

# English as a lingua franca in Switzerland : myth or reality?

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Bulletin CILA : organe de la Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée**

Band (Jahr): - **(1993)**

Heft 58: **Schweizer Soziolinguistik - Soziolinguistik der Schweiz**

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978147>

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# English as a lingua franca in Switzerland: Myth or reality?

## 1. Introduction

The final report of the working party ('Arbeitsgruppe') set up by the Department of the Interior in 1986 to assess the legal, historical and linguistic problems involved in revising Article 116 of the Swiss Federal Constitution relating to the status of the national and official languages of the country and to propose a new formulation of the Article was published in August 1989 together with a supplementary volume containing a number of articles by experts on various aspects of the ethnolinguistic situation in Switzerland. In a number of places in the report serious concern is expressed about the growing encroachment of English into everyday life in Switzerland. In the summary version of the report preceding the foreword and the body of the text the authors review possible future scenarios for multilingualism in Switzerland, one of which relates to the influence of English:

Oder aber wir nähern uns einer Situation, in der jeder Schweizer neben seiner Muttersprache die englische Sprache so weit beherrscht, dass ihm (nach großzügigen Maßstäben) eine faktische Zweisprachigkeit attestiert werden kann. Die Zweieinhalbsprachigkeit ergäbe sich dann aus der nur noch mangelhaften Beherrschung einer anderen Landessprache. Oder wird gar Englisch die Umgangssprache unter Schweizern? Nicht auszuschließen, wenn man die zunehmende Anziehungskraft dieser Sprache bedenkt sowie gewisse Beobachtungen, die diesen Zustand bereits zu belegen scheinen, ernst nimmt. (Zustand und Zukunft der viersprachigen Schweiz 1989: xiii)

On pages 5–6 of the report the status of English as a 'Weltsprache' is discussed and the spectre of English as a medium of communication between members of the ethnolinguistic groups within Switzerland is presented as follows:

Für eine mehrsprachige Nation wie die Schweiz wäre aber die Aussicht auf Englisch als jene Sprache, die die Schweizer in Zukunft im Gespräch mit anderen Landsleuten verwenden, alles andere als eine erfreuliche Entwicklung. Sprachliche Uniformisierung unter Verlust der sprachlichen Traditionen des eigenen Landes sollte nicht der Preis sein, den man für den Anschluß an die Fortschrittsgesellschaft zu entrichten hat. (1989: 6)

Both quotations reveal at least a decided feeling of unease, perhaps even fear, of the future prospect of English being used increasingly as a lingua franca within Switzerland. It is even suggested that English could become the language of everyday communication (die Umgangssprache), although we assume that the authors intend this to be understood as the everyday language between speakers of the four national languages. The "gewisse Beobachtung"

gen” referred to in the first quotation to justify this fear are not made specific, but in all probability they relate to work by Dürmüller (1988) and Girod (1987) based on a number of surveys carried out in both the French- and the German-speaking parts of the country on what foreign languages should be taught after the mother tongue in Swiss schools, what attitudes young people have towards English and what language they would prefer to use in conversation with Swiss from other ethnolinguistic groups. They also relate to anecdotal evidence of English being used as a medium of communication in specific social domains, most of which has little or no empirical basis in fact.

In this paper we shall argue that the results of such surveys should not be interpreted to mean that there really is an increasing tendency towards using English as a lingua franca in Switzerland. We do not deny that parents and schoolchildren may believe that English might be a more useful first foreign language to learn at school than a second national language (LN2). But we shall suggest that this is surely not a new development and certainly not one to give rise to the degree of concern expressed in the working groups final report.

Since 1989 no research has been designed and carried out on a large scale using a variety of data gathering and interpreting techniques to indicate a) whether English is in use as a lingua franca in Switzerland and b) if so, in what social domains, for what purposes and to what extent. Such research is long overdue, and we shall indicate possible research techniques which need to be employed to acquire and analyse the necessary data. We shall also present and comment on some data from a small-scale pilot project involving a number of Swiss firms and businesses. However, our basic argument will be that, whatever the results of such a research project may be, the conceptualisation of English as a lingua franca in Switzerland is an important cognitive construction which serves to focus attention on and highlight the problems of multilingualism in this country. It thus forms part of a set of beliefs which are essential to the social construction of ethnolinguistic relationships and is, in this sense, mythical.

In the following section, we shall introduce an important distinction made by Phillipson relating to the use of English in non-native language settings which will serve as a basis for our argument. In section 3 we shall briefly but critically consider some of the survey results, which will lead us to a discussion of the type of project which needs to be carried out. In section 4 we shall present some of the results of the pilot project from which a set of research hypotheses may be derived. Our conclusion in section 5 will return to the question of whether the idea of English as a lingua franca forms part of a set of beliefs about multilingualism in Switzerland. We shall attempt to put this belief into the right kind of research perspective from and within which a full-scale project might be carried out.

