

Glocalization à la Suisse

By Ingrid Piller | May 20, 2011 | Language & globalization

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When I lived in Basel, a city in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, I often found myself performing an involuntary field experiment in language attitudes. As likely to speak English as German in public, I was regularly confronted with strangers' different reactions to an English-speaking person and a German-speaking person. My English-speaking me only had positive experiences: strangers who overheard me speak English with my child, for instance, would often accost me and ask, in English, where I was from. As I had no desire to share the story of my life on such an occasion, I would respond "from Australia." My interlocutors would then usually tell me, in sometimes quite effortful English, what a wonderful country Australia was; they would ask me how I liked Basel, and they would give me tips on how to make my time in Switzerland more enjoyable.

By contrast, my German-speaking me never had such experiences. No one who overheard me speak German ever asked me where I was from. As a "German German" speaker, I was rarely accosted by strangers but if it

happened, I didn't get the friendly, welcoming reception my English me got but semi-hostile questions such as whether I was a day commuter or was planning to stay in Switzerland for longer.

The fact that the relationship between Swiss German and German German is a fraught one received new evidence last weekend when the citizens of Basel and Zurich accepted [a referendum that makes the use of Swiss German mandatory in preschool](#). Interestingly, the dialect vs. standard referendum doesn't seem to have been reported at all in the English-speaking media – in contrast to the one about assisted suicide, which took place at the same time, and which received significant English-language coverage.

There is a lot of research evidence to support early mother tongue education. So, the success of the referendum to mandate Swiss German in the cantons of Basel and Zurich seems like a progressive educational decision. Except that it isn't because, as so often, language debates are made to stand for something entirely different. On closer inspection, this apparent pro-mother tongue decision turns out to be neither "mother tongue" nor "pro." [In Basel, for instance, 54% of preschoolers do not have Swiss German as their mother tongue](#) but a range of migrant languages, including Standard German. Indeed, the educational disadvantage of migrant children lacking

sufficient competence in the language of formal education, which is Standard German, is well documented (Moser & Werlen, 2010).

Furthermore, the decision is not one that is “for” Swiss German but one that is “against” Standard German as is obvious from the fact that the very same Zurichers that now mandate Swiss German in preschool [not so long ago also mandated the early introduction of English in elementary school](#). And at the same time that public preschools are made to use Swiss German, private preschools where the medium of instruction is English are booming.

The Swiss media reports I've looked at mostly feature long lists of readers' comments where the merits of mother tongue education, the relationship between Swiss German and Standard German, and the relationship between language, culture and identity are hotly debated. However, they largely miss the point that this is not about language but about migration and globalization. Zurichers, as so many others, are perfectly comfortable with the kind of globalization that involves financial, commercial, cultural and media flows and simultaneously highly uncomfortable with the kind of globalization that involves actual people flows. The former finds expression in the scramble for English and the latter in the retreat into the local language.

I just wonder why it is so hard to see that this approach doesn't make migrants disappear? It just serves to alienate and exclude them.



Moser, Urs & Iwar Werlen (2010). Entwicklung der Sprachkompetenzen in der Erst- und Zweitsprache von Migrantenkindern *Do you speak Swiss? Verlag Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, 105-107

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