NEUTRALITY AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS ON LANGUAGE CURRICULA? A DATA-BASED CONVERSATION ON POLICIES, DISCOURSES AND THEIR SOCIOHISTORICAL ORIGINS IN SWITZERLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse language education policy in two officially multilingual countries, Switzerland and South Africa, where the role of English has evolved vis-à-vis local "national" languages since the 1990s. Our focus is on language policy as a manifestation of social struggles and, with a particular emphasis on English, we explore current policy documents in these two very different contexts. Using "neutrality" as an analytical lens, we show that language policy goes beyond curricula and in-/exclusion of languages, and instead neutralises societal ideas in line with the vision of a "successful" future at a given sociohistorical juncture. Finally, we reflect on neutrality as a component of language ideologies, whereby specific languages are authorised for contingent and changing political goals, leading to consequences such as in-/exclusion of certain languages in education policy and unequal distribution of knowledge, resources and authority.

Keywords: language policy; education; multilingualism; discourse analysis; Switzerland; South Africa.

LA NEUTRALITAT COM A LENT ANALÍTICA DELS PLANS D'ESTUDI EN L'ÀMBIT LINGÜÍSTIC? UNA CONVERSA BASADA EN DADES SOBRE LES POLÍTIQUES, ELS DISCURSOS I ELS SEUS ORÍGENS SOCIOHISTÒRICS A SUÏSSA I SUDÀFRICA

Resum

En aquest article analitzem la política lingüística en dos països que compten amb diverses llengües oficials, Suïssa i Sud-àfrica, i en els quals el paper de la llengua anglesa ha evolucionat respecte a les llengües nacionals locals des de la dècada de 1990. Ens centrem en la política lingüística com a manifestació de les lluites socials i, fent especial èmfasi en l'anglès, estudiem els documents polítics actuals en aquests dos contextos tan diferents. L'ús de la "neutralitat" com a lent analítica ens permet demostrar que la política lingüística va més enllà dels plans d'estudi i de la inclusió o exclusió de les llengües i, al seu lloc, neutralitza les idees socials que estan en consonància amb la concepció d'un futur "d'èxit" en una conjuntura sociohistòrica determinada. Per acabar, reflexionem sobre la neutralitat com a component de les ideologies lingüístiques, en virtut de les quals s'autoritzen llengües específiques per a objectius polítics contingents i canviants, cosa que té conseqüències com ara la inclusió en la política educativa o l'exclusió de la política educativa de determinades llengües i la distribució desigual del coneixement, els recursos i l'autoritat.

Paraules clau: política lingüística; educació; multilingüisme; anàlisi del discurs; Suïssa; Sud-àfrica.

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Contents

1 Introduction

The emergence of English as a so-called global language has become a significant topic of research in language planning. In particular, the transnational debate surrounding English language teaching has emerged as a unifying theme in the field, bridging diverse contexts such as the post-colony in Africa, Asia and the Americas as well as the European Union Member States. How and under what circumstances is English given priority in national language curricula, whether as a vehicular or a foreign language? Might an education system opt for English as a way out of ongoing local/national/transnational glottopolitical conflict? To what extent is the expansion of the teaching of English accompanied by a discourse that attributes a "neutral" or somehow anonymous status to the English language? Could neutrality as an analytical lens help us to explore discourse produced in the context of local language curricula reforms? These questions are at the heart of this conversation offered by a teacher trainer/sociolinguist and a political scientist, focusing on discourse produced in connection with language education policy (LEP) in Switzerland (CH) and South Africa (SA). Our shared interest lies in the recent evolution of LEP and the accompanying political and language ideological debates in these two "proto-typical" multilingual countries.

Campbell and Poser (2008, p. 363) emphasise that linguistic change is mediated by social factors and contingent historical events. Although their interest is in traditional comparative historical linguistics, their thought inspires us insofar as LEP can be seen as a written and normative product of social and political-institutional debates on, for example, which languages should or should not be taught, made voluntary, be available to only an elite, or disappear altogether. These debates are mediated by conditions of possibility (Foucault, 1977), in which social factors, behaviour and particular historical events (e.g., the end of apartheid in South Africa) play a role. Discourse analysis sheds light on the conditions of possibility, in which certain paragraphs of LEP can be proposed and voted for or against. These suggestions must be examined in the light of political-economic conditions, in turn mediated by historical events and social behaviour, which privilege certain language ideologies. Following Gal and Irvine (2019, p. 2), we see language ideologies as "locally and historically specific framings, suffused with the political and moral interests of the social positions and projects in which they are embedded". Placing the focus on the making of LEP invites us to trace discursive processes (Pouliot, 2015; Bennett & Checkel, 2014) and scrutinise language ideological debates in the two contexts (Blommaert, 1999).

Aware of the striking differences (history, politics, economy, etc.) as well as some similarities (the favouring of English over some local languages in the school curricula) between the Swiss and South African contexts, we follow Griffiths' (2017, p. 498) idea that "the grounds of similarity and the grounds of difference in comparative study do not need to be the same". Given our different backgrounds, this conversation stemming from comparative analysis forces us to look, not only between the disciplines, but beyond them (Griffiths, 2017, p. 499).

