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## **The face and voice of the SBB CFF FFS: A sociolinguistic study of multilingualism for the branding of a Swiss institution**

### **Abstract**

Combining ethnographic, interview and linguistic landscape data, this project aims to understand the ideologies and hierarchies of the Swiss national languages and English as a lingua franca (ELF) behind the management of institutional multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS, the main Swiss national railway company. It also studies how language is used to brand this company as Swiss through an exploration of the use, role, status and ideologies associated with these languages. A critical qualitative analysis revealed that the regional hierarchies of institutional languages in this company (re)produce the territoriality principle of Switzerland. Moreover, the national languages are ideologically treated as markers of authenticity and national identity to brand the company as Swiss while English is adopted as a global language, rendering the SBB CFF FFS globally competitive. The study participants, passenger attendants on trains, emerge as institutional representatives of the SBB CFF FFS and as embodiments of the Swiss national identity based on their privileging Swiss multilingualism over English.

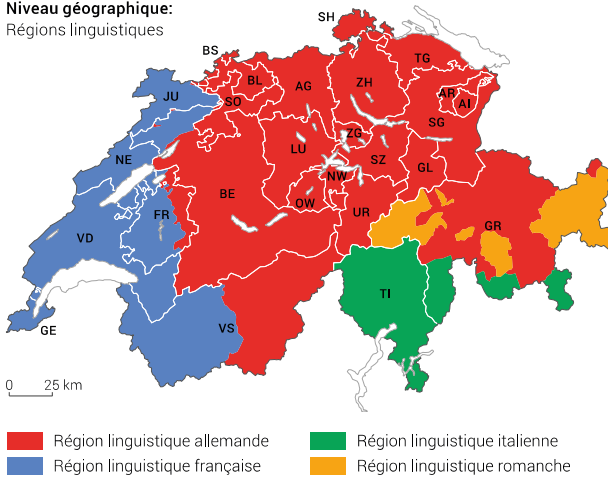
### **1. Introduction**

In Switzerland there are three official national languages, German, French and Italian. Romansh is not an official language, “only” a national one, and it is not used in federal communication except with people who request it (Federal Constitution 1999, art. 70), which is why it is not considered in this study. As figure 1 shows, the national languages are organised by the territoriality principle, which separates them into distinct monolingual territories. The blue zone in figure 1 corresponds to the francophone area, the red one to the Germanophone area, the green one to the Italophone area and the yellow one to the Romansh area. The map also shows the only entirely Italophone canton of Switzerland, Ticino (TI), the French-German bilingual cantons of Fribourg/Freiburg (FR), Bern (BE) and Valais/Wallis (VS), and the trilingual canton of the Grisons (GR) (Romansh, German and Italian). Even within the individual linguistic regions, though, the linguistic situation is not homogeneous. In fact, especially in the Swiss German region, and in Ticino to some extent, there is an enormous variety of dialects that coexist with the more “standard” variety of the languages, German and Italian respectively. The diglossia resulting from the coexistence of High German (the

“high” variety, Ferguson 1959, 327) and Swiss German (the “low” variety, Ferguson 1959, 327) in the German-speaking regions of Switzerland is particularly interesting since the great majority of the people who identify themselves as German speakers actually speak Swiss German most of the time, both at work and at home (Steinberg 2015, 141). This diglossic situation may cause some frustration for those who learn German in Switzerland as the language that is actually most frequently encountered in real life situations there is Swiss German rather than High German.

## Les quatre régions linguistiques de la Suisse

Niveau géographique:  
Régions linguistiques



Sources: OFS – Niveaux géographiques de la Suisse, Relevé structurel (RS)

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Fig. 1: The four linguistic regions of Switzerland (blue – Francophone territory (Roman-dic); red – Germanophone territory; green – Italophone territory; yellow – Romansh territory)

Although the Federal Constitution (1999, art. 70) attributes equal status to German, French and Italian, these languages enjoy uneven power because they are unequally represented both in geographic and demographic terms. This sometimes translates into a competition between the national languages and into their ideological hierarchisation (Berthele 2016), which ranks – Swiss – German as the most powerful language in Switzerland, being the one spoken most by the Swiss population, followed by French and then by Italian. Nonetheless, Swiss multilingualism is often adopted as a marker of Swiss national identity, history and culture and as such it is involved in the branding of the nation on a global scale (Del Percio 2016a, 83).

