in German-speaking Switzerland, they decided to sacrifice this advantage in order to give their daughter the chance to be raised trilingually, with one of the languages being English. This presence of English in the home is reinforced by an American aunt (Lina's maternal uncle's partner), who lives nearby and visits often. Lina's aunt plays intensively with the child, insisting all the while that Lina speak English.

With regard to the question of why Dutch was abandoned, the parents explained that this language was not useful in Switzerland – and not useful generally. We can see clearly in the case just described the extent to which English is valued. In this family, English, which is not a native language of either parent, is given space, while Dutch, a native language, is not.

This case illustrates how in multilingual families not all the languages available are necessarily spoken to the children. Some parents make the decision to not use one (or more) of their languages. Other families, by contrast, decide to add a language, that is, to bring into their family a language which is not one of the parents' native languages, nor the lan-

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<sup>1</sup> All names in this essay are pseudonyms.

guage of the community. Some families, like Lina's, even do both: abandoning one language, while adding another. This essay seeks to examine the motivations for such decisions. Specifically it asks: In multilingual families, which languages are cut, which ones are added, and why?

## 2. Theoretical frame

The theoretical framework relies on two complementary analytical approaches. First, language choices in multilingual families are examined according to Spolsky's tripartite model of language policy. One element of language policy is, according to Spolsky, *beliefs or ideologies* about language. Another is *language management*, which comprises concrete steps undertaken to promote a certain language or variety. Finally, Spolsky argues that *language practices* also form a part of language policy: what people actually do, whether consciously or unconsciously informs the policy. Describing separately beliefs, management and practices is one way to try and understand why some languages are valued and promoted in multilingual families and others are not, and, crucially, whether in fact the attempts work.

The second theoretical model used in this study is De Swaan's *global language system* (see *Words of the World*, chapter 1). In this framework, languages are considered as "collective goods" since they are available, in theory, to anyone, and they do not diminish in value as new users are added. In fact, in the case of languages, their value increases. De Swaan calculates the worth of a language according to its "prevalence" (number of native speakers) and its "centrality" (number of people knowing another language who can use it to communicate). He demonstrates that the centrality, and thus the worth, of English is continually increasing in a self-reinforcing dynamic: the more people there are who use English as a *lingua franca*, the greater incentive there is for yet more people to acquire it.

Behind this model is a conception of the languages of the world being connected by speakers. According to De Swaan, the worldwide constellation of languages comprises a system whereby mutually unintelligible languages are connected by multilingual speakers. This connection, however, is not random but hierarchical. The world's languages, De Swaan proposes, can be divided into three categories: peripheral, central and supercentral. Peripheral languages include most of the world's languages and are generally unwritten, for example, Swiss German. Central languages are the national or official languages of a ruling state, such as

Dutch. Finally, there are a dozen or so supercentral languages. These are languages which are widely spoken across national borders. Most have more than 100 million speakers, and they connect speakers of central languages. An example is French in francophone West Africa, connecting speakers of national languages. De Swaan further elaborates that among the supercentral languages, there is a single hypercentral language, namely English, connecting speakers of the supercentral languages. According to De Swaan, speakers who acquire a second language are far more likely to acquire one higher in the hierarchy than one lower in the hierarchy for reasons of wider communication. De Swaan's model is therefore useful for explaining language choices in multilingual families, and in particular choices concerning English.

### 3. Previous work on the value of English in multilingual families

While a huge body of research exists attesting to the global importance of English, from work on English as a second language (e.g. Kachru), to English as a lingua franca (e.g. Seidelhofer), to the role of English in a country's education policy (e.g. Ferguson *Language Planning*), to global English generally (e.g. Crystal), little work exists on the value of English in multilingual families. Two recent studies, however, do shed some light on this topic, namely research conducted by Braun and Cline ("Trilingual Families"), as well as by Barron-Hauwaert.