## 2. *The use of English in non-native settings*

Phillipson (1992) makes a distinction between ESL (English as a second language) countries and EFL (English as a foreign language) countries. In the former English is in use as an important language in higher education, industry, business, technology and science, etc., e.g. Sweden. The English language is not an official language in such countries, but it is in active and frequent use in all or most of the domains listed above as much as, and often more than, the official language(s) (in our example, Swedish). In the latter English is learnt as a language which may then be used in specific situations involving English native speakers or, from time to time, as a lingua franca in some of the above domains. As in the former case, English is not an official language, but its use is far less frequent than that of the official language(s) and not given public sanction. Clearly the two terms are the endpoints of a scale of non-native English usage rather than a dichotomous categorisation.

Switzerland may be said to lie more towards the EFL than the ESL end of Phillipson's scale,<sup>1</sup> but, if we give credence to the kind of statement discussed in section 1, it may be on the verge of moving in the direction of the ESL end. In effect, however, the official language policy of the educational establishment, which requires that French (in the German-speaking part of the country) and German (in the French-speaking Romandie) are taught before English (and Spanish or Russian), actually prevents Switzerland from moving towards the ESL end at least for the present. It is also partly as a reaction against the constraints of educational policy that the results from the surveys analysed by Dürmüller and Girod may be understood. If the English language is perceived to enjoy so much worldwide prestige, then any attempt to prevent access to it, and thereby to the presumed acquisition of status and power, will be resisted, and the greater the resistance appears to be, the more it will tend to foster feelings of insecurity and threat in official circles.

1 The main thrust of Phillipson's book is to display the subtle mechanisms of what he calls linguistic imperialism in those countries which have adopted English as their official language, or one of their official languages (the majority being former British colonies). Such countries are said to be at the periphery of a sphere of linguistic and cultural influence whose centre is either Britain or the USA. Phillipson's aim is to demonstrate how the education systems of those countries, by working almost exclusively through the medium of English, transfer to the periphery and uphold the cultural and economic values of the centre.

Neither ESL nor EFL countries fit this framework, but encouragement of the spread of English by official bodies such as the British Council is far more likely to occur in ESL than in EFL settings. The magnetic attraction exercised on such bodies by a potential language teaching market in Central and Eastern Europe in which an ESL rather than an EFL situation might be created is ample evidence of this tendency.



If we now focus on the educational aspect of Phillipsons argument and take Switzerland to be an EFL country, it is clear that what we need to consider in evaluating the status of English and that of an LN2 is the general status of foreign language teaching in the education system. Py (1989: 59) points out that

... lorsqu'on dit de la Suisse quelle est bilingue (ou multilingue), on fait référence à la simple coexistence de plusieurs langues nationales sur le territoire de la Confédération sanctionnée notamment par le principe de territorialité (à chaque territoire sa langue) et par le souci de préserver les langues minoritaires (en particulier dans l'administration fédérale).

In other words, in talking of bilingual (or multilingual) Switzerland we are not referring primarily to individual bilinguals (or multilinguals). Lüdi (1992: 46) takes this argument a step further:

... the territoriality principle allows or rather constrains the use of only one of the official languages in each of the three large language regions of the country with the exception of a few overlap areas such as Bienne, Fribourg or the federal capital Berne. Juridically, Switzerland is thus a mosaic made up of largely monolingual regions in which the other national languages enjoy more or less the same status as, say, Spanish or English ... The school system, with obligatory language teaching in a second national language from the 4th/5th grade of primary school on, does make an attempt to correct this picture. But even if every adolescent in Switzerland has acquired a basic knowledge of one of her/his linguistic neighbors, we can hardly speak of functional bilingualism, let alone multilingualism.

Foreign language teaching in the Swiss state education system (or rather in the 25 cantonal systems) acquires a certain gate-keeping function regulating access to the higher levels of education. Partially as a result of the introduction of LN2 training in the 4th or 5th grade, which in many cantons is on the primary school level, FL teaching has become part of the secondary school curriculum, albeit with varying status in the canon of subjects and with little impact on selection for higher education. However, on the high school level its status as a core subject and a means of selection is undisputed and indisputable.