The growing presence and importance of English within Switzerland further complexifies the already elaborate national linguistic picture and it is perceived mainly from two contrasting standpoints. On the one hand, English is contemplated as a lingua franca (ELF) to ease communication not only between foreigners but also Swiss citizens from different linguistic regions (Ronan 2016; Stepkowska 2016). On the other hand, though, English is considered a threat to Swiss national identity and traditions as its use is said to reduce the linguistic richness characterising Switzerland. This second stance on English echoes Stotz's (2006) "confederate discourse", which, among other things, establishes that using English in Switzerland represents an "impoverishment of the relations between the language communities" (Stotz 2006, 260; see also Ronan 2016).

Approaching these topics through the SBB CFF FFS railways,<sup>1</sup> Switzerland's hallmark national railway institution, the aim of this project is to understand the ideologies and hierarchies attributed to the Swiss national languages and English as a lingua franca (ELF) within this iconic company as well as the ways in which they are integrated in its branding as a Swiss institution. The goal is to grasp the economic, cultural and symbolic values of Switzerland's official languages and of ELF as they are constructed by the SBB CFF FFS. Covering the entire Helvetic territory, connecting all the linguistic regions and adopting the three official languages and English as their own institutional languages, the SBB CFF FFS embody Swiss national diversity and become a potential promoter of Switzerland, its values and identity on a global scale.

The research questions that guide the study are the following:

- What language ideologies and hierarchies are behind the management of multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS?
- How is multilingualism used to construct the SBB CFF FFS as a Swiss company? In particular, what are the passenger attendants' language practices and ideas about multilingualism?
- What are the role and status of English at the SBB CFF FFS? When and where is it used, by and with whom and for what purposes?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In the economic process of expansion that has characterised late capitalism since the end of the 1970s, language – and therefore linguistic and communication competences – has acquired a central importance "since a variety of related 'services' are based on communication" (Flubacher et al. 2018, 6). This has made language both the tool through which work is accomplished and a product of it (Heller 2010,

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<sup>1</sup> Schweizerische Bundesbahnen, SBB; Chemins de fer fédéraux suisses, CFF; Ferrovie federali svizzere, FFS in German, French and Italian respectively.

104) and it has an exchange value to produce and obtain material goods, especially money (Heller 2010, 102). This commodification of language considers linguistic resources and skills as being key to “enter the globalised market” (Duchêne/Heller 2009a, 371) and to access niche markets (Duchêne/Heller 2009a, 374) as well as providing different types of resources (symbolic as well as material). This is also possible because language is a marker of identity and authenticity and, therefore, it can be tied to the marketing of local products indexing “something recognisable as a place or a social category” (Duchêne/Heller 2012b, 11). In terms of linguistic skills to be employed in one’s workplace, language is commodified both as a “technical skill” (when a certain linguistic competence is required for a position, and this is measurable through language tests and certificates) and as a “soft skill” (when communicative competences are involved) (Flubacher et al. 2018, 4) that enhance the value of their possessors.

Very much related to the notion of the commodification of language is the key concept of “language investment” (Flubacher et al. 2018), which consists of “individual, institutional, or societal investments in terms of financial resources, time, and energy for the development of language competences that (ideally) can be turned into economic profit” in the future (Duchêne 2016, quoted in Flubacher et al. 2018, 2). Not all types of investment value language purely economically though. As Garrido (2020, 76) points out, skills in “non-strategic languages” may, in fact, produce a symbolic capital rather than an economic one, even if the symbolic capital resulting from the investment in “non-strategic languages” could pay off in economic terms as well. In fact, the symbolic capital of these “non-strategic languages” (Garrido 2020, 75) can make a worker an attractive potential employee with desirable qualities and, consequently, also a probable recipient of an economic return. The value of each language depends on the linguistic market, a Bourdieusian concept that refers to the context in which linguistic exchanges are performed by hierarchically positioned social actors in a wide array of social situations (Flubacher et al. 2018, 7; Barakos/Selleck 2019, 367).

