Linguistic tension in the Fribourg area of Switzerland

Switzerland has long been recognized as an important example of multilingual society, and it is a well-known fact that the country has four national languages and relative peace between the different groups. Those more familiar with the situation will know, for example, that the day-to-day language of most Swiss citizens is Swiss German, usually called a “dialect” of German despite its incomprehensibility to anyone in Germany, or that extensive legal provisions protect the use of these languages in public space, such as on transit, in government, in schools, and in the media. What is perhaps lacking is a more social understanding of the consequences of these language divides: Quebec poses a good example where these social language divisions are much more salient to Anglophone academia due to experiments such as the matched-guise ones frequently carried out in that province (Kircher), and while there is an equal amount of literature on the situation in Switzerland, much of this is rendered linguistically inaccessible due to its publication in languages other than English. To further complicate matters, despite the small size of the country, the sociolinguistic situation differs vastly from area to area, so I will speak to the region in which I have both the most solid academic grounding and personal understanding due to lived experience as a participant in that society: Fribourg/Freiburg, a state-level canton about the size of Monmouth County, NJ.

To begin, it should be noted that of the roughly 300,000 inhabitants of this area, roughly 200,000 are French-speakers, and 100,000 are German speakers. This presents an interesting role-reversal in majority at the state level in a country where it is the Germanophones who outnumber the Francophones two to one. There are also many long-standing immigrant communities, with significant numbers of Turkish, Arabic, Tamazigh, Filipino, and Portuguese speakers as well as hundreds of others, each with fascinating interactions with the dominant languages (I can report that four of my Filipino friends could not understand grammatically

gendered pronouns until 7th grade, and mixed up <il> and <elle> because apparently their languages did not make this distinction); however, for the scope of this paper, we will focus on French and German.

The Swiss constitution reflects broad social norms in its article 70, which specifies the national languages and guarantees protections for linguistic minorities, but most tellingly defines language as inherently *territorial*. That is to say, language is tied to specific locality, and forms a part of geography as socially important as rivers or forest. Every piece of land in Switzerland has an elevation, a zoning law, an owner, an average rainfall, and a language. The power of defining the language of a piece of land is granted to the state-level, which in turn nearly always grants this power to the municipality. This is not unusual, as municipalities are legally much more powerful than anywhere else I know of, and are the governmental bodies that give and take away citizenship, define voting laws, and are responsible for the lion's share of taxation and social safety nets.

This situation is reflected in the current state-level constitution of Fribourg/Freiburg, in which article 6 defines French and German as the official languages of the canton, but specifies that municipalities may have French, German, or both as their official languages. This means that at the state-level, all public discourse may be in either language (article 11), and that all official documents must be published in both languages (article 18.1), the chancellor must speak both languages fluently (article 95), that legal testimony as evidence may be given in either language (article 20). Perhaps even more interesting is that which relates to jury proceedings: at the municipal level, proceedings occur in the official language of the municipality (article 10.1) and in bilingual municipalities the proceedings will be held in the preferred language of the defendant (10.2). At the state-level court, proceedings are held in the preferred language of the prosecution during legal recourse and of the defendant elsewhere

(article 10.3); in cases of disagreement, the judge decides the language (10.4). Referencing the state constitution only touches the tip of the complexity of language use in public space, as a slew of sub-constitutional laws likewise dictate important aspects of these social contracts, such as a 1991 ruling where standard German, not the local variety of Swiss German constitutes the language of proceedings (Papaux 5.2), or a 2010 law that forces the lowland district of bilingual municipalities in the north to utilize the preferred language of the accused in criminal trials, but allows them to use the language of the municipality in civil cases (article 115.2c). These examples serve to show the depth of legislation regarding language use, and equally specific, stringent guidelines are set for every aspect of society, especially in education, public transit, and media (such as laws to force radio stations to play a mandatory minimum percentage of songs in the official language of the area).

Below the state level, which tends to be fairly balanced and bilingually-inclined, municipalities overwhelmingly declare themselves either a French-speaking commune or a German-speaking commune, and of the 169 municipalities within the state, only 3 are officially bilingual despite significant minority in many other municipalities (Papaux 2.3). Of these three, one is the state capital whose bilingual status is enshrined in state constitution, another is a city of historic contention in which a genocide occurred in Napoleonic times, and another is the complex legal result of merging two municipalities with different languages. That is to say, barring exceptional circumstance, municipalities consciously choose not to be bilingual. This is not a light distinction, as the official language determines the language of function in local government including courts, it determines whether schools are in German or French, and determines every aspect of society down to street signs and available radio and television stations. A German-speaking household in an officially French-speaking village will thus have to settle local disputes in their L2, putting them at a systemic disadvantage to their francophone

neighbors; children of that household in theory are granted protections regarding the language of their schooling, but a loophole concerning finances often leads to children attending school in their L2 as well (Windisch 469). Thus, despite a gradient geographical shift in community language percentages, the functional presence of the language is sharply distinguished by municipal boundaries as an intended consequence of territoriality in the law.