The focus of FL teaching in the state system(s) has definitely shifted to language for everyday social interaction but its success in imparting the necessary skills remains doubtful, especially in settings where it continues to hold a marginal position in the secondary school curriculum. Given the restricted amount of time for FL training it stands to reason that anything beyond the most elementary skills has to be deferred to higher education. A similar state of affairs exists FLT for special purposes, i.e. business, technical language etc. Even schools nominally devoted to the training just such skills have to spend a fair amount of time on training basic language skills.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, fluent use of two or more languages tends to be restricted to those who have com-

2 We will discuss the consequences in section 4.

pleted at least a high school education, usually, however, a university education. Furthermore, we suspect that correctness and socially prestigious forms of discourse, above all literary norms, are valued more than the ability to communicate efficiently in verbal interaction in a wide variety of social domains, especially in higher education.

In addition, the training of future foreign language teachers for secondary schools and high schools takes place in university language departments which are traditionally oriented towards literature rather than linguistics, so that controversial debates in the area of second language acquisition and new developments in language teaching methodology are generally considered inferior to the study of literature or are simply never mentioned, let alone discussed. Traditional values are given priority in the education and training of foreign language teachers, and these tend to be normative and elitist.

On the level of the school itself, the curriculum is set in accordance with norms laid down by the EDK (Standing Conference of Directors of Education). Given the often vaguely formulated and somewhat all-encompassing statement of goals set for foreign language learning in each canton, it is important to consider how many hours per week are devoted to individual languages and the forms of achievement tests carried out. During the two semesters that make up the school year periodic tests must be held from which a final semester mark is evaluated.

A number of consequences result from this form of continuous evaluation. Firstly, teachers are at pains and under pressure to develop language tests that are relatively easy to assess, and since pupils (or their parents) may appeal against final semester marks, these tests are almost always in written form and are based on the supposed content of the previous lessons. Foreign language teaching thus tends to resemble the kind of content teaching that takes place in subjects like Biology, Geography, History, etc. where stress is laid on what the pupil knows (or is supposed to know) rather than what s/he can do. Secondly, because continuous assessment of achievement takes place in all subjects, pupils are involved in complex, hair-splitting, running assessments of the level of achievement they have reached and whether it will be sufficient to take them through to the next grade. They may be able to risk a lower mark in subject A because of a speculated good mark in subject B. Pupils, like their teachers, become less interested in their ability to use a foreign language than in their supposed knowledge in it and about it.

This brief assessment of the status of FL teaching in the state school system is relevant to English just as much as to French (in German-speaking Switzerland) or to German (in the Romandie). Hence, not only does the system produce relatively little individual functional bilingualism, but that which it does produce is generally to be found at the higher levels of the educational ladder

and, as a consequence, in the equivalent levels of industry, business, science, the diplomatic service and the federal administration. In addition, those whose foreign language learning does not reach such levels will hardly be able to use English fluently as the language of everyday communication.

In the following section we will briefly consider some of the results of the surveys of attitudes towards English and the teaching of English in Switzerland presented by Dürmüller and Girod. Our assessment of EFL teaching in Switzerland in accordance with Phillipsons cline between ESL and EFL countries should be borne in mind, since we will argue that far too much has been made of this research to the extent that it has helped to provide a breeding ground for the type of fears expressed in the working party's final report.

### *3. English the invader*

In his contribution to the supplementary volume of the report Dürmüller examines the results of a number of surveys, viz. the pedagogical examination of army recruits in 1985, a survey carried out by the ISOPUBLIC institute among German- and French-speaking Swiss in 1986, a 1984 survey carried by the weekly French-speaking magazine *L'Hebdo* among French-speaking Swiss, a survey carried out in 1984 in Berne, Fribourg and Bienne and a survey carried out in 1982/83 among Bernese high school pupils, although no further details are given in the latter two cases on who carried out the research or the size of the sample population. The discussion aims at providing some form of empirical quantitative support for the argument that the pervasive influence of English in a large number of social domains endangers the balance between the languages native to Switzerland. English, in other words, is seen as the linguistic invader against whom forms of defence must be organised. Dürmüller admits that legal means to stem the tide of English influence such as those adopted in France would hardly find support in Switzerland, and that more local policies should be developed. On the other hand, he supports the view that the influx of borrowed lexical items (including whole phrases) from English enables more efficient communication to take place across linguistic boundaries. He even states the following:

Tatsächlich ist es gerade in Bereichen, in denen der englische Fachjargon dominiert, dass sich Schweizer aus verschiedenen Sprachregionen, gelegentlich auch, wenn sie alle aus derselben Sprachregion stammen, auf Englisch unterhalten: Medizin, Physik, Management, Business Administration, Product Planning, Computer Programming, Film Distribution, Banking, Trading, Defence Strategies, etc. etc. (1989: 3)

Whereas he provides very detailed statistical material and graphics, neither he, nor, to our knowledge, any other researcher, provides direct evidence of such statements, even though it is interesting to note the wide range of domains in

which such evidence could be sought. If Swiss from different language areas, or even those from the same area, really do communicate with one another in these fields using English as a lingua franca, it is crucial to offer both quantitative and qualitative data and to submit these to a close and detailed analysis. There is in any case a significant difference between introducing English loanwords into Swiss German, French and Italian, and actually using English as a medium of communication. There is also a considerable difference between these two phenomena and answers given to questions of a very general nature such as those asked in the surveys listed above.