The historical, economic and political context of late capitalism inevitably generates a variety of language ideologies, which is a central and cross-cutting concept in this research project. Language ideologies can be defined as socially constructed ideas and beliefs about language that circulate unevenly in social networks (Heller 2007; Woolard/Schieffelin 1994, 55), which, according to Heller (2007), render language a “fundamentally *social* phenomenon” (original emphasis, Heller 2007, 2). They do not concern only language but are also intrinsically linked to political, social, cultural and economic structures in a certain setting.

Despite the various and, at times, contrasting language ideologies attached to Swiss historical multilingualism, the latter has often been constructed alongside Switzerland’s cultural diversity as a marketing object to successfully promote the nation internationally (Del Percio 2016a: 86). This relates to another crucial

concept in this study, which is nation branding, consisting in the political, economic and cultural strategies that market culture and national identity for economic and commercial ends (Aronczyk 2013, 31) by advertising certain – ideally unique – characteristics of the nation-state in order to create a successful and appealing image of it on a global scale (Aronczyk 2013; Del Percio 2016a, b).

### 3. Methods, Participants and Approach

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

Four methods of data collection were used:

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

Different methods were used to obtain different types and sources of data on the same phenomena and to produce a nuanced and fine-grained analysis. The collection of publicly available material (including research of the linguistic landscapes) started in August 2020 and the eight participant observations and interviews were conducted between January and March 2021.

The main informants in this qualitative study are six SBB CFF FFS passenger attendants working on long distance trains that cross the borders between the Swiss linguistic regions. Three of them were based in Romandie (the French-speaking

part of Switzerland) and three in Ticino (the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland). As part of the Francophone and Italoophone linguistic minorities, these passenger attendants were likely to have more revealing opinions about the power relations among different languages coexisting within the same nation and the same institution. Defined by the company's slogan "The face and voice of SBB", passenger attendants are – linguistically speaking – the most interesting actors within the institution. On the one hand, this is because they are constantly exposed to national and international passengers and their various languages and to the changes of language occurring when travelling from one Swiss linguistic region to the other. On the other hand, they are required to have the richest linguistic profile within the company, which renders them the ideal participants for this study on multilingualism.

## 4. Results

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

### 4.1 Multilingualism as a Marker of "Swissness" and as a "Welcoming Strategy"

Swiss multilingualism is used as a marker of "Swissness" to brand the SBB CFF FFS as a Swiss institution and to generate economic profit by indexing an idealised Swiss authenticity and the good qualities connected to the Swiss brand. These are, for example, innovation, exclusivity, cultural diversity and high standard services (Del Percio 2016b, 1-2). In this way, the products sold by the SBB CFF FFS, namely their transport services and the numerous offers related to them, acquire extra value in the eyes of the customers, as they appear more "real", more "Swiss", and therefore worthier of the investment due to the high-standard qualities associated with "Swissness" indicated above.

An example of the use of multilingualism to brand the SBB CFF FFS as Swiss is the company's logo (fig. 2), which almost blends its identity with the Swiss national identity by combining the powerful national symbols of Swiss multilingualism (represented by the text "SBB CFF FFS", which displays the three official languages in Switzerland in order of demographic importance, that is German, French and Italian) and alluding to the Swiss flag in the red and white

icon. In sum, through the company's logo, Swiss multilingualism is marketed by the SBB CFF FFS and therefore becomes a selling point because it inscribes Switzerland's (idealised) authenticity and identity in it (Duchêne/Heller 2012b, 8).



