

The Face and Voice of SBB CFF FFS: A Sociolinguistic Study of Multilingualism for the Branding of a Swiss Institution

Master Thesis' Summary

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Research Context and Goals

In Switzerland there are three official national languages, German, French and Italian¹. These are organised by the territoriality principle into distinguished monolingual territories, except for the French-German bilingual cantons of Fribourg/Freiburg, Bern and Valais/Wallis, and the trilingual canton of the Grisons (Romansh, German and Italian). Being unequally geographically and demographically represented, the official national languages enjoy uneven power, with (Swiss) German as the most powerful language in Switzerland and the most spoken among the Swiss population, followed by French and then by Italian. This uneven representation of the Swiss national languages sometimes generates internal tensions. Nonetheless, Swiss multilingualism is often adopted as a marker of Swiss national identity, history and culture, and as such it becomes involved in the branding of the nation on a global scale. Reaching all over the Helvetic territory, connecting all the linguistic regions and adopting the three Swiss official languages as their own institutional languages, the SBB CFF FFS² (the nationwide Swiss railway company) embody the Swiss national diversity and become a potential promoter of Switzerland, of its values and its identity. For this reason, the iconic SBB CFF FFS are an interesting setting to study the ideas about different languages and speakers behind the management of Swiss multilingualism.

The growing presence and importance of English within Switzerland further complexifies the already elaborate national linguistic picture and it is perceived mainly from two contrasting standpoints. On the one hand, English is contemplated as lingua franca to ease communication between not only foreigners but also Swiss citizens from different linguistic regions. On the other hand, though, it is considered a threat to the Swiss national identity and traditions, and as an impoverishment of the linguistic richness of the country. All these topics are approached in this study through the nationwide hallmark institution of the SBB CFF FFS.

Central to this research is the concept of “language ideologies”. These can be defined as sets of ideas and beliefs about a certain language and its speakers constructed by a society in relation to a particular -economic, political, cultural and historical- context. The overall aim of the study is to understand the language ideologies and the economic, cultural and symbolic values of the Swiss national languages and of English lingua franca within the SBB CFF FFS and the ways in which they are integrated in the branding of it as a Swiss institution in a globalising world.

The main informants of this qualitative study are six SBB CFF FFS passenger attendants working on long distance trains that cross the borders between the Swiss linguistic regions. Three of them were based in Romandie (the French-speaking part of Switzerland) and three in Ticino (the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland). As part of the Francophone and Italophone linguistic minorities, these passenger attendants tend to have more revealing opinions about the power relations among different languages coexisting within the same nation and the same institution. Defined by the company’s slogan “The face and voice of SBB” (hence the title of this project), passenger attendants are -linguistically speaking- the most interesting actors within the institution. On the one hand, this is because they are constantly exposed to national and international passengers and their various languages and to the changes

¹ Romansh is not a Swiss official language, but a national one, which is why it is not an official language at the studied institution and thus not considered in this Master Thesis. It is spoken by the 0.5% of the Swiss population in the trilingual canton of the Grisons.

² Schweizerische Bundesbahnen, SBB; Chemins de fer fédéraux suisses, CFF; Ferrovie federali svizzere, FFS.

of language occurring when travelling from one Swiss linguistic region to the other. On the other hand, they are required to have the richest linguistic profile within the company, which renders them the ideal participants for this study on multilingualism. The interest in these key figures of the company is augmented by the fact that in November 2020 the passenger attendants at SBB CFF FFS received the Oertli prize -a sign of recognition to the promoters of the cohesion between the Swiss linguistic regions- for their multilingualism and their effort in using the national languages.

Bearing all this in mind, the research questions that guided the study are the following:

- Which are the official requirements and corporate ideas about language use at SBB CFF FFS? How are the Swiss national languages hierarchised within the company?
- How is multilingualism used to construct the SBB CFF FFS as a Swiss company? In particular, which are the passenger attendants' language practices and ideas about multilingualism?
- What are the role and the status of English at SBB CFF FFS? When and where is it used, by and with whom and for which purposes?

Research Approach and Methods³

The study was conducted adopting a qualitative, sociolinguistic and ethnographic approach, which allowed to focus both on the macro scale of the company and on the micro scale of the individual employees. For example, both the official prescriptions issued by the company (macro scale) and their reception and implementation by the passenger attendants (micro scale) were taken into account and articulated.