The evidence discussed in the Materialienband of the EDI-Report considers the answers given by the recruits, all young males, to the following questions:

- 1) If you had the choice, which foreign language would you declare as the obligatory first foreign language at school?
- 2) Do you want more English teaching at school?
- 3) Which foreign languages seem to you to be particularly important in your present or your future profession?
- 4a) In which language would you prefer to talk with a person who does not know French? (put to French speakers with the choice of either English, German or Italian and on the assumption that the addressee is German-speaking or Italian-speaking)
- 4b) In which language would you prefer to talk with a person who does not know German? (put to German speakers with the choice of either English, French or Italian and on the assumption that the addressee is French-speaking or Italian-speaking)
- 4c) In which language would you prefer to talk with a person who does not know Italian? (put to Italian speakers with the choice of either English, French or German and on the assumption that the addressee is French-speaking or German-speaking)
- 5) What do you think of the suggestion that English should be declared an official language in Switzerland?

Briggs (1986) is very critical of the kinds of questions asked in large-scale surveys of this kind. Firstly, the way in which the question is asked can frequently predetermine or provoke the type of answer given. Secondly, the choice of possible answers is limited by the person devising the questionnaire. Thirdly, subjects are not given an opportunity to explain why they answer the way they do. Fourthly and very significantly, subjects are not just answering questions, but are also developing explanations for the significance of the choice of questions asked. They may often interpret the questioners reasons such that they answer in the way they believe they are expected to answer, or, vice versa, may deliberately give answers that subvert the perceived intention behind the questions.



Since English figures in all these questions, the recruit may easily be led to think that deriving opinions on the status of English is the fundamental issue. If that is the case, it is a small step to imagining the reasons for this. Perhaps the questioners feel that more English should be provided at school. Perhaps there really is a move afoot to make English an official language in Switzerland. Perhaps the questioners feel that young people should know enough English to be able to talk to their compatriots, i.e. that they are in favour of such a tactic.

Let us now look at how the questions are put. The first question appears to ignore the fact that French or German is already the obligatory first foreign language at school, so that those giving these two languages as an answer are reaffirming the status quo despite the provocative invitation to subvert it by choosing English. In any case, English is the only possible answer if one wanted to make a change; Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, etc., are not mentioned as options. The second question is essentially uninterpretable since, if a recruit has had only two hours of English a week over a period of two years, the desire for more teaching in English may be to have four hours a week. In addition, this says nothing about the desired amount of teaching in the second national language. A 69.1%–77.1% majority in favour of more English teaching therefore means very little indeed.

The third question relies largely on the speculative assessments of the recruits as to which languages they might need in their jobs. Those who have already been employed as apprentices before beginning their basic training in the army will either not have been exposed to the need for FL learning or are in an EL training programme as part of their vocational training. Similarly, those who have their professional lives ahead of them may have little idea of what they will be doing later, of whether foreign languages will be required and which languages these will be. In either case the answers given are in all probability speculative in the extreme, and the recruits cannot be blamed for thinking that perhaps the most adequate answer, the one that the questioners wanted, would be English.

Answers to the fourth question concerning the supposed preferred language in which to communicate with interlocutors who have no knowledge of the recruits own mother tongue can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Given the choice of the other languages native to Switzerland and English (again rather than, say, Spanish, Russian, etc.), a preference for English may simply be a rejection, on whatever grounds, of the other languages. It may reflect a desire to learn English rather than real knowledge that can be used in cross-cultural verbal interaction. It may reflect a fundamental lack of confidence in the ability to use either of the LN2s and a somewhat naive belief in the supposed simplicity of English. It certainly does not indicate that those an-



swering the question actually would use English and it cannot be used as evidence that English is used as a lingua franca in this way.

The fifth question is provocative in the extreme since it implies that a genuine suggestion has been made that English should be made the fourth official language in Switzerland. We do not doubt that unofficial statements to this effect may have been made, but, to our knowledge at least, no official statement of this kind has ever been made. Indeed, we doubt whether the question could ever find official sanction (cf. e.g. EDK 1987 and Andres 1993). Once again, it is extremely difficult to place any reliable interpretation on the results to this question, least of all that it indicates an imminent acceptance on the part of a majority of young Swiss nationals of raising English to the status of official language in Switzerland.