Fig. 2: The SBB CFF FFS' logo

Multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS is also a marketing tool because it is ideologically constructed by the company as a “welcoming strategy”. In fact, multilingualism is conceived as an instrument to meet the various linguistic needs of the company's clients and to offer them a pleasurable customer experience. In this way, the ideal SBB CFF FFS clients are imagined as either Swiss (residents) predominantly using one of the official national languages or as foreigners proficient in English. This ideological construction of multilingualism creates an inclusive effect that strives to make the company's imagined clientele feel recognised, considered and accepted in its – limited – linguistic heterogeneity. For example, multilingualism is used as a “welcoming strategy” on all official multilingual signs in the stations (fig. 3 and 4) or when a passenger speaks German and the passenger attendant accommodates them by also speaking German so that the passenger will more likely feel at ease.



Fig. 3: Multilingual sign on a ticket machine in Fribourg/Freiburg (FR: Bilingual region (Francophone and Germanophone)), 7-12-2020



Fig. 4: Multilingual sign between the railway lines, Lugano (TI: Italophone region), 18-10-2020

This interpretation of multilingualism is rooted in the company’s general language policy (SBB CFF FFS 2017) that provides guidelines on how to speak with, write to and collaborate between employees. The slogan and title of this document is “Unterwegs zuhause”, “En route, comme chez soi”, “In viaggio come a casa propria” (“on the road as if you were at home”, my translation) and it is defined as “the heart of the company’s brand and the promise to its clients that when travelling with the SBB CFF FFS they will feel at home” (my translation from Italian, SBB CFF FFS 2017, 3). As the extract below shows, the document suggests that this feeling of comfort and safety normally associated with one’s home derives precisely from addressing customers in their own language:

Our aim is to convey, with words, the feeling “on the road as if you were at home”. To do this, the person must be placed at the centre. We listen to our interlocutors’ needs and *speak their language*. (SBB CFF FFS 2017, 4. My emphasis, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

In this way, by being involved in this “welcoming strategy”, multilingualism is mobilised as a marketing tool by the SBB CFF FFS.

## 4.2 Power Dynamics among the Swiss National Languages and English

The study revealed that the Swiss institutional languages of the company are hierarchically classified on national and cantonal levels according to their demographic representation and communicative value (which places German first, followed by French and then Italian, see Berthele 2016) and according to the territoriality principle, which, in each linguistic region, makes the local language official and

<sup>2</sup> Original text: “Il nostro obiettivo è di trasmettere, con le parole, la sensazione ‘in viaggio come a casa propria’. Per fare questo la persona deve essere posta al centro. Diamo ascolto alle esigenze del nostro interlocutore e *parliamo la sua lingua*.” (my emphasis, SBB CFF FFS 2017, 4).

therefore the most important one. On a national scale, the hierarchisation of languages is reflected, for example, in the logo of the company (fig. 2), where the languages are ordered from the most spoken (German) to the least spoken (Italian), leaving French in the middle. On a cantonal scale, the local language acquires more importance according to the territoriality principle. In multilingual top-down signs, the local language is generally placed at the top of the sign or on the left-hand side (fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 5: Multilingual texts, timetable screen, Geneva (GE: Francophone region), 20-10-2020

German clearly emerges as the predominant language within the company, even in the cantons in which it is not the official language, since its importance as the second language (after the local language) is remarkable. In the linguistic landscapes of Romandie (the French-speaking region) and Ticino (the Italian-speaking canton), German is always present as the second language in multilingual signs (fig. 4 and 5), which underlines its importance on both a national and cantonal scale. This predominance of German in SBB CFF FFS environments in Romandie and Ticino can logically be explained by the adjacency of these regions to the German-speaking area of Switzerland, which, as mentioned above, is geographically the largest and is located in the middle of the national territory. This predominance of German even on a regional scale is consistent with the hierarchisation of languages that happens on a national scale visible in the logo of the SBB CFF FFS as mentioned above (fig. 2), pointing to the coexistence of the two scales and to the influence that the national scale has on the regional one.

Finally, English occupies an important position on both the national and cantonal level as it is treated as the global language. On the one hand, it is used for marketing purposes in catchy product names, such as “RailAway” and “EasyRide”, which both designate promotions that provide discounts for travel. On the other hand, English is used as the lingua franca with both foreigners and Swiss citizens from different linguistic regions and it is always present on the multilingual signs signalling danger in stations (fig. 4). This use of English addressed to foreign

travellers and tourists imagined as speaking ELF is detectable in the linguistic landscapes of all of the stations taken into consideration but to different degrees. In Zürich HB (Central Station), for example, the presence of English is much more dominant than in Chur or Lugano. This is probably also due to the greater size and centrality of the station, which also has international train connections, as well as to its proximity to the international airport of Zürich.

