About English and the Swiss Labour Market

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THE LANGUAGE WEB
FYN NET VAN DIE WOORD
THE LANGUAGE WEB
ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF VICTOR WEBB

FYN NET VAN DIE WOORD
HULDIGINGSBUNDEL VIR VICTOR WEBB

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The cover design of this book and flyleaves between sections reproduce the Writing That Fell Off The Wall by Willem Boshoff, by kind permission of the artist. The installation (text on paper, wood and paint on masonite) belongs to the Johannesburg Art Gallery and was first exhibited there in 1997 as part of an exhibition entitled Important Exportant. Three years later, in 2000, it was also displayed at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. Both exhibitions were curated by Gerardo Mosquera of the New Museum of Modern Art in New York. The overall (variable) dimensions are 8m x 24m, and the dimensions of each “wall” 1.2m (height) x 1m (width) x 220mm (thickness).

The installation is a critique of the Age of Enlightenment’s so-called universal values that justified the subjugation of Africa by colonial powers. It is arranged along fourteen stations of an imperious cross, each representing one of fourteen “fallen assurances”: TRUTH; PERFECTION; SALVATION; STANDARD; ORDER; IDENTITY; BOUNDARY; PURPOSE; REASON; PURITY; PRINCIPLE; PROGRESS; FAITH; DESTINY. These words – the words that had fallen off the wall – are written on wooden blocks in seven European languages: English, Dutch, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and German.

(http://www.dia.nsa.edu/lat97/johannesburg/import/boshoff.html)
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9 About English and the Swiss Labour Market

François Grin

In their 1997 textbook, Kaplan & Baldauf start out by observing that “language issues have some of the characteristics of sex – everyone does it, and consequently everyone is an expert.” (1997: 3). It is true that language belongs to those issues about which many people hold what Pool (1991: 8) describes as “extraordinarily stubborn beliefs”, and on which they often pass judgement with a self-assurance that they probably would not manifest if the topic at hand were, say, surgery or archaeology.

Since language issues do affect all of us, it is perfectly legitimate for anyone to hold views about language – or, more precisely, about “language-in-society”. However, health issues are no less relevant to everyone’s life, and people generally do not as readily utter pronouncements about them as they do about language. Hence, it bears repeating that most language issues are complex, and that the list of things that we do not know about language processes such as macro-level language dynamics is actually rather longer than the list of what we can claim to know. Consequently, few are the situations where, confronted with a language issue, we can be certain that one or another view is evidently the right one.

This also applies to questions regarding the role of languages on the labour market. Claims are frequently made to the effect that certain languages, being (in terms of given criteria) more important than others, are the obvious choice as languages of instruction and languages of the workplace. However, such views usually rest on a rather impressionistic reading of patchy evidence. Views of this kind are widespread, and there are surprising similarities of discourse across extremely diverse situations. For example, the largely unchallenged belief among important segments of public opinion in South Africa that the English language is the key to individual and collective economic performance, as well as an unquestionable token of modernity, is echoed in the very different context of Switzerland.

In what follows, I shall discuss the role of language on the labour market first from the perspective of the economics of language, and then by addressing three frequently asked questions about the particular role (and economic value) of English on the Swiss labour market. In the final section I attempt to generalise the issues at hand from the perspective of the value of linguistic diversity.

A brief theoretical overview

As a discipline, mainstream (or “orthodox”) economics has traditionally shown limited interest in language issues, ever since the emergence of “language economics” as a field of research in the mid sixties.1 This lack of interest can be explained by various reasons. Some of them reflect a certain degree of incompatibility between a topic (language) and the favourite methods of economics (Grin 1999a). Economic analysis is typically structured around the theoretical and empirical examination of causal links between variables. Causality is expressed through formal models, in which the variables featured must, in principle, lend themselves to some kind of quantitative interpretation.2 Even if a particular variable cannot be expressed in terms of a quantitative index on a numbered scale, economic modelling of the relationship of the kind $X = f(Y)$ will seek to ascertain if variable $X$ increases or decreases when variable $Y$ increases; in other words, it must be possible to think of the variables considered in terms of “more” or “less”. Needless to say, such notions of “more” or “less” are sometimes ill-suited to the study of variables whose determining characteristics are of a predominantly qualitative nature – as is often the case in language-related processes. When a problem cannot be modelled formally, mainstream economists tend to be uninterested, largely because the incentive system of the profession almost exclusively rewards the production (and publication) of highly technical and formalised research.

However, there are also substantive reasons for economists’ lack of interest in language matters. Economics is primarily concerned with the allocation of scarce resources to competing users. It studies processes of production, consumption and exchange in a world characterised by scarcity. Scarcity affects practically all types of resources, whether material and financial means, know-how, or time.3 Economic theory also considers the scarcity problem as universal. Of course, the acuteness of the problem is not the same for everyone, as shown by the fact that access to market goods and services varies considerably between individuals, social classes, and countries of the world. However, if the problem of scarcity is, in essence, identical, and if human nature is fundamentally the same everywhere (the assumption being that people always try to allocate their scarce resources in the best possible way to achieve whatever goals they pursue), it follows that the economic processes of production, consumption and exchange all share the same fundamental logic, and remain, by and large, unaffected by the language in which they take place. Hence, there is little reason why economists should