Braun and Cline studied 70 trilingual families living in mainly monolingual societies. Their data consist of parental interviews, 35 conducted in England and 35 in Germany. The families selected were those in which two non-community languages are spoken in the home. The 70 families could be categorised into the following three types (116–117):

- Type I Parent A and Parent B speak one different native language each. Neither of them speaks the community language natively. No common native language. (24 families)
- Type II One or both parents speak two native languages (which may include the community language). (31 families)
- Type III One or both parents speak three native languages (which may include the community language). (15 families)

While among the first two types of families there were not big differences between the families in England compared to those in Germany concerning language practices, the 15 Type III families displayed con-

siderable differences. Of the nine families who lived in England, eight of them *only* spoke English at home. Thus, among these families, a potentially trilingual situation resulted in English monolingualism. In the six families in Germany, on the other hand, five actually used English as a third, non-native language in the home (118). Braun and Cline do point out that most parents in Type III families in England had English as a native language, while such parents in Germany did not have German as a native language, which may have led to these differing patterns (119-120). Nevertheless, the fact remains that English is favoured over other native languages in England, as well as being favoured by non-native speakers in Germany. Further, the value of English can clearly be seen in a different comparison in Braun and Cline's study, namely with regard to choice of school. Twenty out of 35 families in Germany enrolled their children in international schools, generally choosing the English section, while only two of the 35 families in England did so. The evidence from Braun and Cline's study clearly attests to the value of English compared to other languages in multilingual families.

In Barron-Hauwaert's survey, one aspect she considers is how languages with "high world status" (3) fare in trilingual families compared to languages without such status. Barron-Hauwaert gathered data via a survey on ten trilingual families in Belgium (3), Switzerland (3), Germany (1), France (1), the UK (1), and Nepal (1). These ten were among a number of families who had responded to advertisements for the study. The parents selected for participation had to fulfil two requirements, namely that they had children who were over two years of age (i.e. children who could talk), and that the parents spoke different native languages while living in a third language area (Braun and Cline's Type I family).

Barron-Hauwaert looked at which language was chosen as the parents' main language of communication, and compared languages with high world status to those without. She found that in six families one parent spoke a "prestigious" language (English, French or Italian), while the other parent spoke a language which, outside its own specific language area, carried no particular prestige (Swiss German, Polish, Catalan, Dutch and Czech). In each of these families, the parents used one of the former languages as their main communication language. Thus, she concludes that parental languages with high world status may threaten those parental languages with lower world status (3).

#### 4. Data and method

The present study examines language choices among 35 tri- and quadrilingual families in Switzerland. One of the families actually lived in southern Germany but the mother worked in Switzerland, and the child attended day-care there as well. The informants were found mostly via an article I wrote for an English-language parenting magazine published in Switzerland, the *New Stork Times* (Chevalier, "Trilingual Tots"), plus an advertisement placed there. Since the magazine is aimed at parents with young or primary school age children, all of the families except three indeed had children in this age group. A few families were also found through personal connections, especially through university colleagues and students. Due to these methods of data collection, the parents who participated tended to be middle class, with at least one parent if not both working professionally. Further, the fact that many participants were recruited via a magazine written in English means that a bias towards the use of English in these families may exist. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by myself, usually in English (the language of the magazine in which most parents had heard of the study, and the author's native language). One interview was conducted in Italian (family 31 in Table 1, below), one in French (family 33), and one in German (family 34).

The interviews generally lasted a little under an hour (average length 52 minutes). Each interview was recorded and transcribed.<sup>2</sup> Attempts were made to interview both parents, as well as to meet and interact with the children in order to gain as full a picture of the family as possible in the time available. It was possible to interview both parents in 27 cases, while meeting the children was achieved in 32 cases. Having the children present made interviewing more strenuous since parents with younger children were often interrupted. On the other hand, being able to observe the multilingual family in action is clearly advantageous for the researcher.

