

Habilitation Project: Evaluative Reactions to Spanish Speakers in French-Speaking Switzerland

Overview

I have been living in Switzerland since June 2016. For the first couple of months, I would have a quick glance at *20 minutes*, a freesheet daily, as part of my daily commute by train. Two million Swiss residents also partake in this daily routine (Recherches et études des médias publicitaires, 2016). In spite of the fact that, by now, I rarely have a look at it, I concede that it gave me a first glance at the country's popular views on many subjects. Indeed, not only was I able to read how the popular media addressed topics, but given that the online version of the daily allows readers to leave comments on some of the articles, I was also able to have a peek at people's stances on certain topics. Back then, I remember that two issues captured my attention more than any other: the importance afforded by authorities to integrate immigrants and minoritized groups into the Swiss society by means of linguistic assimilation to German, French or (less so) Italian, and the efforts deployed by these authorities to sell the country's big cities as vibrant cosmopolitan urban agglomerations.

On the first issue, I was particularly attracted to a news article on immigration policy announcing that local authorities considered it opportune to toughen the criteria for becoming a Swiss citizen (*20 minutes*, 17 June 2016). The piece reported that the plan was that by 2018, in addition to having an empty criminal record and proving a 10-year residency in Switzerland, candidates to citizenship would have to show that they had successfully integrated themselves into Swiss society. According to the media, the main criteria to prove the latter would be to show at least B1 proficiency level in any of the national languages. I remember that, on that day, as soon as I made it into my office, I went online to have a look at people's reactions to the piece. Besides complaining on the lengthy implementation process of the new policy, most of all 131 comments revolved around language. Among these, some people thought that a B1 proficiency level was not enough to communicate successfully in everyday situations. Other people were outraged upon learning that immigrants could already obtain Swiss citizenship without being tested on knowledge of a national language. One particular person gave a concrete example of a neighboring family in which all members were naturalized but only the father spoke a national language, namely French. This person was outraged by the fact that the entire family had been granted Swiss citizenship even though neither the mother nor the two children, ages 2 and 3, were able to hold a conversation with him.

Another news piece that captured my attention was about the start of the 2016-2017 school year (*20 minutes*, 17 August 2016). The piece reported that, for the Canton of Vaud's Department of Education, it was of utmost importance to integrate immigrants by means of linguistic assimilation to French, particularly when the immigrants did not come from "peaceful countries, such as European countries" but rather came from "violent countries". I was eager to see people's reactions to this piece, so I literally ran from the train station to my office. Unfortunately, the piece was not open for comments.

Yet another news piece that captured my attention was about the interplay between immigration and language loss in the Canton of Ticino (*20 minutes*, 24 August 2016).

It mentioned that, in the eyes of the Canton's authorities, the decline in the use of Italian was attributable to an increasing number of immigrants. More specifically, it reported that these authorities considered the languages that immigrants bring with them as a danger to the maintenance of Italian among locals. Once again, I was disappointed when I realized that this piece was not open for comments.

A piece reporting the results of a survey that was conducted among "expatriates" in order to determine the pros and cons of living in Switzerland (*20 minutes*, 29 August 2016) made me realize that immigrants residing in the country probably felt the (linguistic) hostility directed at them. With regard to the cons, the perceived inhospitality of Swiss nationals ranked first. Indeed, immigrants reported encountering insurmountable social obstacles as they felt unwelcomed and isolated by Swiss nationals. Given the controversial topic, this piece got 387 comments. Although in some cases locals admitted being cold with foreigners and deserving this evaluation, the vast majority of participants explained that immigrants would feel more welcomed only if they care to learn a national language; and that, if they did not, they should consider leaving the country.

Given the tone of the news and comments on the interplay between immigration and language, I was somewhat confused by a piece mentioning that, during the summer of 2016, the city of Geneva spent about 25,000 Swiss Francs over a weekend hosting international bloggers in order to have them write on the city's diversity in terms of culture, food, and nature (*20 minutes*, 22 August 2016). The city's tourism office seemed particularly pleased by one Spanish blogger's appreciation of the city as a cosmopolitan center. A boxed text reported that Lausanne has a similar program, their budget being of 100,000 Swiss Francs a year. The 236 comments the piece generated ramped up my confusion. Indeed, many comments were written by proud Genevois delighted by the fact that their city's diversity helped in getting rid of the perception of Switzerland as a country populated by "yokels". One particular participant mentioned that the cities of Geneva, Zurich, Basel, Bern, and Lausanne, multicultural in nature, were more representative of today's Switzerland than cities that look like the prototypical Heidi's village.

These news pieces concerned me then and still do today. I think they are indicative of a contradiction specific to occidental countries brilliantly described in Piller (2016) with reference to linguistic diversity in Anglophone nations such as Australia, Canada, and England. To put it simply, the author notes that, in these countries, linguistic heterogeneity tends to be seen as an attractive feature when it serves to depict their cities as modern worldly centers, but as a burden when it entails the maintenance of unwanted languages and the proliferation of English varieties that the dominant groups view as not good enough and as an obstacle to progress.

As a sociolinguist who had spent the years prior to my arrival in Switzerland studying evaluative reactions to the presence of Spanish and its speakers in the United States, this first contact with Swiss news and readership's reactions left me wondering if Spanish speakers here have to deal with the same issues with which Spanish speakers have to cope on the other side of the Atlantic. Are they systematically downgraded for speaking Spanish or for speaking one of the local languages with a foreign accent? Does the way in which they speak local languages make them prone to housing discrimination or to facing obstacles to equal employment opportunities? Do the

Swiss nationals feel the presence of Spanish in the public space, for example on shop signs, as invasive?

I got a partial answer to my questions a couple of months later when a friend of mine of Latin-American descent and a Swiss resident for over a decade posted a rant on Facebook about how she felt her Spanish-sounding family name has affected her job search negatively. Moreover, her post went on to say that, when she had used her husband's moniker, a White European-sounding family name, she had been shortlisted more often.

In this study, by means of experimental tests derived from the matched-guise technique, written questionnaires, and sociolinguistic interviews, I want to answer those questions in depth. Because I live in Biel and am a native speaker of French, I will focus exclusively on attitudes held by speakers of French to speakers of Spanish, leaving the assessment of German and Italian speaking regions of the country for future research.

References

20 MINUTES: Various Articles

<http://www.20min.ch/ro/> [Various Dates]

PILLER, Ingrid (2016): *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice: An Introduction to Applied Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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