Four methods of data collection were used:

- **8 participant observations**, during which I accompanied six passenger attendants for one of their shifts on long distance trains taking fieldnotes. I focused on their use of languages during the various exchanges with passengers and colleagues. On average, the total duration of the participant observations was of 54 hours.
- **Interviews** with participants, including 1 one-to-one online interview and several informal interviews during the participant observations.
- A study of the **linguistic landscapes**, namely the variety of written texts (such as official signs and advertisements) displayed for various purposes and in different languages in eight major SBB CFF FFS stations. These were located in four different linguistic regions (French-speaking region: Geneva, Lausanne; French and German speaking region: Fribourg/Freiburg; German-speaking region: Zürich HB, Luzern; Italian-speaking region: Bellinzona, Lugano; Grisons, trilingual canton (German, Italian, Romansh): Chur). In particular, the study focused on the languages of the official signs for informative purposes. A total of 412 pictures was taken for the study of linguistic landscapes.
- A research of **SBB CFF FFS institutional documents** that were publicly available, such as job requirements and language policies.

These different methods were combined to obtain different types and sources of data on the same phenomena and to produce a nuanced and fine-grained analysis of them.

³ **Disclaimer:** The data collection methods, data treatment and storage have been approved by the *Commission d'éthique de la recherche de l'Université de Lausanne* (CER-Unil) on 8th December 2020.

The collection of publicly available material (research of the linguistic landscapes included) started in August 2020, and the eight participant observations and the interviews were conducted between January and March 2021.

Overview of Research Results

The main results of the research are concisely reported and illustrated by a selection of examples in the following three subsections. The first one focuses on the ideologically constructed role of multilingualism in the promotion of the SBB CFF FFS as a Swiss company, whilst the second one reports the actual power dynamics resulting from the coexistence of the four institutional languages. The third section illustrates the participating passenger attendants' views and practices related to multilingualism at SBB CFF FFS.

1. Multilingualism as Marker of “Swissness” and as “Welcoming Strategy”

- Swiss multilingualism is used as a marker of “Swissness” to brand the SBB CFF FFS as a Swiss institution, and to generate economic profit by indexing the good qualities connected to the Swiss brand. These, for example, are innovation, exclusivity, cultural diversity and high standard services.

An example of the use of multilingualism to brand the SBB CFF FFS as Swiss is the logo of the company, which almost blends the company's identity with the Swiss national identity by combining the powerful national symbols of Swiss multilingualism (represented by the text “SBB CFF FFS”, which displays the three Swiss official languages in order of demographic importance, that is German, French and Italian) and the Swiss flag represented in the red and white icon.

- Multilingualism at SBB CFF FFS is a marketing tool for two main reasons. First, it indexes “Swissness” because it suggests the existence of an authentic link with Switzerland's multilingual traditions and culture. In this way, the product sold by the SBB CFF FFS, namely their transport services and the numerous offers related to them, acquires an extra value in the eyes of the customers, as it appears more “real”, more “Swiss”, and therefore worthier of the investment due to the high-standard qualities associated to “Swissness” indicated above.

Second, it is constructed by the company as a “welcoming strategy”. In fact, multilingualism is conceived as an instrument to meet the various linguistic needs of the company's clients and to offer them a pleasurable customer experience. In this way, the ideal SBB CFF FFS clients are imagined as either Swiss residents dominant in one of the official national languages or as foreigners proficient in English. For example, multilingualism is used as “welcoming strategy” when a passenger speaks German and the passenger attendant accommodates them by also speaking German, so that the passenger will more likely feel at ease.

2. Power Dynamics among the National Languages and English

- The study reveals that the institutional languages of the company are hierarchically classified on a national and on a cantonal level, according to their demographic representation (which places German first, then French and then Italian) and according to the territoriality principle (which in each linguistic region makes the local language official and therefore the most important one).
- German clearly emerged as the predominant language within the company, even in the cantons in which it is not the official language, since its importance as second language (after the local language) is remarkable. In the linguistic landscapes of Romandie (French-speaking region) and in Ticino (Italian-speaking canton), German is always

present as second language in the multilingual signs, which underlines its importance on both the national and the cantonal scale.

- English occupies an important position on both the national and the cantonal level, as it is treated as the global language. On the one hand, it is used for marketing purposes in catchy products' names, such as "RailAway" and "EasyRide", which both designate promotions that facilitate and provide discounts for travel. On the other hand, English is used as lingua franca with both foreigners and Swiss from different linguistic regions, and it is always present on the multilingual signs in the stations.
- The order of languages on public signs at stations always features the local language at the top of the sign. This is probably linked to safety reasons (especially as far as the signs signalling danger are concerned) and possibly to questions of identity and legal obligations, as placing the local language in the most visible position signals that that region is inhabited and "belongs to" a certain linguistic group.
- This hierarchisation of languages, resulting in the predominance of German, functions as an instrument of inclusion and exclusion as it gives unequal access to good-quality information and sometimes also to job positions.

For example, passenger attendants must have a very good level of German (level C2) and must know two additional languages among French, Italian and English before the end of their training. If these linguistic requirements are not fulfilled, they may not get the job.