All in all, then, we dispute the validity of the kinds of interpretation made on the basis of such quantitative data. Even if it were possible to argue that the survey covers a representative sample of young Swiss nationals from all the native ethnolinguistic groups, the quality of the data gathered is flawed in the extreme as a consequence of the kinds of question asked. In the following section we shall consider where there appears to be a perceived need for a knowledge of English. We shall outline a pilot project carried out with representatives from the world of business and finance which gives a certain amount of insight into the types of question that could more profitably be asked and the social domain in which a large-scale survey might be carried out to reveal results that lend themselves to far subtler analyses than those we have reviewed in this section.

#### *4. English in the world of business and finance*

One domain in which English may be seen to play an important role in Switzerland is that of business and finance, and it is within this domain that there are clear signs of English functioning as a lingua franca both within Switzerland and between Switzerland and other countries. In this section we shall focus on the needs of Swiss businesses for varying degrees of competence in English and some of the ways in which these needs are addressed at present. We shall discuss the question of motivation for learning English both in general terms and within the framework of companies strategies for reducing the deficits in the English language competence of their employees.

The majority of responses to the question of motivation for learning English reveal a fairly predictable pattern. First, respondents tend to believe that it will give them better chances in the job market and that they will have better career chances. Second, they express the conviction that English is important as

an international lingua franca both in international business and in the world of international politics and diplomacy. This latter point is a very general one and is far less central to our concerns than the former type of response. Lambert (1967) suggests that there are two basic types of motivation for foreign language learning, which he labels integrative and instrumental. In the context of a language being used as a lingua franca, in our case English, it is far more likely that instrumental motivation will dominate, since that language will be assessed as a highly useful, if not indispensable, tool for supra-regional communication. The type of motivation for learning a non-lingua franca or the language of a cultural minority group, on the other hand, is more likely to be integrative, and we might expect it to occur far less commonly. Obviously, it is not easy to make clear distinctions between Lambert's two types of motivation. In fact, it is more usual to find varying degrees of both types in any language learning scenario. When learners are asked to verbalise their own individual motivations, even in the case of learning a lingua franca like English, they may express a strong desire to assimilate to the culture of the native language community. At the level of university studies in a foreign language, integrative motivation is probably dominant. Dürmüller (1988: 6) has shown, however, that in the context of Swiss high schools, instrumental motivation is stronger.

We shall concentrate here on the question of instrumental motivation, which, when looked at more closely, reveals far subtler differentiations than might be at first be assumed. There is a noticeable difference, for example, between learning a foreign language in order to be able to function better in one's job and learning that language to be able to communicate with native speakers while on holiday. The language needs are likely to be far more specific and much more detailed in the former situation than the latter. In addition, the types of discourse in which the learner may be expected to engage are likely to be far narrower, more clearly structured and thus more predictable in the former than in the latter situation. Before returning to the question of instrumental motivation, we shall first sketch out the present situation within Switzerland with respect to the status of English from both a national and an international point of view.

One indication of the importance of English for business communication within Switzerland might be derived from the frequency with which it is used as a lingua franca within and among Swiss companies and their branches in the different ethnolinguistic regions of the country. However, in the absence of reliable research findings claims for the lingua franca status of English in Switzerland are almost impossible to substantiate. We argue that one important step towards rectifying this lack of information would be to carry out as exhaustive a survey as possible among as wide a range of companies as possible. With

the right kinds of questions, researchers could derive a data base on which representative quantitative analyses could be carried out. These in turn would help to generate sets of hypotheses to be tested by qualitative observational methods and to locate those areas which would warrant closer study.

At present, the evidence, such as it is, is largely anecdotal. One example with which we are familiar concerns the analysis of telex texts and business letters received and sent out by the head office of a major Swiss bank. On the basis of these texts, which contained communication in English between Lugano and various locations in the Romandie and Zurich, a reading comprehension course was developed for English courses held by the bank in question. However, using this data base as evidence of the lingua franca status of English within the world of banking in Switzerland would be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, there was an extremely low incidence of such letters in comparison with the total sample (3 out of 200 texts). Secondly, the corpus was gathered with the specific aim of providing examples of the type of text which prospective students of English in in-service training at the bank might need to deal with and not for the purpose of projecting a large-scale survey.

A second example concerns an internationally active manufacturing and servicing company with branches in all the major Swiss cities, including branches in Lugano, Lausanne, Geneva, at which the headquarters and work organisation are located, and Zurich, at which the facilities for storing spare parts are situated. For the national communications in which this firm are involved, there are two models. Between Zurich and the Romandie (including the Geneva headquarters) bilinguals are employed. Between the Romandie and Zurich there are fewer bilinguals; one out of five district technical managers speaks no German at all. Between the Lugano branch and the Lucerne branch, on the other hand, communication takes place in German. Service technicians in the Ticino usually speak German and are actively encouraged to take evening classes in that language. German-speaking technicians, on the other hand, are only advised to take Italian lessons. In this case there is absolutely no evidence of English functioning as a lingua franca, in spite of the fact that the official company language is English and that manuals are produced mainly in that language.

