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Societal multilingualism in South Tyrol: Language contact, diglossia and the dominance of the German-speaking minority

Stephanie Risse

Alps and Caucasus from a typological viewpoint: homogeneity vs heterogeneity

The purpose of my essay is to give a brief overview of the “legal construct” of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen (hereinafter South Tyrol), because it is widely considered a showcase regulation of a historical ethnic conflict by political and legal means. In our general understanding the Alps form one homogeneous territory, mostly due to their geographical location and setup.

However, politically speaking, there are eight national states associated with the Alpine region and referred to as “Alpine Countries”. In 1989 they have agreed on an international law convention for the protection and sustainable development of the Alps. Here’s a list of these Alpine Countries: Germany, France, Italy, Liechtenstein, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, Monaco. The European Union acts as a partner of this association. These countries’ “official languages” (German, French, Italian, and Slovenian) are naturally among the languages spoken in the Alpine territory. But, as in any other region around the globe, the number of languages actually spoken there is considerably higher. We can therefore say that the Alps are characterised by many small-scale multilingual areas.

Having said that, it should be pointed out that the Alps are still relatively homogeneous when it comes to linguistic diversity, compared, for example, to the Caucasus. The Alps and the Caucasus both look back on a multilingual past. The two territories are, however, rooted in completely different, if not to say opposed, patterns of socio-political ideology: There is, on the one hand, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a multi-ethnic monarchy, in which the Alps played a predominant role. On the other hand there was “the early Soviet Union, where Lenin’s Language Policy led to a real appreciation of a multitude of languages. Recognition, literalization and promotion of languages which had lacked systematic attention in Tsarist Russia, were encouraged” (Ehlich 2006: 25).

As we now know, both attempts of societal multilingualism failed, although languages per se were not the primary cause for this failure. Historical Tyrol, as part of the Austro-Hungarian-Empire, belonged to a multi-ethnic state whose inhabitants commonly spoke more than one language. The idea of “one nation – one language” was violently enforced against the dynastic concept. After the failure of Austria-Hungary and the experience of Stalin’s brutal Russification policy within a multilingual Soviet Union, stifling Lenin’s

1 Prof. Aggregato, Universität Bozen (I).
2 “Europe is anything but the most linguistically diverse continent. Following recent estimates on ethnoogue. com (accessed on 8 June 2015), Europe would be home to merely 286 (or: approx. 4%) of the world’s estimated 7,102 living languages.” (Darquennes/Vandenbussche 2015: 2)
multilingual ambitions at birth, the whole idea of state-prescribed multilingualism was discredited throughout Europe.

From this perspective we still need to find out much more about the reasons why these multilingual societies have failed. Linguistic research on Austria-Hungary (Schjerve-Rindler 2003, Ohnheiser et al. 1999) allows the conclusion that, beside many examples where multilingualism led to conflict, there were also some situations of successful multilingualism to be found within the royal public administration, education or the military, and that in some of the crown dependencies languages were not exploited for the purpose of political mobilisation under the pretence of building national identity (Boaglio 2003).

*Language policy in the Alps: monolingualism vs multilingualism*

Despite all that, the notion of a national state – in particular the idea of a nation that is united by one single language, Anderson’s famous “invention of a nation” – became generally accepted. Recent examples following the breakup of Yugoslavia or examples in the context of the current crisis in Eastern Ukraine testify this development. All summed up, political as well as social action in Europe – and here I explicitly include Russia – is still largely determined by the presupposition of some “consolidated Monolingualism”. How can languages still heat up political issues to such an extent that conflicts and struggles for power between different groups or even nations can culminate in a battle of languages, if not for this reason? In this context it won’t do any harm if we recalled one seemingly simple principle, namely the one that not languages per se kill other languages but that, in conflicts, languages are exploited serve people’s purposes.