Rather than a traditional article comparing Swiss and South African LEP and discourses, we present a data-based conversation. Discussion of the two contexts has allowed us to extrapolate key questions, and to provide comparative insights while acknowledging differences. With this approach, we aim to help readers appreciate the specific characteristics of the two contexts and relate them to each other. Furthermore, we hope to examine the discourse produced around English without losing sight of the (trans-) local, national or global conditions of possibility. Through our analysis, we generate an additional discourse based on our own interpretation. By offering question-based reflections, we reveal our author identity and leave room for our own positionality (and associated non-neutrality). Our questions may stimulate readers to formulate their own thoughts, perhaps in relation to a context with which they are familiar. In the case of Switzerland and South Africa, we have each restricted ourselves to one local situation with a specific data set, i.e., a limited educational context, in which certain language ideologies are dominant under specific political and economic conditions.[1]

In the Swiss context, we focus on a local debate regarding the prioritising of learning a local/national language or English, a policy which emerged a decade after Switzerland's 2004 decision to introduce two foreign

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1 Anyone analysing the discourse on language policy in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, or on the South African language-in-school debate from the perspective of other first-language communities or regions (e.g., the Afrikaans-speaking communities or the highly urbanised Gauteng province), would certainly answer our questions differently, raise other questions and come to different conclusions.

languages in elementary school. In the South African context, we concentrate on the question of whether English, as the economically stronger language, should be introduced early, at primary school level, and taught exclusively at secondary level, or whether the use and learning of pupils' native language(s) should be preserved and continued.

In the next section, we briefly explain our shared theoretical and methodological underpinnings, highlighting our view on language as a social practice and our interest in language policy as a manifestation of social struggles in society. We also shed light on linguistic neutrality as an analytical lens before describing our approach, adopting a discourse perspective inspired by Foucault. This section provides the foundation for the following questions, as well as data-based reflections in connection to the Swiss and South African contexts. In the last section, we jointly revisit our analytical lens in relation to language education discourses and policy before formulating concluding remarks and open questions.

Regardless of the chosen variety, we are aware that language is never neutral (Sousa, 2019). Although this contribution will be published in one of the few journals that accommodates the use of several languages (Catalan, Spanish, Occitan, English and other European languages), we have chosen to write in English. Although English enabled our collaborative academic writing, our spoken conversations occurred online, sometimes in Italian; the Swiss data set was mostly in German and occasionally French; while the data for the South African context was available in English (Canagarajah, 2002). This choice sheds light on our backgrounds as products of European education systems (in German-speaking Switzerland and Italy), including exposure to English as a foreign language. Our roles as an associate professor training English teachers and a political scientist teaching courses in Italian and English further contribute to our engagement with the English language.

2 A brief account of our theoretical and methodological underpinnings

Language policies legitimise decisions, particularly in education, where language curricula determine which languages are taught, and which are not. At the same time, these policies are entextualisations of decisions that have already been made, often after debates, discussions and even votes. During these debates, the language(s) in question become the object(s) of discussion. At the same time, language is used in a certain way in the decision-making process, during policy negotiations, for example, to argue for or against the in-/exclusion of a certain language in the curricula. Hence, we do not consider language an object that can be reduced to its formal characteristics; rather, we see it as an instrument of action and power. Focusing on LEP helps us to describe and explain "the role of language in constructing the relations of social difference and social inequality that shape our world" (Heller, 2011, p. 34). From a glottopolitical perspective, exploring the role of language in the process of establishing LEP sheds light on language as an instrument of in-/exclusion linked to education systems shaped by social and economic transformation (del Valle, 2017). Critical sociolinguistics (Boutet & Heller, 2007) has shown that power negotiations are (re-)produced in social interactions, where language practices and their legitimacy or value are expressed in language ideologies (Gal & Irvine, 2019). Investigating the conditions and interests that grant "legitimacy" (à la Bourdieu) and "authority" (cf. Woolard, 2008) is crucial to understanding LEP and language ideological debates (Blommaert, 1999).

Language education policy serves as a reference for decision-makers, a valid document to refer to, a rationale for or against a decision. In this respect, LEP enjoys a neutralised status (cf. Wee, 2010). Based on a paragraph in a policy document, it may be possible to end a discussion, resolve tensions or make a decision, whether at macro (national/transnational) or micro (local/school) level. Focusing on negotiation processes while creating LEP can reveal whose interests are represented. Our text sheds light on the attribution of authority and hierarchies between languages through the examination of accompanying language ideological debates and discourses (Blommaert, 1999; Woolard, 2008). We thereby adopt neutrality, understood as aperspectival objectivity, emphasising the influence of economised perspectives on language (ideological) debates, which shape anonymity by means of the power associated with certain hegemonic languages (Woolard, 2008).

Language ideological debates address issues like the fact that in South Africa, for example, the teaching and learning of certain national languages is controversial for historical reasons; or, in Switzerland, there are different ideas about when, in what order and to what extent these should be taught/learned. Language authority

and its ideological nature are constructed according to different assumptions (cf. Wee, 2010, p. 422). These include ideas about how languages are preserved/revitalised/learned, about "the relationships that speakers belonging to particular communities might be expected to have with various languages, and about how the notion of equality of treatment both within a group and across groups itself might be interpreted" (Wee, 2010, p. 422). Focusing on discourse in connection with language policy, we concur with Park (2009):

> [...] the distribution of ideologies in a debate does not necessarily align with the fault lines of social positions, but instead shows [...] ideology pooling, where both sides of a debate draw upon a common set of socially shared ideologies despite differences in their political orientations. (p. 84)

In the next section of our data-based conversation, we go on to demonstrate that the construction of English as a "neutral" or "anonymous" language is based more on "global language" ideologies – widely shared by the elite and public opinion in both contexts – and a position of power, than on local language ideological debates (Blommaert, 1999). Despite a tradition of multilingualism in both countries, English is not linked to political/social power struggles and is perceived as "aperspectival" or anonymous (Woolard, 2008).

Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, we examine LEP and its discourse, with the emphasis on power relations and language ideologies. Discourses are shaped by broader social processes and determine what can be said and known, thus defining boundaries (Foucault, 1972). The assertion that English proficiency leads to labour market success and therefore should be included in curricula has real consequences when treated as knowledge and truth. Historically situated, it is constantly evolving through the interplay of language, power and knowledge (Hall, 2001). Our reflections, based on key questions extrapolated from our ongoing, temporally, and geographically situated conversation, sheds light on language ideological debates and the power structures they reflect.

3 A conversation on language education policy from a Swiss/South African perspective

What kind of language education policy is characteristic of our context? What kind of discourse can we observe in relation to English?

Martina:

The question of whether to prioritise learning a local/national language or English as the economically dominant language has been extensively debated in Switzerland. Discussions started a decade after Switzerland's 2004 decision to introduce two foreign languages in elementary school, the result of a decision-making process involving local and federal authorities.

Before going on to shed light on a small fraction of this debate, it may be helpful to briefly introduce Switzerland, a multilingual country with four "national languages" (German, French, Italian and Romansh) distributed unevenly across its territory. German is spoken by 63% of the population, followed by French (22.7%), Italian (8.1%), and Romansh (0.5%) (Pandolfi et al., 2016). Each of the 26 so-called Swiss cantons has the power to decide which language(s) are used for official purposes, and four of them are multilingual.

Switzerland's federal organisation is also evident in its education system, which can be defined as an assemblage of "multiple, monolingually oriented school systems in a state with a multilingual composition, resulting from the significant territorial autonomy of the various linguistic groups" (Lundberg, 2018, p. 52; Busch, 2011). The different cantons (of varying size, leading to self-attribution and attribution by others of terms such as "majority" and "minority") have implemented the national strategy, i.e., the introduction of the teaching of two additional languages in elementary school, in different ways. The term "foreign languages" in Switzerland refers to federal languages not officially recognised at canton level, as well as languages without official status in Switzerland, such as English (Giudici, 2019). Broadly speaking, in French-speaking Switzerland (including the bilingual cantons), the first foreign language taught at school is German, while in the central and Eastern part of German-speaking Switzerland, English is taught first. In the mostly Italian-speaking canton, Ticino, French is the first foreign language, while in the multilingual canton of Graubünden, the first foreign language is either German, Italian or Romansh, depending on the language region. The second

foreign language is English in the French-speaking region, French in the central and Eastern German-speaking areas, and German in Ticino.

In 2014, Philippe Schwab, the Secretary General of the Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation, presented Switzerland's multilingualism as an integral part of the country's identity, culture and history. This discourse has been examined and questioned by a number of authors (Camartin, 2000; Del Percio, 2015; Duchêne 2020; Duchêne & Del Percio, 2014). Focusing on the present and past nature of language policy and related language ideological debates helps to challenge Switzerland's apparently straightforward relationship with multilingualism. As Giudici (2018) and others (cf. Berthele, 2016; Grin & Korth, 2005; Lundberg, 2018; Stauffer, 2001) show, language policy has long been determined by varying local and regional interests, actors and politics. National efforts towards unification manifested themselves in 1975, when the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers for Education (EDK) recognised learning a foreign language as an educational aim and recommended introducing a second foreign language in year four or five (EDK, 1975, art. A1–3). This recommendation remained very vague, however. Only in 1992 did the EDK manage to announce the "breakthrough of structural reforms on the teaching of a second national language" (EDK, 1992, p. 5). By the end of the 1990s, almost all the cantons had adopted this recommendation. Since 1998, some German-speaking cantons have decided to give English preference over the second national language at primary school level (cf. Brunner, 1996; Fuchs, 2014; Hutterli et al., 2012; Stauffer, 2001). Despite not being a member of the European Union, Switzerland nevertheless followed EU's LEP recommendations, calling in 2004 for at least two foreign languages to be taught from an early age.[2] In 2004, a national strategy of language teaching was developed by the EDK, claiming as its objective improved coordination and optimisation of language teaching/learning in compulsory education. The strategy aimed to counteract diverging cantonal policies[3] and accentuated the compulsory study of two foreign languages at elementary school, as well as another (national) language as an option from year nine (Brohy, 2004). Due to ongoing debates on language policy in multilingual Switzerland, the legal framework was modified in 2007, introducing a more specific paragraph:

> Within the scope of their responsibilities, they [the state and the cantons] shall promote foreign language teaching that ensures that pupils have competences in at least one second national language and one other foreign language by the end of compulsory schooling. The teaching of the national languages shall consider the cultural aspects of a multilingual country. (Sprachengesetz, 2007, Article 15, § 3)

In this federal system, LEP provides room for discussion, as the needs and circumstances of local actors tend not to be perceived or defined in the same way by everyone (cf. Giudici, 2018; Grin & Korth, 2005). We suggest an examination of the political debate in the canton of Thurgau, situated in the easternmost region of Switzerland. In other cantons in German-speaking Switzerland (not neighbouring French-speaking cantons), we can observe similar results and arguments in the discourse of most of the political initiatives that fundamentally favour the idea of according English a privileged status, should only one language be part of the language curricula. However, the local processes behind these debates are different.