The two examples appear to indicate that evidence in favour of English being in use as a lingua franca in the domain of business and finance is rather slender and at present consists of hearsay. Nevertheless, in both cases the companies concerned refer to a need for English which is not adequately satisfied in the state school system. For example, a manager in charge of the bank section for which the course referred to above was being prepared stated repeatedly that, as far as the bank was concerned (and in his opinion this might be extended to other areas of business and finance) LN2 training should be replaced in

the school system by adequate training in English. Once again, the evidence is anecdotal, but it does focus on a largely utilitarian attitude towards language competence set within the framework of the costs incurred by internationally active firms who need to train their employees to deal with perceived language needs and requirements.

This latter point also highlights a degree of uncertainty and lack of linguistic orientation in the firms themselves, who, along with the various business schools in Switzerland (the KV, DMS and HWV), recognise a deficit which they identify, rightly or wrongly, as a consequence of official language policy within the Swiss educational system. In a response to the proposed revision of Article 116 of the Federal Constitution, Keiser, the head of the languages department at the HWV in Lucerne, makes the following comment:

Niemand möchte den neuen Sprachartikel in Frage stellen ... Im sprachpolitischen Konzept für die bundesrätliche Botschaft vermißt man aber eine Europa- und Weltperspektive. Da wird vom englischen Vormarsch und von der Bedrohung der Schweiz durch das Englische geschrieben, von einer dringend notwendigen Integration ist kaum die Rede. (1993: 27)

Keiser's bibliography confirms a deficit in foreign language teaching policies which was also borne out by a symposium held at the Haus der Universität in Berne in 1990. The general objective of the symposium was to determine the language needs of Swiss companies and to discuss ways of addressing those needs. Invitations were sent to personnel managers and/or directors in charge of in-company language training in firms chosen on the basis of the following three criteria:

- 1) that there was likely to be a need for such programmes either on the basis of the firm's sizeable international involvement or its branch network throughout the language regions in Switzerland
- 2) that there was a sufficient number of employees to warrant some form of language training supervised or provided by the company
- 3) that the firms had a sufficiently large turnover to provide the financial resources required to support such programmes.<sup>3</sup>

In order to organise a programme which would be relevant to the participants, we sent out an advance questionnaire, which aimed to provide data on the following points:

- on the languages and language skills (reading, writing, conversation, etc.) needed by the companies for which employees and at which level of proficiency

3 During the run-up to the symposium the scope of the participants widened, largely by word of mouth, to include representatives from language schools in Switzerland and representatives from various examination boards. In the event this segment comprised about a third of the total number of participants.



- where language deficits were most noticeable and how they were already being addressed (e.g., through external/internal courses, by means of stays in another language region, through language courses provided outside Switzerland, through financial contributions and incentives offered to the employees, etc.)
- the examinations used to assess language competence, in particular with reference to career assessment

Since there were only 20 representatives from various companies the data provided cannot be considered as in any way representative, but they do highlight some significant trends which we shall discuss below. We shall concentrate on those language needs noted by the respondents, the ways in which these needs are addressed at different levels within the company hierarchy and the various approaches taken with respect to the assessment of language needs and certificates of language competence.

In terms of language needs the results display a clear predominance of English, and they were reiterated by the symposium participants in plenary discussions. During those discussions the main languages in use were German and English despite a large proportion of participants from the Romandie. In addition, although the questionnaire simply asked for language needs in general and did not explicitly mention language training in an LN2, reference was only made, both in the questionnaire responses and in the plenary discussions, to English, and to a far lesser degree Spanish. This was particularly noticeable in the case companies with their main activity in Switzerland and with branches all over the country, e.g. the major banks and insurance companies and, to a lesser extent, some manufacturing companies. The only exception, predictably, were federal agencies, whose language needs included LN2 and for non-German speakers Swiss German dialect courses.

The focus of the symposium thus shifted somewhat swiftly to a consideration of the role of English. A recurrent argument was that too little English was offered in the school system too late, especially for those leaving school after the obligatory nine years, which is one point to which Keiser (1993: 29) also refers.