As a result, Europe finds itself in a constant “trial-and-error situation” when it comes to multilingualism, because we act on the assumption that we are faced with homogeneous language groups that encounter other, equally homogeneous, language groups. When such groups meet we get what, in linguistics, we call “language contact”. At the same time we know from experience that said homogeneity does not exist, just as little as strictly monolingual speakers.

Join me in a little experiment: Think of all your friends and acquaintances, your colleagues at work or your fellow students and screen them for people who actually use one language only. I am sure that you will find only a tiny few. What we are talking about here is not linguistic perfection, but a both realistic and practicable definition of multilingualism: Bi- or Multilingualism – even better: multilingual competence – will be seen as the command and use of two or more linguistic systems, whatever the level of proficiency and the age of acquisition of those languages. Multilingual speakers normally use a bi- or multilingual “speech mode” including mix language (code-switch and borrow).

So, let’s recapitulate: For our modern European societies (or nations), as well as for the individual people living in them, it is true that multilingualism is the rule rather than the exception. Nevertheless the political frameworks and their associated institutions, especially the educational systems, are tailored to monolingualism. At this point our European Standard Languages enter the stage. Most of them are generally binding, as they are backed by a nation state. The emancipation of standard languages offers some in-
disputable advantages, since they enable functioning communication over widespread geographical territories.

But, again, it is a fact that standard languages are not quite as homogeneous as legal codes and constitutions want to make us believe. Like a roof, standard languages form a communication link between widespread language areas. But underneath or within standard languages we have a variety of “languages” that mostly end in the suffix “-lect”: dialects, sociolects and ethnolects, just to name a few. They denominate linguistic particularities within a standard language used by social groups (sociolects) or ethnic groups (ethnolects), or also groups that define themselves according to their place of settlement. An old saying among linguists (by an unknown author) best describes the tense relationship between standard language and dialects: „A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

Languages such as German and Italian, which are the main focus of this essay, are highly characterised by regionally rooted dialects – or varieties, if we want to stick to correct linguistic terminology – as opposed to Russian, for example. Furthermore it is true for the German language that the nation states where German is spoken as an official language do not consider the role of dialects equally important. Then we also have to take into account the differences in what is considered “standard” in the respective German-speaking countries: „German, like English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese (…) and other languages, is an instance of what Kloss (1978: 66-7) terms a ‘pluricentric’ language, i.e. a language with several interacting centres, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms.“ (Clyne 1995: 20)

For German this pluricentric concept was packed into the D-A-CH-(L) formula, which implies that we will see language differences even concerning the standardised German in those countries with German as the official language: Germany (D), Austria (A), Switzerland (CH). Also in Liechtenstein German is the official language whereas in Luxembourg German is co-official language, beside French and the Luxembourgish established in law in 1984. The differences in the German “Sprachraum” differs however: Whereas people in Germany take it for granted that their standard German is the “proper” German, language policy-makers in Austria rightly insist on the recognition of its linguistic originalities, in particular on a phonetic and lexical level.

The Australian linguist Michael Clyne describes Austria as “caught between linguistic cringe and linguistic imperialism” (Clyne 1995: 31).3

Institutionalised multilingualism with separate language groups - the “showcase” of South Tyrol (Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen)

As you surely knew better, the “Autonome Provinz Bozen-Südtirol”, as it is officially called in German, or Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano – Alto Adige in Italian, also commonly referred to as Südtirol or Alto Adige, quite recently also called Sudtirolo in modern

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3 Along the same lines we have to read the correction of a headline introducing an online report about South Tyrol in the British “Guardian”: “This article was amended (…). The original headline said: “South Tyrol: where Germany and Italy collide” rather than “South Tyrol: where Austria and Italy collide”. This has been corrected. This article was further amended (…) to clarify South Tyrol’s cultural heritage and geographical location.” (Online: www.theguardian.com 20 August 2012)
Italian, does not border on Germany, but on Austria. Among the community of European states this territory has found its own way of dealing with a historical ethnic conflict.