The situation in Thurgau was unique in that the discussion extended beyond the canton's borders after a lengthy debate that began in 2013. In May 2017, the local parliament banned French from elementary school, contradicting the recommendation to teach two "foreign languages" (including one "national language") at elementary schools. This led to some intervention from the top, from the federal state, in the form of criticism of the canton's decision, though the reproval seemed to have no effect; in fact, the contrary was the case, as the positions only grew stronger. In June 2017, about six weeks after the parliament's first decision, the proposal against early French at elementary school was rejected in a second vote. Hence, English (starting in year five) and French (starting in year seven) remained in the curriculum, while the cantonal law on compulsory schooling (Gesetz über die Volksschule) omitted the following paragraph (§ 31, 4): "French is taught only at secondary level".

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2 This policy has been implemented in cantons that recognise only one official language. In bilingual cantons, however, only one additional language was initially taught.

3 The neighbouring cantons Appenzell-Innerrhoden and Appenzell-Ausserrhoden have different strategies on when to introduce French and English.

Examination of this case contributes to a growing body of literature that shows how, in a more nuanced way, certain language ideologies are mobilised when English and national languages are involved (cf. Berthele, 2016; Ferry-Meystre and O'Regan, 2022; Giudici et al., 2020; Stepkowska, 2016). Moreover, the case also illustrates which languages become the subject of heated debates, while others enjoy a kind of aperspectival or "neutralised" anonymity that erases power differences and hence controversiality (Woolard, 2008).

Rocco:

The questions that dominate the South African debate on language education at primary school level are somewhat different. Should English, as the language of economic progress and individual social mobility, be started early, at primary school, and then exclusively at secondary school? Or should the use and learning of the native language of pupils be preserved and continued? While the issues differ, the underlying debate reflects similar problems, conflicts and ideologies to those seen in the Swiss context.

To begin a conversation between Switzerland and South Africa, the evident historical and socioeconomic differences must be taken into account. Despite being the language of the colonial master (Britain), English is now the native language of a relatively small, primarily "white" and urban minority, constituting only 8% of the population. This figure is lower than the percentages of speakers of Zulu (25%), Xhosa (16%), Afrikaans (12%), Northern Sotho and Tswana (9%), and comparable to that of Southern Sotho. Notwithstanding, English enjoys the status of a co-official language in South Africa. Even more importantly, the significant socioeconomic inequality among groups and regions, as well as the effects of the transition from apartheid to a "non-racial" democracy in the early 1990s, have no equivalent in Switzerland.

However, it is these differences that make the similarities more striking. In fact, a discourse and an LEP framework that perceives multilingualism as a defining feature of the country's identity has been around for as long as it has been in Switzerland. In the 1920 and '30s, while German-French bilingualism was encouraged among the Swiss elite as part of the "spiritual-defence-of-the-nation" policy, English-Afrikaans bilingualism was promoted in the "white" and "black" elites of South Africa as part of a "South Africanist" policy (Malherbe, 1946; Dubow, 1997). Pupils classified as "white", "coloured" (mixed-race) and "Asian" (of Indian origin) under racial segregation laws were instructed in English or Afrikaans (the decision as to which language was left up to the parents), in so-called parallel-medium schools, throughout the first five years of their schooling, after which they moved on to fully bilingual or dual-medium instruction (Patterson, 1957, pp. 59–62). Under the prevailing laws, pupils classified as "native" (later "African") received four to six years of mother-tongue instruction in a standardised Bantu language corresponding to their local dialect. English or Afrikaans were taught as subjects during this period. Subsequently, the medium of instruction shifted to English or Afrikaans (typically English), with one Bantu language and the other official language taught as subjects (Hartshorne, 1995, pp. 308–309).

After the advent of apartheid in 1948, the government shifted its official discourse from elite-level South Africanism to a "multinational" perspective, according to which South Africa was presented as a collection of "nations" defined partly by language and partly by race. As part of this framework, compulsory instruction in the native language ("mother-tongue instruction") was implemented and extended. For white pupils, the language of instruction (English or Afrikaans) was determined by the school authorities and used throughout the first eight years of schooling. In contrast, African pupils received mother-tongue medium instruction for the full eight years of primary school, with both official languages (English and Afrikaans) increasingly taught as subjects from the early years of schooling.

From the late 1950s, mother-tongue education in the Bantu languages came to be closely identified with the policy of ghettoising the African population into the traditional core settlement areas of the different language groups (the so-called "Bantustans"). Both the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction alongside English in secondary schools and mother-tongue education in the Bantu languages in primary schools became a major trigger for protest and contestation during the struggle against the apartheid regime in the 1970s and '80s. The African National Congress (ANC) and the civic associations that flanked it endorsed the demands of African, coloured and Indian parents (particularly in the urban areas) for their children to be taught in English from primary school (Hartshorne, 1995). By the late 1970s, preference for a de facto English-only policy as an instrument to neutralise glottopolitical ("ethnic" or "tribal") conflicts within the multilingual

African majority became the official line of the ANC. Thanks to the efforts of some expert circles within the liberation movement, however, multilingualism was ultimately retained as a goal in the post-apartheid state's agenda, at least nominally. The sociolinguist Neville Alexander, in particular, contrasted English, the "colonial language", with the country's "indigenous languages" –the local Bantu varieties and his own mother tongue, Afrikaans– and warned that granting English a privileged status, whether de jure or de facto, in the new dispensation was bound to have a polarising effect within the "black" population, separating the educated elite from the poor (Alexander, 1986, 1999, 2004; Webb et al., 2010).