This poses a well-noted paradox in linguistic law: article 7 of the Fribourg/Freiburg constitution prohibits discrimination based on language, and protects the rights of both languages especially in situations of minority status, yet article 6's commitment to linguistic territoriality sanctions total legal and social dominance of the official language of an area. The general synthesis of this is resolved by defining a separation between public and private spheres: **la liberté des langues pour la vie privée**, **la territorialité pour la vie publique** [liberty of language for private life, territoriality for public life] (Papaux 4). That is to say, the state cannot punish an individual for speaking a language at home or between friends, but maintains the right to punish an individual either directly or indirectly for speaking a language in official settings.

This mentality has parallels elsewhere, including religion, in which a long and complicated history of social agreements has established both commitments to freedom of religion as well as endorsed religions at the state level: Fribourg, for example, is a Catholic canton while Bern, the German-speaking canton to the East is Protestant, and Vaud, the French-speaking canton to the West is Catholic, while Valais, the mixed canton to the South is also Catholic. Just like with language, municipalities have an official religion as well, and can defy the state-level religion: Le Landeron, a municipality in the canton Neuchatel, is an officially Catholic village in an officially Protestant state. Territoriality is assigned to both language *and* religion, meaning that legally, a corn field can be not only Germanophone, but *also* a Protestant

field, regardless of the identity of the owner, or farmer working the field, or the current pedestrian walking upon it. However, religious identity has by and large fallen in salience due to rampant atheism and general disregard for organized religion, so while it forms a good parallel legally, socially it may fall short of the significance still given to linguistic identity.

The social consequences of these territoriality laws and the tensions driving their creation should not be underestimated. Although Switzerland is often hailed as a success story in contrast to many failed multiethnic countries, local historian Jean-Luc Rime states that “authorities have always been nervous of sparking a linguistic civil war” (Signorell). It is telling that the article 6.5 of the state constitution likewise guarantees a commitment of the state to promoting dialogue and good-will between the linguistic communities, as it implies that this may be an ideal rather than a reality. The widely-recognized “Röstigraben” (literally Rösti wall) is a barrier defined more or less by the official languages of the municipalities, and defines where Germanophone Rösti-eating culture ends and Francophone Rösti-hating begins. Unsurprisingly, linguistic identity is not formulated by language alone, but instead contains an entire cultural identity.

This is delightfully broken down and summarized by the famous routines of Marie-Thérèse Porchet, the stage persona of comedian Joseph Gorgoni, which can be interpreted as a sort of comedic drag performance with a fair amount of social commentary. This famous pillar of Swiss francophone culture follows the ramblings of a francophone housewife in her interactions with various other groups, typically either Swiss Germans or Parisians. She makes use of phonotactics to cement linguistic divides (her friend’s name is Zbinden which is typically Swiss German, and the [zb] onset is in itself a punchline), she has a bit about Tupperwares which can be interpreted at least in part a parody of the overpronunciation of loanwords, and her biggest fear is the “bourbines” Swiss Germans and suffering the same fate

of having to live among them like her friend who got exiled to Wetzikon (the name of this village is another punchline, the -ikon suffix is a common Swiss German place name marker). Her commentary includes plenty of criticisms of Swiss francophone culture as well: her son "Christian Christophe" is a critique of the cultural practice of using the same four names, he is gay which she accepts with great difficulty but states that "at least the guy isn't a Swiss German because *that* would be crossing the line". Her wild popularity serves to show that her messages resonate well as both identity-affirming narrative as well as reasonable critique intended to make explicit undiscussed biases and work towards dismantling them.

She provides a convenient lens through which to contextualize the findings of important sociolinguistic work, especially an exploration of social bilingualism in Fribourg, written by Swiss francophone sociologist Uli Windisch. While the scope of the work is extensive and examines every area of the French-German linguistic divide in Switzerland, it would be better to focus in on one of his case studies in Villars-Sur-Glâne, the very community in which my family lives. This is a fairly affluent and growing town on the linguistic border, with about 75% francophones and 25% germanophones. Generally, when francophones were asked of the language situation in the town, attempt to even acknowledge the existence of problems, and that everything is great (465). Others allude to potential problems which have thus far been averted successfully, and that it is everyone's responsibility to avoid conflict and engage in dialogue between the communities. An interesting contrast is between one of the francophone respondents who sees no problem "as long as the community's francophone identity remains respected", and one of the germanophones who states that "the language question is broadly nonexistent in Villars. One has no choice but to accept that the municipality is francophone" (465). This points to a more underlying fear of many francophones which, unusually, is presented explicitly by yet another respondent who states that "There are no language problems, but we're watching a

Germanic invasion unfold. I always say: look at what's going on in Ticino (Italophone state): the Ticinese have woken up, they don't let themselves be governed by the Germans" (466). Others disagree, effectively saying Villars has it better than elsewhere: "The Germans who arrive in Villars know French very well and pass unseen. This creates little resentment with the francophones. Here we don't hear of an invasion that we'd call difficult to live with" (467).