Another form of inclusion and exclusion based on the hierarchisation of languages is visible in the linguistic landscapes through the occasional official signs of the SBB CFF FFS featuring only the Swiss majority languages German and French as well as English. In these cases, the Italoophone linguistic minority is excluded from the addressees of the signs.

3. The Face and Voice of (SBB) CFF FFS: Passenger Attendants' Language Practices and Ideologies

- German can represent a real challenge for passenger attendants from Ticino and Romandie, mainly because in Switzerland High German and Swiss German (Schwyzerdütsch) coexist in a diglossic situation. The former is the standard variety that is taught in schools in the non-German-speaking Swiss regions, whilst the latter refers to the spoken language varieties of Swiss Germans. This linguistic situation is further complexified since each Swiss German canton has its own variety of Schwyzerdütsch. Despite this, the Francophone and Italoophone participants underlined their motivation to acquire and improve their -High- German not only because it is crucial for their job and to receive its economic return, but also for personal interests, satisfaction and pride. Nevertheless, the advantage of expanding the knowledge of Schwyzerdütsch is that it quickly helps to connect with the Swiss German passengers and have a friendlier exchange.
- Italian and "dialetto ticinese" (dialect spoken in Ticino) are sometimes used as markers of identity and pride in belonging to the Italoophone linguistic minority. As in the case of Schwyzerdütsch among Swiss Germans, "dialetto ticinese" was also used to establish a friendlier and warmer exchange with passengers from Ticino. During the observations, Italian was also used by the passenger attendants in announcements in other linguistic regions to affirm the visibility and legitimacy of the Italian language against the predominance of the German one.
- The ethnography also revealed the existence of a "Swiss Railway Language", which is a professional jargon that has to be mastered by the company's employees. It exists in the three official languages and it is specific to the SBB CFF FFS and therefore to

Switzerland. For this reason, this jargon seems to consolidate the Swiss identity of the SBB CFF FFS. For example, the SBB CFF FFS talk about “scambio” (deviation in Swiss Italian) rather than “deviatoio” (which would be the word used in Italy), and of “Perron” (platform in Swiss German) rather than “Bahnsteig” (the corresponding German word for it).

- Passenger attendants were flexible multilingual workers who adapt to the changes of national languages when travelling through the different Swiss linguistic regions. For example, the company policies establish that when they walk through the coaches checking tickets in Ticino, passenger attendants should greet the passengers using Italian first and then (Swiss) German or other languages, whereas once the Gotthard tunnel is crossed and the train enters the Germanophone region, German should normally be used first and the other languages should follow. The same happens over the loudspeaker, when the local language opens the announcement of the next station and it is followed by either the language of the region that the train just left or the language of the region towards which it is headed to.

Passenger attendants also prove their flexibility by switching language to accommodate the passengers whenever possible. If they greet passengers in (Swiss) German but then realise that they speak Italian, passenger attendants normally try -if they can- to speak Italian, to favour the customers and make them feel at ease (see “welcoming strategy” above).

- The passenger attendants who participated in the study presented themselves as proud multilingual workers who prefer to speak the Swiss national languages whenever they can instead of English. Most of them in fact believed that Swiss multilingualism at SBB CFF FFS is a national symbolic richness that has to be preserved and that it contributes to the nation’s cohesion as well as the affirmation of the Swiss national identity.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

To conclude, the hierarchies of the SBB CFF FFS institutional languages on a national and a regional scale reflect the demographic importance of the national languages, in which German is the majority language, followed by French and then by Italian. German emerged as the predominant language, generating patterns of exclusion among passengers and employees. Despite this, the institutional multilingualism at SBB CFF FFS is ideologically and discursively mobilised as a “welcoming strategy” and as a marker of “Swissness” to promote the company globally. English has an important role within the company as it is considered as the global lingua franca to be used with non-Swiss customers and as a marketing language to render the SBB CFF FFS competitive on the global market. Passenger attendants are the institutional representatives of the SBB CFF FFS that embody the Swiss national identity. They contribute to construct the Swiss national identity of the company by favouring the Swiss national languages over English whenever possible, therefore making the SBB CFF FFS not only a national railway company, but the *Swiss* national railway company.

The SBB CFF FFS will benefit from the findings of this research study to improve their language policies and practices and to diminish the sociolinguistic inequalities that concern both the company’s employees and its customers. This might enhance their institutional image and reputation and could set an example for other multilingual companies, in Switzerland and abroad.

To further expand sociolinguistic research in the underexplored field of national public transports, future similar studies might focus on multilingualism in the Swiss trilingual canton of the Grisons and in other nations. Such research directions could contribute -on a national, European and global scale- to shed light on workplaces and contexts that involve people crossing national and/or linguistic borders.