After the end of apartheid, the new constitutional framework reflected the ambiguities of the liberation movement's stance and the compromises of the negotiated transition. According to Section 6 of the 1996 Constitution, the nine standardised Bantu varieties already in use in primary schools across the country (Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu) were declared official languages alongside English and Afrikaans. In addition, the constitutional text reaffirmed the goal of enhancing the status of the varieties spoken as native languages by the African majority ("recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" [6.2]). However, it also required the state to consider a set of qualifying conditions ("usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned"), and enabled the provincial and local governments to choose a select few languages for the purposes of government. Moreover, Section 29 of the 1996 Bill of Rights established that "the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions" was protected only "where that education is reasonably practicable", and that "the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account (a.) equity; (b.) practicability; and (c.) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices".

In fact, the decades since 1996 have witnessed a fast ascendance of English as the dominant language in school curricula. The Language-in-Education Policy adopted in 1997, while providing for the use of all official languages as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT), allowed an early-exit model in which three years of mother tongue education (MTE) in the so-called foundation phase are followed by an exit to English instruction from year four. In addition, since 2009, all schools serving non-English speakers now teach English as a subject from year one. In fact, mother-tongue medium education only survives as a guiding principle or ideology in Afrikaans language schools, where all subjects (other than other languages) are taught in the native language.

As a result, though the constitution allows the use of any of the eleven official languages as a medium of instruction in schools, and though only a small minority of South Africans (almost all from the socioeconomic elite of European and Southern Asian origin) learn and speak English as their native language, only English – and, in a minority of schools, Afrikaans – is currently used beyond year three. As of 2020, according to data presented by the Minister of Basic Education in Parliament in May 2020, 80% of schools were single-medium English and 16% were Afrikaans. Nevertheless, this process continues to be contested among LEP experts and in academic debate. In particular, the "single-minded movement in the direction of a unilingual, English-only dispensation" is often blamed as permitting that "the ruling elite, besides pushing the Afrikaans-orientated middle class on to the political margins, ensure their 'profits of distinction' (à la Bourdieu)" (Alexander, 2004, p. 122).

In what way is neutrality as an analytical lens beneficial when focusing on language curricula discourses? Under what conditions is English prioritised in language curricula in your context? On what kind of data do we base this claim?

Martina:

"Neutrality" in Switzerland, closely linked to its history and its role, has been continuously reinterpreted over the past two centuries (Wylie, 2001; Müller, 2019). In this conversation on LEP, I view "neutrality" as a valuable analytical lens that illuminates the diverse forms of authority ascribed to languages, particularly

hegemonic languages that derive their authority from a sense of anonymity (Woolard, 2008).[4] An examination of "neutrality" allows us to challenge the celebratory discourse on multilingualism in Switzerland, where languages (and their speakers) are hierarchised. The analytical lens further illuminates the local and national political structure and how these link to languages. Finally, this lens helps to theorise the spoken/unspoken and legitimate/illegitimate elements that contribute to the production/reproduction of "neutrality" with respect to LEP in Switzerland. Negotiating language policy can simultaneously be seen as both a practice and a commentary on that practice (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 1). Shedding light on the debate produced by the different speakers and their position, role, interests, or views on language education contributes to our attempt to analyse why certain ideas are favoured as part of broader social projects.

In the context of Thurgau, a vote passed on 3 May 2017 did not correspond to the national strategy on teaching languages. Thanks to the second, very close vote six weeks later (on 14 June 2017), French did not disappear from the curriculum at elementary school. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how this came about, who argued for which solution, and how the decision could have been overturned in just six weeks. The discussion on shifting French to secondary school (years nine to eleven, ages 13-15) began in 2013, exactly 20 years after its introduction at elementary school. My observations are based on the following data set: detailed minutes of local parliament sessions, cantonal and media reports related to the discussion, cantonal language concepts, positional statements of various political parties, cantonal associations and interest groups (e.g., the Swiss Teachers' Union, Chamber of Industry and Commerce) at cantonal level, and drafts for consultation for a potential curriculum at elementary (including English, excluding French) and secondary school (including French) levels. The texts and reports were produced between 2013 (when the discussion began, in response to a political proposal submitted on 13 February 2013, by politicians from centre, left- and right-wing parties) and 2018 (when the new language "concept" of *Sprachenkonzept* was published in the Thurgau canton).

In the context of this conversation, I will limit myself to a few extracts from the dataset to illustrate two points. Firstly, I argue that the attributes associated with English differ from those of French (a national language), despite the presence of similar language ideologies. For instance, there are contrasting views on maintaining French at the primary level. Secondly, I will show that the narrow tilt in favour of the existing language law may stem from different sources, beyond the mere learning and teaching of French as a foreign language. I will thus emphasise the broader scope of language policy initiatives, which encompass more than just the inclusion or exclusion of languages in school curricula. Perhaps, through the process of officialisation, they may serve to anonymise or neutralise societal ideas and align them with a particular vision of the "correct" future at a given sociohistorical moment.

When examining the minutes of the cantonal parliament, which holds the legislative power in Thurgau, English appears to only a limited degree. Of course, the debate revolves around shifting French, not English, to secondary school only. Whenever English is mentioned, politicians on both sides of the debate agree on the undisputed status of English and its place in the curriculum at primary and secondary level. They underline its straightforwardness, accessibility, omnipresence, popularity, general utility as a "world language" (even useful for weak pupils), importance in the labour market ("first and most important foreign language in the practical professional life of our country"), and internationality. Two statements uttered in German (translated into English) by opponents and supporters of the proposal shed light on the nature of the discourse on English.