The order of the languages on public signs in the stations is probably linked to instrumental and pragmatic considerations (especially as far as the signs signalling danger are concerned) and possibly to questions of identity and legal obligations at cantonal level. This relates to the ideology of language as a marker of membership and belonging to a certain community (Del Percio/Duchêne 2012, 49-50) and it is valid on both the cantonal and national scale. On the one hand, the fact of privileging the local language in multilingual signs and through the broader linguistic landscapes of the different stations respects the principle of territoriality (see Stotz 2006; Berthele 2016; Ronan 2016), marking these spaces as “belonging to” the local population (see Papen 2012, 57). On the other hand, by using multilingual signs, the spaces of the SBB CFF FFS stations are constructed as belonging to the Swiss population in general and not only to the local population in particular. In fact, since multilingualism is ideologically constructed as a Swiss characteristic, the multilingual signs in the stations can be seen as marking that the spaces where they are located are *Swiss* spaces, belonging to the Swiss nation and therefore also to the Swiss population.

This hierarchisation of languages, resulting in the predominance of German, functions as an instrument of inclusion and exclusion as it gives unequal access to good quality information and sometimes also to job positions. For example, passenger attendants must have a very high level of Standard German (level C2) and must know two additional languages at level B1 (oral) out of French, Italian and English before the end of their training. If these linguistic requirements are not fulfilled, they may not get the job. This emerged both from the participants’ informal declarations and from research on the official website of the company, where the job requirements are listed. Another form of inclusion and exclusion based on the hierarchisation of languages is visible in the linguistic landscapes through occasional official signs of the SBB CFF FFS featuring “only” the majority languages German and French plus English. An example of this is reported in figures 6 and 7, featuring two multilingual signs in the stations of Geneva and Zürich HB (Central Station) respectively, both of which have direct connections to Ticino (the Italoophone canton of Switzerland). In these cases, the Italoophone linguistic minority is excluded from the addressees of the signs.

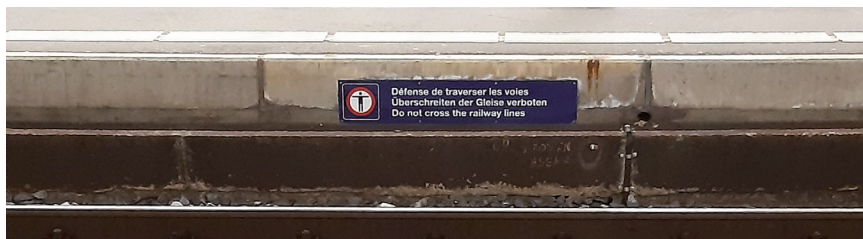


Fig. 6: Multilingual sign without Italian, Geneva (GE: Francophone region), 20-10-2020



Fig. 7: Multilingual sign without Italian, Zürich HB (ZH: Germanophone region), 14-2-2020

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

German can represent a real challenge for passenger attendants from Romandie and Ticino, mainly because in Switzerland High German and Swiss German (Schwyzerdütsch) coexist in a diglossic situation. The former is the standard variety that is taught in schools in the non-German-speaking Swiss regions, whilst the latter refers to the spoken language varieties of Swiss Germans. This linguistic situation is further complexified since each Swiss German canton has its own variety of Schwyzerdütsch. One of the participants from Romandie (Francophone area) laughingly admitted that “L’allemand c’est à pleurer!” (“German makes you cry!”), especially for new employees who are still learning the language. Despite this, the Francophone and Italophone participants underlined their motivation to acquire and improve their – High – German, not only because it is crucial for their job and for economic return but also for personal interest, satisfaction and pride. Nevertheless, the advantage of expanding one’s knowledge of Schwyzerdütsch is that it quickly helps to connect with the Swiss German passengers and have a friendlier exchange.