One cornerstone of this form of autonomy is the subdivision of citizens into language groups, a separation that was designed in 1945 to protect the German and Ladin-speaking minorities within the Italian state territory. As a consequence the collective protective mechanisms are limited to these three established language groups: German-speaking South Tyroleans, Italians and Ladins. Other groups, such as the autochthonous Sinti, who speak Romanes, or migrants, are not recognised as separate language groups. Language is a major pillar of this legal construct. It is thus implied that the South Tyrolean autonomy is committed to the above-mentioned idea of consolidated monolingualism (Risse 2013).

In a Western European context the South Tyrolean language policy is positioned somewhere in the middle between the conflict-ridden Basque country and Luxembourg. Luxembourg boasts the best conditions for a socio-political integration of multilingualism, being clearly more flexible than South Tyrol with its highly institutionalised system (Naglo 2007). It is a system that strongly oscillates between separating and integrating mechanisms. One of the separating factors is that citizens, in almost all aspects of daily life, and in particular when it comes to the choice of a school or a workplace, have to opt for one language group only – the one that they feel most related to. It is, however, legally not possible to express one’s multilingualism or emotional allegiance to two or three of these language groups. For many people who were raised bi- or trilingually this situation is in fact a dilemma. Overall, the South Tyrolean Autonomy can thus be described as an example for a successful *regulation* of an ethno-linguistic conflict, but not as a *solution* as such (Marko 2005).

There is not enough space now to go into more detail of this exciting legal-political construct which also played a role in the European discussion about the status quo in Kosovo. So let me just briefly direct your attention to two interesting aspects about how, according to recent analyses, certain developments and interventions in language policy can be reconstructed with the help of sociolinguistic research.

*Language contact and diglossia – findings about oral communication in South Tyrol*

South Tyrol’s roughly 500,000 inhabitants are Italian citizens, but each one of them has to choose which one of the three language groups he or she wants to belong to. It is therefore a very subjective commitment that leads to the statistical subdivision of the population. According to those statistics two thirds reported to belong to the German language group, which is a clear minority within the overall Italian territory. In South Tyrol, however, they form a majority. Over the past few years more and more migrants from other countries have settled in South Tyrol, so that their share has reached 8.2 % of the population. Still, from a judicial and political perspective, they remain “languageless”, because they cannot, or only under certain limitations, become part of one of the three officially recognised language groups of German, Italian and Ladin.

At this point, another sociolinguistic aspect with an impact on the daily-life speaking routine of the people comes up: Languages are not only a means of communication, because their speakers – intentionally or unintentionally – also use them to disclose their
affiliation to one of the language groups. Italians in South Tyrol are considered “de-regionalised”, because they hardly speak any dialect. Italian in South Tyrol does contain some Germanisms, especially on a phonemic level. Italians in South Tyrol use, for example, German diphthongs, and language contact has resulted in mutual German-Italian loanwords. It is still generally perceived that Italians are less “rooted” in this territory because they do not speak their own distinctive dialect. It is only in the adjacent province of Trento, south of Bolzano, that such a dialect can again be detected (Risse 2010, Risse 2013: 44ff).

Ladin languages of South Tyrol (spoken in the valleys of Gadertal/Val Badia and Gröden/Val Gardena), on the other hand, are understood to be a perceivable proof for the “rootedness” of their speakers⁴, the same is true for the German dialects spoken by South Tyroleans. These dialects are considered evidence of a long-established cultural tradition, and they convey the idea that a specific group “has always lived here”. German dialects are used by the people to distance themselves from the Italian group on the one hand, and from standard German on the other.

From diglossia to a dialect-Italian-(standard German)-continuum

Since the 1990s two developments have become evident for the German language in this small-scale territory: Firstly, a clear diglossia is no longer existent.