Brägger is a teacher, member of the Green party and the parliament, and supports the shifting of French to secondary school only:

> For our teenagers, French is really a foreign language in the true sense of the adjective. This contrasts with English, which totally permeates our everyday world. Therefore, in the context of early foreign

language learning, one should not really speak of two foreign languages, but of one and a half at the most. (Brägger, parliamentary minutes. *Grosser Rat*, 03.05.2017)[5]

Schönholzer, a member of the Liberal party, opposed to starting French at secondary level, speaks of the battle against English "as the most popular foreign language" being lost and later quotes a retired professor (in German linguistics):

> I could imagine a different model. English for everyone, French for the elite. The children learn the language that is more accessible to them, i.e., English, in primary school. Those later moving on to the more demanding types of schools, primarily high school students, could then learn French at secondary school. These are also the ones who later tend to hold nationwide functions. In the past, the elite learned Latin, today it could be French. (Schönholzer, liberal party. *Grosser Rat*, 13.08.2014)

One could argue that these statements provide "common sense arguments" in connection with English and have achieved a certain level of neutrality or anonymity. However, the attributes of English are clear, in contrast to French, traditionally brought into "linguistic peace" with one of the majority languages (e.g., German) by the Swiss state for the sake of "national cohesion". Thus, the debate may ultimately be about French rather than English, despite the references to English.

As illustrated above, French is seen as "foreign" (to the German-speaking majority), unpopular, suitable for an elite that still aspires to a few non-compulsory, superior years of schooling before moving on to tertiary education. Elsewhere, its difficulty is noted, the quality of the teaching or the textbooks is questioned, its beauty is emphasised, and its importance for Swiss citizens' identity or for social cohesion within the country is accentuated. Even the emergence of the "positive" attributes for French, a "national" language, challenges its status; otherwise they would not need to be mentioned. The following statement in favour of the proposal to shift French to secondary school, made by Schrepfer, member of a right-wing party and president of a group debating the proposal and the related modification in the cantonal law, may illustrate the point:

This proposal is not about diminishing the importance of French. All group members are aware of the importance of French for our country. We all want our children and young people to have the largest possible set of skills at the end of compulsory school with respect to this beautiful language, which is also important for our identity. (Schrepfer, member of the right-wing party, and president of group debating the proposal in more detail. *Grosser Rat*, 03.05.2017)

As already mentioned, the decision to maintain French at elementary school was taken six weeks after the first vote in the parliament. This close result (62 to 60) – or rather, the shift – is by no means attributable to a single factor. Three main arguments emerged from an analysis of media discourse and parliamentary minutes. However, the numbers 1 to 3 used below are not intended to imply any causal link with frequency of occurrence in language ideological debates.

1) There were several mentions of a package of measures aimed at improving working conditions and relieving the pressure on teachers of French. This package was released shortly before the second vote and consisted of implementing a set of measures that included the creation of smaller student groups, exemption of weaker students from French lessons, and reducing the weight of French marks during the transition from primary school to different levels of secondary school. One left-wing politician said, "French serves its purpose with the improvements. It prevents language stress and patchwork at secondary school" (Züst, member of a left-wing party, 14.06.2017).

2) With respect to the extra-cantonal political situation and its consequences for Thurgau, German-speaking Switzerland's largest canton, Zurich, had in the meantime voted in favour of two foreign languages at elementary school (21.05.2017). It was argued that this would clearly have an influence on rural Thurgau, which would pay a price for becoming an "island": new course books would need to be developed and new teachers recruited, and mobility (between cantons and other educational programmes) would be complicated. There was also mention of the possibility of state intervention being provoked by a violation of the national strategy linked to the "hard-won language concept".

5 All the extracts and statements were translated by Martina Zimmermann from German/Swiss German into English.

3) There were other potential challenges in connection with the proposed shifting of French to secondary school. More French lessons at secondary school would have meant fewer lessons for other subjects such as natural science. This was seen as a hindrance for about two-thirds of young people opting for vocational training after compulsory school. The new timetable was criticised by various actors (e.g., the Swiss Teachers' Union and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce) as too "language heavy", and teachers of non-language subjects feared fewer classes (and consequently, reduced income). A fear of neglecting vocational orientation during compulsory schooling was also expressed.

The measures taken to improve the current situation for teaching and learning French (outlined in point 1) can be interpreted as a reaction to the "difficulties" mentioned for French (but not for English). Points 2 and 3 can be understood as preventing the potentially harmful political-economic consequences of changes to LEP.

The shift in rural Thurgau, I would argue, illustrates that LEP is not about the in-/exclusion of certain languages, but about who has a say in what knowledge is to be acquired, in line with what an imagined "successful" future of the society might mean at a given sociohistorical juncture.

For example, the debate that focused on French lessons at elementary or secondary school is less about how French is learned, and more about equipping young people with the "right bundle of skills" (Urciuoli, 2003). In the 2017 debate, this bundle includes French (and thus multilingual competence), but it also includes vocational orientation and enough science lessons to be potentially equipped with the right resources for an imagined, fluctuating market (Duchêne, 2020, p. 93). The status of a national language was briefly questioned, whereas English seemed to enjoy undisputed authority. However, the temporary questioning of the national language illuminates the interdependence beyond cantonal borders and power structures within Switzerland. One could therefore ask to what extent the cantons can afford to deviate in their decisions from those of the majority of German-speaking cantons, with which they wish/have to be associated. What room for negotiation are they entitled to under different conditions of possibility (cf. Giudici & Manz, 2018)? And with respect to English, one might wonder whether English holds the authority of a fifth national language in Switzerland (Murray & Watts, 2001), existing as a disembodied and intangible entity without an associated territory, and to what extent it may be free from the social constraints that the four national languages must respect.