Italian and the “dialetto ticinese” (a general term referring to the variety of dialects spoken in Ticino) are sometimes used as markers of identity and pride in belonging to the Italophone linguistic minority. As in the case of Schwyzerdütsch among Swiss Germans, the “dialetto ticinese” was also used to establish a friendlier and warmer exchange with passengers from Ticino. During the observations, Italian was also used by the passenger attendants in announcements in other linguistic regions to affirm the visibility and legitimacy of the Swiss Italian language and identity against the predominance of the German one. In this respect, on a route between Zürich HB (Germanophone area) and Ticino (Italophone area), one of the participants performed a sort of act of linguistic resistance by asking to see the tickets only in Italian, switching to – Swiss – German only when the passengers reacted in that language. This was done even if *officially*, still being on Germanophone soil, the participant should have used – Swiss – German first and only then Italian. Through this behaviour the participant admittedly wished to convey the message that Italian is as important, alive and as present as German on that particular route and that despite the smaller number of speakers, Italian is still a national language that has to be recognised. As the participant emphatically added, “siamo in pochi, ma ci siamo”, meaning “we are not many, but we are here”. This confirms that “language is a terrain that enables struggles over [...] [the] legitimacy to become visible” (Del Percio/Duchêne 2012, 44).

The ethnography also revealed the existence of a “Swiss Railway Language”, which is the professional jargon existing in the three Swiss official languages that has to be mastered by the company’s employees. The “Swiss Railway Language(s)” are tested during the language exams that passenger attendants have to pass every five years to attest that they are keeping up their proficiency in the required languages. One of the participants reported that the primary goal of these exams is to test the employees’ knowledge of the “railway language”, namely the particular terms related to the Swiss railway system, in a national language other than “their own” (which assumes that passenger attendants have a main habitual language that is a national language), as they are apparently only asked to talk about railway-related topics using the specific terms of the SBB CFF FFS. This “Swiss Railway Language(s)” is specific to the SBB CFF FFS and therefore to Switzerland as it differs from the “railway languages” of the adjacent nation-states that also have German, French and Italian as their official languages, namely Germany, Austria, France and Italy. Participants, in fact, talked about Swiss “railway German”, “railway French” and “railway Italian”. For this reason, this jargon seems to consolidate the Swiss identity of the SBB CFF FFS. For example, the SBB CFF FFS talk about “scambio” (deviation) rather than “deviatoio” (which would be the word used in Italy) and of “Perron” (platform) rather than “Bahnsteig” (the corresponding German word for it).

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

Passenger attendants also prove their flexibility by switching language to accommodate the passengers whenever they can. If they greet passengers in (Swiss) German but then realise that they speak Italian, passenger attendants normally try to speak Italian, to favour the customers and make them feel at ease (see “welcoming strategy”, section 1).

These considerations show that the hierarchies of the SBB CFF FFS’ institutional languages “on the go” only partly depend on the territorial principle since during direct contact with customers, passenger attendants privilege the customers’ language preferences, accommodating them as much as possible. As a result, the moving space of the train is an interesting one because travelling through and stopping in different linguistic regions anchors the language practices of passenger attendants to the territorial principle but at the same time it defies its very logic by being constructed as a space where the passengers’ languages are prioritised whenever possible by the flexible language practices of the passenger attendants.

The passenger attendants who participated in the study presented themselves as proud multilingual workers. The fact that participation in this sociolinguistic study on multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS was based on self-selection – since it was on a voluntary basis – is already evidence of the participants’ conviction of having something interesting and valuable to share in relation to the topic. During the participant observations in particular, a rather strong sense of pride emerged related to the passenger attendants’ Swiss multilingualism, as they all stated that they generally prefer to speak the Swiss national languages whenever they can instead of English or before recurring to other languages they might know. While discussing the topic, one of the participants exclaimed “On est en Suisse, quoi!” (“We are in Switzerland, right?!”) and underlined “On a la chance de vivre dans un pays qui a trois langues nationales, il faut les utiliser!” (“We have the chance of living in a country with three national languages, they should be used!”). In doing so, this participant seemed to advocate for the confederate discourse, and therefore also for the conception of Swiss multilingualism as a richness, and for the

use of the national languages as *linguae francae* instead of immediately recurring to global English, which “sarebbe un peccato!” (“it would be a pity”), as another participant stated. Most of the participants, in fact, believed that Swiss multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS is a national symbolic richness that has to be preserved and that it contributes to the nation’s cohesion as well as to an affirmation of Swiss national identity.