Further data used in this study are derived from longitudinal case studies of two of the families (one being Lina's). Details on the data and methodology of these case studies can be found in Chevalier ("Mobile Parents," "Active Trilingualism," "Caregiver Responses," *Trilingual Language Acquisition*).

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to acknowledge the University of Berne for providing me with funding for a research assistant for this project, as well the research assistant herself, Livia Gerber, for her meticulous transcription.



The method of enquiry is as follows: I give an overview of all the languages available to the families and compare these with the languages actually used by them; at the same time, I seek explanations for the parents' choices via a thematic analysis of the interviews; this analysis is, in turn, underpinned by the theoretical models of De Swaan and Spolsky.

## 5. Overview of the languages involved

The following table provides an overview both of the parental and community languages,<sup>3</sup> as well as the parental language choices. In columns 2, 3 and 4 the parents' native languages<sup>4</sup> and the community languages (CL) are listed. These are the languages which the families "automatically" had at their disposal for their children. Note that in the columns for parental native languages, the order of languages among those parents with more than one native language is given in order of dominance, if the parent stated that they felt dominant in a particular language. If this was not stated, the main language of the community in which the parent was raised is given first. Columns 5, 6 and 7 display the parents' language choices. Column 5 shows the language(s) the mother spoke to her child(ren), column 6 the language(s) the father spoke to his child(ren), and column 7 the language the couple used between themselves (which in two cases changed after the birth of the first child; see families 10 and 33). Finally, column 8 also lists to a large extent language choices parents made, since it shows any languages the children were exposed to via childminders or school if these were different from the community language.

While the table documents the parents' native languages and the community languages, it does not reveal the full extent of the languages actually available to the families interviewed, since in principle parents also have at their disposal any languages learnt later in life. However, when parents actually made use of this option, this information appears in the table. For example, in family 30, the bilingual Italian-Swiss German mother chose to speak English, a language she acquired formally via school, to her son. Further, if parents have the inclination and

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term "community language" in the same way as Braun and Cline, namely to refer to "the language which is spoken in the wider community and neighbourhood" of the families in question (Braun and Cline, *Language Strategies* 3).

<sup>4</sup> The languages listed are those which the parents considered to be their native languages.



Fam	Moth- er's native lan- guage	Fa- ther's native lan- guage	CL	Language spoken by mother to child	Lan- guage spoken by fa- ther to child	Lan- guage spoken by par- ents to each other	Scho ol/ care- giver's lan- guage when differ ent from CL
1	English	He- brew, Eng- lish	SG	English	Hebrew	English	He- brew
2	SG	Swed- ish, Arabic	SG	SG	Swedish (Arabic)	English	
3	Arabic	Span- ish, Ger- man	SG	Arabic	Spanish	English	Span- ish
4 <sup>5</sup>	English	Ger- man	SG	English	German	English	
5	Arabic, French	SG	SG	Arabic (French)	SG	English	
6	Italian	SG	SG	Italian	SG	German	Eng- lish
7	English	Arabic, French	SG	English	Arabic	English	
8	English	Swed- ish	SG	English	Swedish	English	
9	SG	Dutch,	SG	SG	French	English	

<sup>5</sup> Three families (4, 16, 24) living in Swiss German-speaking communities in which one parent came from Germany and the other from an English-speaking country expressed interest in taking part in this trilingualism research. They automatically considered themselves to be trilingual families. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the diglossic situation in German-speaking Switzerland (see Ferguson, "Diglossia"); suffice to say that since Swiss German is not immediately intelligible to many native speakers of German German, it is quite justified for native speakers of the latter variety to feel they are dealing with a different language.