The second point that we wish to stress here is that companies note that their greatest difficulty is in finding the appropriate ways and means to address this deficit in English. At different levels of a company's personnel hierarchy the problems are also different, and the most difficult problems are presented at the level of the workforce where the greatest deficits are in evidence. The level of the workforce is characterised by two features. On the one hand, it is that level at which school is likely to have provided either rather rudimentary training in English or none at all. At the same time, however, the types of demand for individual competence in English are likely to be restricted to, for



example, conversational skills (with little or no call for an ability to read and write) for telephonists, writing skills for secretaries and typists, reading skills for more specialised employees (e.g. in a department dealing with customers complaints or in the case of technicians working with advanced technology where manuals and specialist literature are predominantly written in English). The problems are aggravated by the fact that in each restricted domain demands for foreign language competence (particularly in English) can be very high at times. Telephonists are often confronted with highly colloquial speech styles; secretaries have to conform to the highly structured norms of this form of written discourse; and technicians frequently have to deal with manuals containing highly condensed, complex information. Difficulties confronted by white-collar management are similar, but their ability to deal with them is generally greater, since their exposure to English is likely to have been longer and more intensive.

It is in these areas that strategies developed to address these linguistic needs are rather unfocused. The questionnaire responses and the plenary and group discussions reveal that the following three strategies are most frequently used:

1) Workers are invited to attend English-language evening classes, which are financed in part by the companies. In some cases employees receive a full reimbursement of the costs incurred if they provide evidence of attendance. The principal problem with this strategy is that the language needs are often so specialised (see our discussion above) that they cannot be met through general evening classes in English. A few companies organise English for special purposes courses aimed at meeting specialised needs, but, in doing so, they tend to neglect more general competence in the language. The overall result of this strategy is often disenchantment on the part of the participants since they perceive themselves to be learning English with the sole purpose of more efficient functioning within the company.

2) Similar strategies as those in 1. are applied to the level of middle management, although specially designed courses for this group of learners are often regarded as too costly as they are aimed at too few trainees. In addition, many larger companies encourage management level employees to take a language course abroad on condition that, in order for their expenses to be (partially) reimbursed, they provide some kind of certificate of proficiency in English. This point is highly significant for any sociolinguistic investigation into the role of English in Switzerland since personnel managers are usually not adequately informed about the types of qualification available, i.e. about the content of the courses leading up to the certificate, the type of English competence being examined and the level of attainment acquired. Those qualifications which are still most frequently demanded are the Cambridge First Certificate (FCE), the new Certificate for Advanced English (CAE) and, as

proof of attainment at a very high level, the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE). Of these three the CPE was originally designed and still thought of by the examining body, the University of Cambridge, as evidence of a non-native speakers ability to follow courses at a university level in an English-speaking country. Only the CAE has a business option.

3) At the level of management, since the central problem is one of time, the usual strategy adopted is one-to-one intensive courses, often in an English-speaking country. We shall argue that it is only in this context that the needs of both the individual and the company can be adequately addressed.

Returning to the question of motivation, we can safely assume that the main type of motivation for language learning in a business context, particularly the learning of English, is instrumental. In providing ways and means to meet their needs, however, companies are not really interested in setting up or encouraging what one of the participants described as 'nette, das Soziale sicher fördernde Sprachkurslein'. It is primarily their needs which are being addressed and not those of the individual learner. In applying any of the strategies outlined above (or any further strategies that might be suggested), companies aim to improve the internal functioning of their business. Employees are also motivated by these considerations, and this is particularly so in times of economic recession. But they feel cheated if, after all their not inconsiderable efforts, they are unable to order a meal or find out basic information. In other words the instrumental needs of the individual employee are not always in harmony with those of the company.

A move towards more integrative motivation may achieve better results, but in the case of English in Switzerland, and in particular within the domain of business and finance, the preliminary results of our pilot investigation do not reveal any clear evidence of a move in this direction, nor do the results support wild claims concerning the increasing function of English as a lingua franca in Switzerland. In the final section, therefore, we shall return to the reasons for why these claims continue to be made, arguing as we did in section 1. that they are mythical in the sense that they do not need to be substantiated. They merely need to be believed to achieve their aim. We shall also argue that a large-scale survey of the role and function of English in Switzerland is more than ever necessary and shall outline a few suggestions in this direction.

### *5. The English as a lingua franca myth*

In a country like Switzerland, which, in accordance with Phillipsons EFL-ESL cline, can be classified as an EFL country, there may indeed be situations in which English functions as a medium of communication. These may range

from casual communication between members of different ethnolinguistic communities who share a knowledge of English but feel insecure in their knowledge of each others language, to complex discussions between academics at official symposia and congresses or intra- and inter-company business meetings at the high management level.

However, in the case of casual conversation we need to ask whether the interlocutors command of English is sufficient to allow more than a superficial form of phatic communion. Sociolinguists now know enough about various forms of oral discourse and conversation analysis to know how complex and subtle oral communication is and the very high degree of competence in the language of interaction which is needed to sustain it. Use of English as a lingua franca at the level of academic discussion is by no means restricted to Switzerland, and part of the reason for resorting to English is undoubtedly the large body of literature in a wide range of disciplines, particularly in the natural sciences, technology and medicine, which is published in that language. As the results of our pilot investigation reveal, high level management discussion between members of the various ethnolinguistic groups in Switzerland would appear to be held more in French or German (probably rarely in Italian) than in English.