Rocco:

Since prior to its adoption in 1997, the Language-in-Education policy has triggered a vibrant discussion within the LEP expert community (Crawhall, 1992; Heugh, 1995; Heugh et al., 1995; Banda, 2003; Brock-Utne et al., 2004; Webb et al., 2010; Desai, 2013; Heugh & Stroud, 2020). However, the discussion has remained beyond the political arena, and a public debate on the connection between LEP and inequality has never got off the ground. The role of English in South Africa is generally referred to in objective, non-political (hence "neutral") terms, and is accorded an unproblematically positive value. Financial agencies and investors, for example, routinely praise South Africa's relatively high level of English proficiency among the educated labour force as a major factor in the country's economic appeal.

Generally speaking, public attention to language in education has tended to focus on changes in language policy at South Africa's universities, where the ANC's national government strongly encouraged a shift away from Afrikaans to English to "deracialise" access to higher education and help create a new African elite (Brink, 2006; Giliomee & Schlemmer, 2006). Public debate on the teaching and use of pupils' mother tongue in primary school only emerged in 2011-2012, when the national Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, announced the launching of a pilot project for mother-tongue education in a rural area of the Eastern Cape Province. Designed with the help of linguists at Rhodes University (a traditionally "white", English-medium university with a liberal-progressive tradition and a long record of supporting the "enhancement" of the Xhosa-speaking elite), the project was initially introduced in 70 schools in the Cofimvaba district with the adoption of a mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) strategy, according to which the learners' native language was maintained for mathematics, natural science and technology beyond year three for another three years (Mbude, 2019). At the end of the pilot phase in 2016, since the MTbBE cohort was reported to perform well in English as well as the three native-language subjects, more schools per district were included in a province-wide rollout that included 100 schools. From 2020, school-leaving pilot exams were also offered

in Xhosa. By 2022, as many as 2,015 schools in the province used the home languages of their pupils (Xhosa and Southern Sotho) to teach mathematics, natural science and technology beyond the foundation phase.

When Motshekga reported to parliament on the Eastern Cape Mother Language Education Programme, announcing that her department would move forward with plans to expand the programme to schools in other provinces, this sparked a debate in the national media about the "value" and the "practicality" of mother-tongue education. Supporters of the minister's plan mainly insisted on "value". In her address, Motshekga based her argument on constitutional obligations ("Section 6 of the Constitution lists the official languages [...] and all these languages can be used as languages of learning and teaching or as subjects", in answer to a question in parliament, 13.04.2022). She also referred to expert opinions on the positive effects of primary education in the pupils' native language in terms of educational effectiveness, equality and human capital formation, raising concerns about "the devastating learning consequences" of using English as the medium of instruction for children who speak African languages at home. Motshekga went on to affirm that these consequences would include "lack of conceptual understanding and little identification with the content" (Tyler et al., 2022), and that "one of the biggest reasons why South African children have such poor reading comprehension skills is that they are essentially learning in a 'foreign language' by being taught in English". Motshekga's decision was welcomed as "a victory for language activists" supportive of education in the African languages. Zulu cultural expert, Sihawu Ngubane said that "teaching pupils in their mother tongue will improve the results" and that he did not foresee the programme posing any problems for the pupils ("it's not going to affect anything. Mathematics is still mathematics whether it's taught in English or isiZulu, the theories of mathematics will remain the same") (Kunene, 2022). According to educational psychologist Naomi Holdt, "the concept of teaching particular subjects in a pupil's home language is an excellent one [...] and every pupil deserves the opportunity to be educated in their home language" (Kunene, 2022).

On the other side, counterarguments based on the crucial dimension of "practicality" were put forward, even by the same advocates of mother tongue education. Serious issues related to shifting to a mother tongue-based system include the spatial intermingling of language groups in other parts of the country, the lack of teaching material in the Bantu languages, and the lack of financial and human resources. Some media source even reported that "parents and teachers were never consulted" in the pilot project. According to one primary school subject advisor in the Eastern Cape:

> [...] parents and teachers were basically bulldozed with this programme, they were never consulted before it was implemented. [...] The minister is saying the programme has yielded good results, but this programme was not really properly assessed at schools in the Eastern Cape. When exams came, there were no exam papers set in isiXhosa, so pupils ended up having to write English set exams despite having learned the subjects in isiXhosa. (Kunene, 2022)

In contrast to the omnipresent arguments of the "practicality" of teaching in the mother tongue, any clash between conflicting language ideologies seems to be absent in the South African debate under investigation here. English is assumed to be a "neutral", anonymous resource anyone would be happy to master, with no partisan or political undertone. "Language activism" as an ideology-driven activity is equated to militancy for mother-tongue education (i.e., in languages other than English), and vice versa. Even the thesis that the rise of English in post-apartheid South Africa was the result of a middle-class strategy, comparable to the "elite capture" of former colonial languages in other African countries (Alexander, 2004), receives no mention in the debate triggered by the Eastern Cape Pilot Project. The lack of any critical discourse challenging the assumption of English as a "neutral" language in South Africa is indicative of its dominant and unquestioned hegemonic status in the public domain. Even the strongest advocates of mother-tongue education are reluctant to question its position in the media (cf. Woolard, 2008).

