

Communication beyond linguistic borders : English as catalyst

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English as catalyst

Why not just speak English? In a multilingual entity like Switzerland this is a legitimate question to pose, especially given the inexorable rise of the English language beyond and within our borders.

Since the end of the Second World War English has been spreading at an ever-increasing rate around the world. In Switzerland, too, it has evolved from a little-known language to the most popular foreign tongue, and

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its prominent role can no longer be ignored. In the business, technology, entertainment and leisure sectors English now enjoys such a strong presence that fears are beginning to be voiced about the risk to Switzerland's "authentic" culture, and in particular Switzerland's traditional culture of four languages.

Unstoppable advance of English

Spoken and written English is used more and more often in everyday business life. Four or five times as many English-language books are published in Switzerland as Italian-language books, and as many books are read in English as in a second national language. The advertising industry relies heavily on English words and phrases: 30 percent of all advertisements in magazines use English, usually in a prominent position. English is now even being used to advertise Swiss products in Switzerland.

Highly popular with the younger generation

English is greatly valued by the youth of Switzerland, who regard a knowledge of the language as important to their careers. This is why schoolchildren are much more enthusiastic about learning

English than a second national language. They are also exposed to English outside school hours. While Switzerland boasts radio and TV programmes in German, French and Italian and printed media in all national languages, they are rarely used to intensify knowledge of the country's national languages or read and watched willingly outside school hours. English, on the other hand, is eagerly consumed and readily available in the form of non-Swiss radio stations, satellite TV channels, press publications, and original-language cinema films.

The spread of English in Switzerland is the result of cultural assimilation in the broadest sense. We are in the process of absorbing a culture whose language is not only English but above all American-English: a process, let it be

noted, that is happening throughout Western Europe.

English: the ideal language of communication

So why not make English the language of communication in Switzerland? The fact is that our knowledge of other national languages is far from ideal, so English has the best chance of serving as a universal language of communication. In its favour is the fact that it is not one of Switzerland's national languages and is therefore a neutral foreign language for everyone. The use of English in Switzerland does not favour any particular linguistic group and creates none of the inequalities or imbalances which result from the constitutional obligation to educate children in a second national language.

Not just four but many

With a "lingua franca" accepted by all members of the population, Switzerland would also be well equipped to tackle changing reality. The world is changing and Switzerland with it. Switzerland is no longer just a country where four languages are spoken. It now houses within its borders linguistic groups that are significantly larger in membership than the Romansh community. If one takes Romansh as a yardstick for distinct linguistic communities, then Switzerland has ten languages, not four. So a common language is essential to ensure communication among these diverse groups.

Two key conditions must be met to raise English to the status of a universal language of communication: a willingness on the part of the general populace to accept English as an obligatory second language, and the availability of good English skills. ■



(Illustration: Günther Ursch)

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