These perspectives are more or less in line with my own lived experience, and lead naturally to conclusions which I can substantiate with my own examples. For example, one respondent states that Germans pass "unseen": in day to day life, germanophones are completely out of the social circles of most francophones, save a token one or two. They pass unseen for a variety of reasons, but mainly, as later discussed, all the germanophones have to *leave* to another town for any events in their own language. The street signs are all in French, the bus announcements in French, the elementary school in French, the sports leagues are in French, the military base nearby is in French, church services are overwhelmingly in French (494), the local paper is in French. This is not surprising given the supermajority of the area is francophone, however germanophones are *unseen and unheard* which is strange given their significant minority. This is almost certainly presented as a contrast to African migrants especially, whose skin color, manner of dress, and loud presence on the street with music and phone calls and social gatherings are *seen and heard* and unignorable; or to the Algerian migrants whose skin color, hijab and burqas, public prayer, and calls from the mosques (until it was outlawed) which are *seen and heard*. Essentially, Germanophones are not inherently appreciated, but are appreciated because they are invisible and do not question the status quo of the identity of the area; this is not the case in every municipality. In contrast, a few miles south is another town, Marly, in which the germanophone community has done the opposite: they are loud, they are politically active, they have lobbied for a German-language primary

school, they have asked for German street signs to be placed on major roads (469). The perception of the germanophones there is markedly different, and respondents frequently mention the “germanization” of the area, the threat to the local identity, and the general unpleasant demeanor of the germanophones (477).

Drawing more from my personal experience, I can easily confirm Windisch’s claim that the uneasy peace is mainly due to perceived equality at the moment and due to fear of conflict that has rocked so many other areas. The social circles of francophones and germanophones are extremely different--despite growing up in my hometown with so many germanophones, I only knew two of them personally due to them being neighbors, and even so they refrained from speaking German when around francophones. This can be interpreted as a parallel to Windisch’s germanophone consultant who states that “I try not to cause problems by telling other germanophones to respect the francophone identity of the area when we come around Villars” (466).

This is probably in their interest when the francophones feel so threatened. An indication of this ever-present fear is francophone respondent who spoke of her fear of Germanization left an interesting clue in saying “as I always say”: these conversations happen frequently, typically behind closed doors. There is a slew of stereotypes, benign and ugly, concerning both sides which are brought out in heated arguments: I witnessed my uncle getting called “a lazy Romand” after a car accident, to which he replied with an ethnic slur and orders to the germanophone to get out of his village and go back to whatever ‘-ikon’ he’s from. However, these types of conflict are exceedingly rare, and in fact he was criticized by other family members for fueling the flame of conflict between our communities. Quieter confrontations include no longer inviting a cousin who married a germanophone woman from Bern following witnessing the wife speaking to their children in Swiss German. This is far from the utopian

vision often given to Swiss multilingualism. That is not to say that Swiss ethnic conflict is bad vis-a-vis elsewhere in the world as this type of aggressive confrontation is exceedingly rare, but rather that the underlying conditions for conflict and the linguistic battleground in public space is very real even if hidden with great care from outsiders.

As we can see, Windisch's work is a great starting point to understanding the specific dynamics of the area. However, as a testament to the linguistic barriers in academia, his two-tome work totalling a thousand pages of interviews and analysis has not been translated, and is in fact written bilingually: some sections are written in German, and interviews with francophones and germanophones are never translated either way. This is explicitly done to give equality and an equal stand to both sides (35), but effectively renders the text inaccessible to anyone who isn't already bilingual in these two languages. To further complicate matters, much of the German in the interviews is Swiss German, depending on the respondent, and so renders the text even more inaccessible than it already was. Thus, although important and relevant sociolinguistic work has been carried out for decades in these regions, and although the lessons learned in matters of policy or sociolinguistic theory would certainly prove valuable to the world more broadly, the intended audience appears to be those who are already familiar with the local languages and thus probably already familiar with the social situation of the area.

This paper is intended as a preliminary step towards reversing this process, and to bring to light much of the sociolinguistic work which has already been carried out in this region. An understressed aspect of Swiss multilingualism is the social tensions at play, in part because they are taboo to discuss publicly especially to community outsiders, and in part because acknowledging the tensions along ethnic and linguistic lines is viewed as adding flames to the fire. I distinctly remember a geographer at the University of Fribourg stating, in a televised interview, that we should stop attempting to locate the Röschtigraben, that such an exercise

only adds to ethnic tensions and that we should think of ourselves as Swiss first and foremost. Needless to say, this presents an ideal which strays far from reality.

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