⁴ The Ladin school system is the only one in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen offering trilingual education (German, Italian, Ladin) from the very beginning. Transversal studies carried out among those trilingual pupils in the Ladin Valleys (2008-2010) give evidence that this exceptional educational system brings astonishing results concerning literacy, text quality and language acquisition (Risse 2014; Risse/Franceschini 2016).
Diglossia refers to a situation in which dialects are used by a single language community. In addition to the community’s everyday language variety (labelled “L” or “low” variety), a second, highly codified variety (labelled “H” or “high”) is used in certain situations such as literature, formal education, or other specific settings, but not used for ordinary conversation. It started out with a shift towards a standard-dialect-continuum, i.e. the speakers did not switch from one variety to the other but gradually and unconsciously lapsed from standard German to dialect. Clearly discernible phonetic markers for this phenomenon are, for example, the palatalised “s”-sounds, as well as diphthongisation, plus lexical and morphological changes.

The second trend is of interest to the entire German language area as it shows an opposing development to what is happening in the cities and conurbations of Germany and Austria: Whereas from 1982 to 1998 political discussion on language issues in South Tyrol was characterised by the perception of German as a threatened minority language, the core topics shifted between 1998 and 2008 towards one central question: To what an extent can bilingualism be promoted without threatening the future of the German language? This mind shift in political discussion was mainly due to the easing of political tension but also to growing prosperity within the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. The German-speaking minority had realised that learning Italian meant an economic advantage. Italians were no longer considered a threat in the first place.

This period was also characterised by a distinct call for standardisation and thus an approximation to standard German. Having said that, oral communication in South Tyrol would rather be geared towards Austrian Standard German (ASG) and when it comes to written communication towards a blend of Austrian and German Standard German (GSG). In formal contexts any variation, i.e. dialects, were rejected rather vehemently. Said rejection now seems to have turned into its exact opposite, as is confirmed by data from a running project KiIS5.

Therefore nowadays we would better speak of a dialect-Italian-(standard German)-continuum. This trend has become more and more evident since 2008. Especially with young people dialects are trendy. They make sure via the new media (SMS, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) that the increasing informal literalization of dialects moves on steadily. Some types of German-language schools have recently realised that they even need to teach dialect. Just to give you an example: The management of local vocational schools (German as L1) has come to the conclusion that they will have to offer their students from foreign family backgrounds classes in German dialect. When it comes to language, life in South Tyrol is dominated by the dialect-speaking German minority, which leads to a situation where at least a passive command of German dialects is indispensable, especially in the crafts, in trade and in service professions. At times basic knowledge is even required by employers.

By contrast, German linguists are currently leading a heated discussion about the extent to which German is influenced or even considerably changed by immigrant languages like Turkish, Russian, Serbian/Croatian or other typical immigrant languages due

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5 KiIS – Kommunikation in Institutionen Südtirols, oral data collected since 2008, in various institutions (educational system, health care, administration and political sphere).
to strong immigration in cities and conurbations (esp. Berlin, Vienna, Frankfurt or the Ruhrgebiet). Typical labels of this debate are catchwords like “Kiezdeutsch” and “Multikultideutsch” (*both referring to multiethnic German*).

Autochthonous dialects like in South Tyrol hardly play any role in these countries, on the contrary, because especially among young people colleagues from other German-speaking areas have observed a permanent retreat of German dialects.

From this point of view, for language policy-makers the logical conclusion of the development in South Tyrol must be that South Tyrolean German be incorporated in the D-A-CH-(L) construct. Prerequisite would be to systematically compile South Tyrolean German within the framework of an international project called “Variation in the Grammar of Standard German”. On a political level this would mean, however, that another bit of the historically derived claim of the German-speaking minority in South Tyrol to be part of Austria must be abandoned. Linguistically the existence of South Tyrolean as an independent variety of German, including its multitude of Italianisms, is verifiable. In oral everyday communication South Tyrolean German is already a fact. Therefore we can conclude that a new dialect, or a new variety of German, has long emerged. Now it lies with decision-makers in language and education policies to react accordingly.

**References**