		French					
10	French	German, English	SG	French	German	English, then German	
11	Danish	SG	SG	Danish	SG	English	English
12	Italian	Lingala, French, English	FR	Italian	English	French	
13	Persian	Italian	SG	Persian	Italian	German	
14	English, SG	Danish	SG	English	Danish	English	
15	English	French, English	SG	English	French	English	
16	English	German	SG	English	German	English, German	
17	French	English	SG	French	English	English	
18	English, Italian	Italian, SG	SG	English	Italian	Italian, English	
19	English	English	FR	English	English	English	Spanish, Swahili
20	Korean	German	SG	Korean	German	English	English
21	English	French	SG	English	French	English	
22	English, Italian	Italian, SG	SG	English	Italian	English, Italian	
23	English	SG	FR	English	SG	English	English
24	German	English	SG	German	English	German, English	English
25	Swedish	English	SG	Swedish	English	English	
26	Finnish	German	SG	Finnish,	German	German	English

		man		English	man, English		lish
27	French	Dutch	SG	French	Dutch	English	
28	Basque	Span- ish	SG	Basque	Spanish	Spanish	
29	Italian	Italian	SG	Italian	Italian	Italian	Eng- lish
30	SG, Italian	SG, Eng- lish	SG	English	English	SG	
31	Spanish	SG, French	IT	Italian, Spanish	Italian	Italian	
32	Polish, SG	Arabic	SG	English	English	English	
33	French	Italian	SG	Italian	Italian	French, then Italian	
34	German	French	SG	German	French	German	Eng- lish
35	Greek, English	Danish	SG	Greek	Danish	English	

Key:

Fam: Family

CL: Community language

SG: Swiss German

FR: French

IT: Italian

Table 1: Languages available and languages used in 35 multilingual families in Switzerland

the means they may even choose to expose their children to other languages besides the ones they are able to speak themselves and the community languages; information concerning this option appears in the final column. For a number of couples interviewed, it was only the conscious decision to speak a third language which was not one of their native languages, or otherwise expose their child to a third language, which resulted in a multilingual rather than a bilingual situation. This brings us to the question: When is a language, which is not automatically available to a family, added?

## 6. When is a language added?

In the corpus of 35 interviews of multilingual families in Switzerland, we can see that when a language which is not automatically available (either as a parental or community language) is added, that language will be English. Three pieces of evidence attest to this.

The first piece of evidence concerns the use of English as a *lingua franca* between parents. Nine couples did not speak to each other in either partner's native language; instead they used a third language, a *lingua franca* (families 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 20, 27, 31, 32 in Table 1). Of these nine families, two (families 13, 31) chose to speak the language of the community.<sup>6</sup> The other seven chose English.<sup>7</sup> It will be recalled that in Lina's family, for example, the mother's native language was Swiss German, the father's native languages were Dutch and French, and yet the couple communicated in English, their strongest non-native language. Dutch, according to De Swaan, is a central language. It is an official language, necessary for communication in Dutch-speaking regions. But it is not useful as a *lingua franca* outside of these regions. Thus, for this family living in Switzerland it did not have any communicative value and was therefore dropped from the family's linguistic repertoire. The other native language of the father, French, on the other hand, is a supercentral language. Further, it is one of the national languages of Switzerland (although not a language of their region). French, therefore, was maintained, as the father chose to speak this language to his daughter. However, it was hypercentral English, not a native language of either parent, nor the language of the community, which was added to the family repertoire. The decision in this family to maintain French over

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<sup>6</sup> Italian in Italian-speaking Switzerland and Standard German in German-speaking Switzerland. Although the latter is not the spoken language of the German Swiss community, it is the variety taught in schools and to non-native speakers (see Ferguson "Diglossia").

<sup>7</sup> It is further of note that among those couples in which one parent *is* a native speaker of English (13 families), most communicate in English (11 families). The 13 families are 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 23, 24, 25. The exceptions are families 10 and 12. In family 10, the couple (mother French, father Indian-German, raised in Germany) had begun by speaking English. However, the father was dominant in German, and also wanted to give his wife practice in German, since they were living in German-speaking Switzerland. In family 12 (mother Italian, father Congolese), the couple also chose to speak the community language, in this case French. Families 16 and 24 communicated to each other in both languages of the couple (in each case English and German). In line with Barron-Hauwaert's findings (p. 3), only languages with high world status are used as couple languages in these families (English, French and German).