4 Concluding remarks and open questions

In this final section, we explore insights gained from analysing language policy and ideological debates in Switzerland and South Africa, two distinct multilingual contexts with diverse historical, political and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In 2017, the political debate in German-speaking Thurgau questioning the teaching of both French and English at elementary school temporarily challenged Switzerland's legal framework. The analysis highlights the prevailing language ideologies and processes of hierarchisation between languages. While the authority of French is debated, English enjoys an unchallenged, apparently neutralised status in the LEP. Having achieved anonymity, English seems to be have been freed from the hierarchy negotiation of official languages in Switzerland. Furthermore, the temporary challenge to the legal framework reveals how educational decisions that involve the in-/exclusion of types of knowledge, skills, or competencies are justified in accordance with current visions of a profitable future.

In South Africa, the rise of English in LEP at elementary school took advantage of the similarly "neutralised" status of the ex-colonial language. Since the early 2010s, initiatives by the national Minister of Basic Education and pilot projects in the Eastern Cape province have highlighted the importance of mother-tongue education in the African/Bantu languages. However, even here, the debate substantially confirmed the language hierarchy that had emerged even before the end of the apartheid regime and by 1997 was institutionalised in the school system. Although the association between mother-tongue education and apartheid is no longer mentioned as relevant (Kaschula, 2022), an informal but "unassailable" (Alexander, 1999) hierarchy among the official languages, with English as the dominant code, is still being kept off the public agenda. Despite conflicting with the Constitution, English is widely regarded as the preponderant language of national progress and individual mobility for all language groups, and seen as part of an aperspectival and objective reality, even by proponents of indigenous language use.

In the case of the Thurgau canton, as in the case of the rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province, taking "neutrality" as an analytical lens illuminates the unspoken, the taken-for-granted, the anonymous and the undisputed, accentuating the naturalisation processes of language hierarchies. We argue that, in both contexts, we can only understand the status of languages (e.g., uncontroversial English; French and its transfer to secondary school as a hindrance to other important subjects; Bantu languages and their use as a time- and money-consuming "luxury" and a hindrance for pupils from underprivileged backgrounds) and discursive processes by zooming in on conditions, actors and interests at the local level. Zooming out, however, to consider (trans-) local, national or global conditions, is equally important. In the neoliberal, globalising economic system, there is a tendency to evaluate specific skills according to their potential for economic capitalisation, and this affects the way we organise different areas of our society. Education is a domain in which anticipations of the future are particularly visible and tied in with the neoliberal logic of economic expansion, articulating and stylising the ideal of an individual with the potential to be competitive in the labour market and facilitate future economic growth, distinction and success (Zimmermann, 2019, p. 3). The focus on political discourse at the local level sheds light on neoliberal rationalisations based on language ideologies and speculative visions, and on the sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflictual intertwining of (trans-) local, regional and global logics. At a given sociohistorical juncture, these visions are based on visions of a "successful" future, to which specific skills (e.g., specific language competences or vocational training) acquired through local education may contribute. Such visions are shaped by the high level of integration of both countries into global financial networks centred around largely English-dominated economies such as those of the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Under neoliberal conditions, policy and political discourse debating policy can be seen as a reaction to economic needs. As English is seen to have economic qualities – insofar as straightforward competence in English can apparently be converted into economic capital in a neoliberal sense – its "value" is no longer disputed (Bourdieu, 1986). What emerges is not only a clear hierarchy between different languages in two officially multilingual countries, but also a hierarchy between the state or the political sphere and the economic sphere, whereby the former serves the latter for the production of *homines oeconomici*, with the right bundle of skills and the ability to use them flexibly in a hypothetical future. Struggles between hierarchised (trans-) local or global interests also become apparent, as varying definitions of given skills determine their importance (or lack of it) and the extent to which they are allocated resources (time, money, workforce, etc.).

It would be naive to argue that English language skills automatically ensure equal access to top positions in the economy for all members of different linguistic groups, given that multiple complex factors are at play. Individual effort and commitment cannot fully account for all social and economic differences. To

explore the way in which these differences play out, are explained and contested by different social actors (e.g., teachers, politicians, parents and experts), ethnographic fieldwork would be necessary (cf. Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). Our analysis, on the other hand, which focus on language ideologies while debating policies in two different contexts, illustrates that policies based on such assumptions do not contribute to erasing differences. Certain social differences remain or even risk being further reinforced, for example, by the promise to simplify dispensation from French lessons or the continuing non-existence of exam papers and teaching materials in the Bantu languages. In both contexts, English is widely viewed as a valuable resource that serves to symbolically distinguish those who have achieved economic success and facilitates their ability to sustain that success across generations.

To conclude these joint reflections, we raise questions about the future focus of language policymaking discourse. Will dominant language ideologies persist or gradually evaporate? How will shifts in dominant language ideologies affect the authority given to different languages? We argue that examining local language ideological debates may provide insights into power dynamics and resource allocation. Understanding the prioritisation of interests requires comprehension of the constraints at local level. Our analysis and existing studies on LEP suggest that discursive constraints tend to align with the prevailing distribution of power (Blommaert, 1999). We are convinced that data-based conversations across disciplinary and contextual boundaries – but situated in the here and now – can sharpen our analytical view of what has become "neutral" or achieved "aperspectival objectivity" (Nagel, 1986). This in turn makes it possible not to lose sight of social differences and their consequences.

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