However, precisely because the status of English is restricted to EFL by virtue of language policies in operation throughout the federal and cantonal administrations as well as the education system, the use of English as a lingua franca will be restricted to a few very specific instances. We do not deny that English enjoys enormous popularity and that it is heard (perhaps also from time to time even spoken) by young people within the domain of popular culture and the media. Neither do we deny the demand for English as an international means of communication. But such interest in the language and the strong demand to have it taught more frequently and earlier within the school system does not indicate that it is at present shifting to the status of lingua franca in certain social domains in Switzerland. Nor are we justified in presenting this scenario as a threat. Why, then, are statements to this effect uttered so often?

The first point is that they are made when problems of an inter-ethnic nature become acute in Switzerland and that they are voiced most frequently in the print media and on television and radio. From time to time one may even encounter statements to this effect made in official federal documents relating to language politics in Switzerland (cf. the comments quoted in section 1. from the official report of the working group) and in both houses of the federal parliament. Such instances can be documented and analysed with respect to the argumentative context in which they occur (cf., e.g., Watts 1988). The second point is that they are never made by linguists or sociolinguists, simply because little or no empirical evidence is provided which would validate them.

We suggest that it is extremely useful to have a non-native language like English enjoying such a high degree of popularity in order to focus more sharply on the perceived need to construct models of Swiss identity across ethnolinguistic boundaries. If it is felt that common aims, common needs, common policies, etc. should form the basis of politico-cultural decision-making in Switzerland and that these are encumbered by a lack of cooperation and lack of understanding between the ethnolinguistic regions, then it is necessary to depict a scenario in which those common aims, needs and policies can be shown to be lost. The spectre of English in use as a lingua franca between the ethnolinguistic groups or even as the preferred language of communication in certain social domains among members of the same ethnolinguistic group serves this purpose rather well. This is particularly the case in the Romandie where the old rivalry between French and English (cf. Flaitz 1988) can be played upon to great effect.

We do not believe that there is anything wrong with this kind of argumentation as long as it achieves its desired effect; after all, the English language will certainly not suffer from it in any way. However, there is a danger that the myth is taken to be a fact and that the necessary focus on what measures should be taken and what research should be undertaken to improve understanding between the ethnolinguistic groups is missed. In the interests not only of fairness but also of a greater degree of factuality, we consider it necessary, indeed long overdue, to investigate the status of English within Switzerland on a large scale. Our final comments in this paper will be devoted to this desideratum. The rather sketchy and impressionistic results arising from the pilot questionnaire sent out to a range of various Swiss companies and the points made in plenary and group discussions at the symposium indicate certain trends in language needs in general and those in English in particular. It would seem that companies have a clear, instrumental motivation for wishing to improve their employees competence in English. It would also seem that the employees themselves are driven by instrumental motivation in learning English rather than by integrative motivation, although their wishes appear to diverge from those of their personnel managers. We suggest that a large-scale survey of Swiss companies should be carried out and that the questions should aim to derive information on the overall language needs of those companies and their employees at a number of different levels. The questions should not be restricted to needs for English. We have shown that needs for an LN2 may be just as pressing. However, they should also aim to discover when, how, amongst whom, in which situations, why, etc., English is used in the companies approached and whether there are any situations in which it is used as a medium of communication among Swiss employees from different language regions.



The results of such a survey should then provide reliable information on those more specific situations in which data of a more detailed kind could be gathered and analysed. We are therefore suggesting that micro-level ethnographic analysis should be carried out to show what actually happens when English is used as a lingua franca. Ideally, the survey should not be restricted to companies but should be extended to cover academic institutions as well.

In addition, a corpus of data from the media, from popular culture and from the world of advertising would help to complement the large-scale survey of firms and academic institutions and would provide information on where further investigation into the use of English in Switzerland needs to be carried out. It is, for instance, extremely difficult to prove or disprove claims to the effect that young people from the Romandie and the German-speaking part of the country frequently talk to one another using English. The points made at the beginning of this section indicate that this form of lingua franca usage is likely to be very restricted, but until we know where to look in more detail and how to set about gathering interaction-focused material, statements to this effect made in the media, which convey the impression that they are reporting facts, will continue to occur. In conclusion, it is perhaps necessary to reiterate our conviction that it does very little harm to the English language to erect it as a bogeyman in the language debate being carried out in Switzerland. Using English in this way, however, can be taken a little too far, and the time has come for some empirical sociolinguistic evidence.

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