Dutch, and to add English conforms entirely to De Swaan's global language system theory, in which languages higher up in the hierarchy will be sought and used by speakers of languages which are lower in the hierarchy.

Let us now consider this example family's language choices through the prism of Spolsky's model of language policy. One element of language policy, it will be recalled, is *beliefs or ideologies* about language. In Lina's family, we can say that the parents are, on the one hand, ideologically committed to multilingualism, since they state that multilingualism is a good thing, and that it is advantageous for children to grow up speaking different languages. On the other hand, they also have a clear belief about the different values of languages, Dutch being less valuable than English. With regard to *language management* in Lina's family, this can be seen in the parents' efforts to keep up English as a lingua franca after Lina was born. Their using English as a couple language was intensified then, because after Lina's birth they became strict about not code-switching. Once the father had become more and more proficient in Swiss German they said they had started to use also this language with each other before Lina was born. But after her birth, they consciously tried to employ English for her sake, in order to provide her with as good a language model for English as possible. Thus, in terms of language management they had defined clear strategies to follow, which, arguably, were more concerned with the promotion of English than the promotion of multilingualism.

The second piece of evidence showing that parents favour English is that parents in two families who were not native speakers of English spoke English to their children. In family 26, both parents spoke English to their children in addition to their native languages (Finnish and German), while in family 32, both parents spoke exclusively English to their son. In the first family, the use of English was a result of the family having lived for some time in the United States; this usage could be considered, in fact, the influence of the previous community language. In the other family, however, reasons are not so easily discernible, and in the following I shall try and explain this choice. The father, Ahmed, is from Egypt and is a native speaker of Arabic. The mother, Agnieszka, was born in Poland and moved to Switzerland at the age of seven; her native languages are Polish and Swiss German.

Ahmed had lived in Switzerland for twelve years at the time of the interview; he was conducting postdoctoral research and all of his work was done in English. He informed me that he had taken courses in German but hadn't actually managed to learn the language. Agnieszka

spoke fluent English and no Arabic. Their *lingua franca* was by necessity English, and the couple did not seem to have any motivation to change this. The reasons for the parents speaking English to the child are less obvious. The father explained it by stating that "English is our family language." He had actually planned to introduce Arabic after the child had a "solid base in English." This strategy, however, did not work. After having been socialised into speaking English with his father, the child refused to respond not only in, but even to, Arabic. Although the father's answer only concerned the role of English in the family, I believe that the importance of English in the father's life more generally played a role in his choice to speak English to his son. The interview material shows that English is, for Ahmed, very much connected to education and professional life. He stated: "in the university it was everything, the study, was in English because I studied science." While with regard to his workplace in Switzerland he continued: "it's an international atmosphere and the main language is English so I didn't feel like I have to learn German so that's why I'm still speaking English." The importance of hypercentral English in these spheres adds to its value for the father generally, and is likely to have influenced his decision to speak English to his child.

I come now to the third piece of evidence which reveals that when a language is added, that language will be English. Six families, in which none of the parents spoke English natively, made English an integral part of their children's lives by sending them to an English-medium school or day care. Four families chose a bilingual day care, with the community language plus English (families 11, 20, 26 and 34), while the other two families (6 and 29) added English via their choice of school. In five of these families at least one of the parents had lived for some time in an English-speaking country. In family 6, for example, the mother, Marina, was Italian, the father, Jörg, was German Swiss and they had both studied in the United States. They lived there again in a later period for eighteen months, when they already had two children. They moved from the United States back to Switzerland when the children were aged two and five. When the family returned, the children could both speak English better than either Italian or Swiss German – and still can, despite having lived in Switzerland for eight years at the time of the interview. This is due to the fact that they attend an international, English-medium school. During the interview, I observed the children speaking English to each other, as well as sometimes to their mother – even though she addressed them in Italian. The motivations for the choice of the school and thus the upkeep of English are com-