When asked about their use of English with passengers, all of the participants in this study replied that they only use it with foreign passengers who cannot speak any of the Swiss national languages. Some of them elaborated on this quite emphatically, underlining that with passengers who can speak one of the Swiss national languages they always try to use these as – in their eyes – using English “too easily” represents an impoverishment of the linguistic richness that characterises Switzerland. This idea of linguistic impoverishment related to the use of English as a *Lingua Franca* in Switzerland has been analysed by Stotz (2006, 252), who identifies it as one of the main elements of the confederate discourse. For this reason, the passenger attendants who participated in this study and all those who share the same convictions – who, according to the participants in this study, are the majority – can be defined as ambassadors of the confederate discourse as they actively and simultaneously promote both the use of the Swiss national languages and the linguistic richness that symbolically characterises Switzerland and the SBB CFF FFS.

For their multilingualism and their efforts in using the official national languages, in November 2020, the passenger attendants of the SBB CFF FFS were awarded the Oertli prize, which is a sign of recognition to the promoters – both individuals and institutions – of cohesion between the Swiss linguistic regions (fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Headline in the *24 heures* newspaper on 6th November 2020 announcing that the Oertli prize has been awarded to the SBB CFF FFS’s passenger attendants for their multilingualism<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The text in the *24 heures* newspaper of 6th November 2020 reads as follows: “**The SBB CFF FFS personnel rewarded for their multilingualism:** The ability of the SBB CFF FFS’s passenger assistants to express themselves in several languages was recognised with a prize of 30,000 Swiss francs, awarded on Friday by the Oertli Foundation.” (my translation).

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the hierarchies of the SBB CFF FFS's institutional languages on a national and cantonal scale reflect the demographic importance of the national languages, in which German is the majority language, followed by French and then by Italian. German emerged as the predominant language, generating patterns of inclusion and exclusion among passengers and employees alike. Despite this, institutional multilingualism at the SBB CFF FFS is ideologically and discursively mobilised as a “welcoming strategy” and as a marker of “Swissness” to promote the company globally. English plays an important role within the company as it is considered a global language and a lingua franca to be used with both Swiss and non-Swiss customers as well as a marketing language to render the SBB CFF FFS attractive and competitive on the global market. Passenger attendants are the institutional representatives of the SBB CFF FFS that embody the Swiss national identity. As “the face and voice of SBB CFF FFS”, they contribute to constructing the Swiss national identity of the company by favouring the Swiss national languages over English whenever possible, therefore making the SBB CFF FFS not only a national railway company but the *Swiss* national railway company. For this reason, they can be considered ambassadors of the confederate discourse (Stotz 2006).

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

The main limitations of this study concern the COVID-19 pandemic and the focus on the Swiss minority language regions. The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of passengers (foreigners in particular) and therefore the number of observable interactions and languages spoken. It is also possible that it discouraged passenger attendants from participating in the project. Moreover, the study only focused on passenger attendants working in the minority language regions of Romandie and Ticino, which means that the Swiss German region was only included indirectly. This did not allow a more complete picture of the studied phenomenon.

To further expand sociolinguistic research in the underexplored field of national public transportation, future similar studies might focus on multilingualism in the Swiss trilingual canton of the Grisons and in other nationwide transport systems. These could adopt a diachronic perspective on multilingualism and a comparative lens with the SBB CFF FFS. Such research directions could contribute – on a national, European and global scale – to shedding light on patterns of social inclusion and exclusion based on language policies and practices and might raise awareness of the importance of an inclusive and fair management of multilingualism for enhanced access to public services.

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