plex. On the one hand, the reason Marina gave was the quality of education. Her belief is that the Swiss primary school system is "not good." The children start late (age 7), and her daughter was told not to read and write in kindergarten. Moreover, according to Marina, Swiss German is spoken in the schools (author's note: the language of education is supposed to be Standard German from first grade on). Finally, Marina added, the children are forced to choose either an academic path or a trade path at a young age, when they might not be ready for it. At the international school, the opposite pertains in every case. Thus, the explicit ideology stated is that of a good school system (the international one) versus a poor one (the Swiss one). However, in a later part of interview, and not in response to the question of choice of school, we get a glimpse of a reason which is less about the quality of education than about the hope of being able to return to the United States. Marina stated "I mean for me it was a condition to come back to Switzerland to send them in international school and also with the hope to go back to the US one time." The school is thus certainly equally valued because it is English-medium, thus providing the mother with the (theoretical) possibility of mobility.

The question of mobility is an important one with regard to the decision to maintain or favour English. In the corpus, 16 of the families said that they were not sure whether they would be staying in Switzerland or not; 18 families said that they planned to stay, and one family said that they would have to leave. Of the six families whose parents were not native speakers of English and who chose to provide English via school or daycare, only one believed that they would stay in Switzerland. The other five, by contrast, were not sure. Thus, for these families, the value of English education may lie above all in the flexibility it allows the parents.

It should further be recalled that the participants in this study were self-selecting, many of whom (Marina included) had responded to an article in an English-medium magazine. Thus, an inherent predisposition towards favouring English cannot be excluded.

In this section I have provided evidence of the importance of English in multilingual families, and claim that, overall, it is the most valued language. However, it is essential to also seek negative cases in order to check the strength of this claim. Thus, it is also important to ask: Is a language ever added which is not English? Only one negative case could be found. An American family (family 19) living in French-speaking Switzerland had enrolled their children in French-Spanish bilingual daycare. In addition, for a certain period they employed a nanny who spoke



Swahili to the children. Thus two languages, Swahili and Spanish, were added in this family which were not automatically available, and which were not English. However, this family of course already spoke English. Therefore, while this is formally a negative case it is not a counter example.

#### 7. When is a language cut?

The interviews revealed considerable enthusiasm for multilingualism, and several times it was called a "gift." Yet not all parents made use of all the languages available to them. One question which arises in this context is therefore: Which potentially multilingual families feel three languages are too much and intentionally choose a bilingual upbringing for this reason?

The conscious decision to opt for bilingualism rather than trilingualism (or quadrilingualism) occurred in only two of the 35 families. In one of the families (family 33) the mother came from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the father from the Italian-speaking part, and the language of the environment in which they brought up their children was Swiss German. When their first child was born they chose to make Italian the home language and addressed each other and the children in Italian (previously the couple had spoken together in French). Thus, rather than a trilingual upbringing they opted for a bilingual upbringing with one home language. The other family (family 31) cut two of the four languages available. What is striking is that both families in question are a generation older than all the other families interviewed. They both had adult children, whereas the other families had young or school-aged children. The decisions of these two families who chose to cut a language match the mindset of the times, when many educators and doctors were sceptical even of bilingualism, let alone trilingualism. In the interview, the parents in family 33 comment that their decision back then to cut a language may not have been the right one:

Father: *A ce moment-là on a dit, il faut choisir une langue, on peut pas parler deux langues. Peut-être c'était faux.*

[At that moment we said, we have to choose one language, we can't speak two languages. Perhaps it was wrong.]

Mother: *Bien sûr ! Moi je pense.*

[Surely! I think so.]

All the families a generation younger were, by contrast, enthusiastic about raising their children multilingually. Nevertheless, even among the younger families, decisions were made not to use all the languages available. This could be seen among the parents who were raised bi- or trilingually themselves. There were 19 such parents and all of them chose to speak (or at least to try and speak) just one language to their child, hence dropping their other language. The only slight exception to this pattern was the Swedish-Arabic bilingual father in family 2, who generally spoke Swedish to his baby but thought he might try some songs or games in Arabic. Generally, though, the data from this 21st century corpus attest to the enduring popularity of the “one person, one language” principle, first described over a century ago by Ronjat (3, paraphrasing advice given to him by the linguist Grammont).

As to the choice of language, three factors played a role. The first was dominance in one of the languages. Nine parents stated that the reason for choosing one native language over another was that they felt dominant in the one chosen (families 2, 5, 7, 10, 35; both bilingual parents in 18 and 22). The only example in the corpus of interviews of when English is cut from an entire family repertoire is for this reason. In family 10, the Indian-German father raised bilingually with English and German in Germany, chose to speak his dominant language, German, to his son.

A different reason for not speaking one native language actually had the aim of providing children with the possibility of an extra language (families 3, 12, 14, 15, the father in family 30). For example in family 15, the mother was a native speaker of English, the father a native speaker of both English and French (born and raised in England with French parents) and the community language was Swiss German. The father chose to cut English and only speak French to his daughter precisely in order to give her an “extra language,” since English was already available from the mother. (Thus, in this case the bilingual parent cuts out one of their own languages in speaking to the child, but this does mean the language is cut from the family.)

The third reason given was how useful a language was. Usefulness, however, appeared to be conceived of in terms of global usefulness rather than, for example, the ability to communicate with grandparents. Thus, when this reason was given, a supercentral (or hypercentral) language was always chosen over a more localised one (families 9, 12, 32; the mother in family 30). We have already seen how in Lina’s family (family 9), the bilingual Belgian father chose to speak the “more useful” French with his daughter over Dutch. In families 30 and 32, the bilin-

gual mothers chose to speak neither of their native languages to their children but opted for hypercentral English instead. Finally, in family 12, the preference for a supercentral language is combined with the aim of an extra language. Here, the trilingual father grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo with Lingala, French and English. He began by speaking French to his daughter, but since the family lived in Geneva he switched to English in order to give her an extra language. Lingala, the local language of the area in which he grew up, was not considered as an option.

## 8. Conclusion

The overview of languages available and languages used, and the reasons for the choice of languages in multilingual families in Switzerland are in line with De Swaan's conception of a hierarchical global language system. The choices reveal that while multilingualism generally is viewed positively, not all languages are equally valued and promoted. English is overwhelmingly favoured, whether as a couple language, as a foreign language which parents decide to speak to their children, or as the medium for daycare or school. We have seen that the majority of couples who do not communicate in either parent's native language(s) use English as a *lingua franca* (7/9 couples), while among those couples in which one parent is a native speaker of English, most communicate in English (11/13 couples). A particularly salient finding in this study is that among the non-native speakers of English, if an extra language is added to the family repertoire it is *always and only English*. This result must however be considered in the light of the methodology: since the recruitment of families was mainly via an English-language magazine, a favourable disposition to English was likely to be a given.

The interviews suggest that English is valued in this way due to the personal experience of the parents. The parents comprise a group of mainly middle-class, professional, mobile adults, many of whom have studied or worked in English-speaking countries, or currently work in English-speaking institutions. For them, the value of English comes from it being part of their professional lives, and their academic and social background. This global generation appears to have quite naturally appropriated the global language. They place a high value on the ability to communicate globally – and recognise the need for English in order to achieve this. That their children should acquire English seems obvious and takes precedence over, for example, fostering the ability of

their children to communicate with their grandparents in their grandparents' native language. Thus, although these parents have an overall positive view of multilingualism, this does not, in practice, extend to all languages equally. To return to Spolsky's model, the parents' belief in multilingualism is not matched by language management or practices which support all the languages available. The present study has thus revealed a kind of selective multilingualism in favour of the highly-valued, hypercentral English.

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