Friend or foe?

The discourse of the rise of English in Luxembourg

Julia de Bres

'Gëtt hei geschwë méi Englesch wéi Franséich geschriwwen?' ('Will English soon be written here more than French?') was the question asked by an article on *Radio 100,7*'s website last April. The article was about a conference on languages in literature in Luxembourg, and noted that English was taking on 'ever greater importance' in this field. True or not, this illustrates a trend that I call the discourse of the rise of English in Luxembourg. This discourse assumes a zero-sum game where one language can only prosper at the expense of another, and where English is given a privileged status alongside Luxembourg's official languages: Luxembourgish, French and German.

Like all such discourses, it represents a social construction rather than a 'truth' about language, and its promoters are seeking to advance certain social interests. From a discursive point of view, it is less important to determine whether the use of English is indeed rising in Luxembourg than it is to explore what people are trying to achieve with this discourse, that is, what interests they are seeking to advance by claiming that English is on the rise. There is no research to date that specifically focuses on discourses about English in Luxembourg, but such discourses do appear in research on sociolinguistic issues more generally in the country. This is the case with my own research and teaching at the University of Luxembourg, in areas including the language ideologies of cross-border workers, young people's use of English, and language use on social media. My aim here is to consider how the discourse of the rise of English is constructed in these domains, how people respond to it, and what the potential social effects are.

In research with cross-border workers on their language practices and ideologies about multilingualism at work in Luxembourg, English was often highlighted as a basic requirement in international professional environments. With English being constructed as the logical choice in culturally diverse workplaces, lack of skill in this language by other colleagues was met with surprise and sometimes scorn on the part of those who were proficient in English. This discourse of the necessity of English was sometimes combined with a discourse of linguistic persecution via French, for instance in claims of unfairness that French was used in important contexts such as interviews and employment contracts or to exclude people in social interactions at work.

A purportedly neutral construction of the value and normality of English could thus become a means of implicitly contesting the dominance of French at work. Such discourses did not go unresisted in these workplaces, where a counter-discourse of English as unfair imposition was sometimes advanced by those who did not speak English confidently. In the same workplace, therefore, some workers might plead for greater use of English because of its claimed inevitable rise worldwide, while others would greet any such perceived trend with alarm. Discourses on English among young people in Luxembourg emerge in research on the multilingual literacy practices of students and in teaching local students at the University of Luxembourg. The discourse of English as a global language is strong among these young people, who tend to present the role of English in Luxembourg as an obvious, inevitable and normal effect of globalisation, to which they express very little resistance. Importantly, they construct English not merely as a language used for educational or professional purposes, but also as a language of social life. They report using it, often independently of their level of fluency, in informal contexts of enjoyment, such as

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social media, texting each other, listening to music, reading and watching movies. This contrasts with traditional views of English as a lingua franca, where English is seen as an instrumental language used when necessary to communicate across cultures, but where 'mother tongues' function as languages of identity. In the reported practices of my students, English fulfils many such identity functions too. Another striking aspect is their construction of English as a language of flexibility, which they report using freely in combination with other languages, and in which they feel less pressure to be 'correct'.

This sense of comfort and ease in English is sometimes expressed through a discourse of English as a chosen language, in contrast to the perceived imposition of French within the Luxembourgish school system. While English comes in as the fourth language learnt at school, I regularly encounter classes where students much prefer being taught in English to being taught in French (I sometimes offer to teach classes in French just to gauge the reaction, which is reliably one of barely concealed horror). These attitudes towards French seem to result from negative experiences within the school system, where, as the former coordinator of the English teacher training programme Frank Schmit has observed, French 'has effectively become the new Math, being used as an eliminatory criterion to bar young learners from academic tracks'. As he remarks, 'this goes a long way towards explaining why a vast majority of students harbour deep aversions towards it. […] If with all the competence our students produce in real life situations [in French] they are still not deemed good enough to pass our local schools, […] if nothing is ever good enough, then why even try?' In these circumstances, the discourse of the rise of English may offer an escape route for young people battling linguistic insecurity in relation to French.

Social media is well-known for being saturated with English, but it is also a domain of increasing use of formerly mainly spoken languages, of which Luxembourgish is a good example. I analysed language practices on a multilingual Facebook group in Luxembourg to investigate how members negotiated the diversity of languages online. This group differed from the cross-border workers and young people above, in that they were diverse not only in nationality and age, but also in class, coming from a range of social backgrounds. To cut a long story short, the group started off in English, linguistic conflict ensued, and Luxembourgish triumphed. This illustrates the strength of Luxembourgish in some online contexts, where it manages to displace even the world's most widely spoken language in one of its strongest domains. During the language debates throughout

this process, many of the discourses often made about French in Luxembourg appeared with English as a target. Members protested that not everyone in Luxembourg could write in English, that they rarely used it, and that it would take them hours to translate something they wanted to say from Luxembourgish to English. As well as disrupting the myth of the happy quadrilingual Luxembourger, these comments question the supposed ease and neutrality of English, constructing it instead as difficult and non-neutral. They present counter-discourses to the discourse of English as a global language within a different social group that has not mastered English to the same degree. At times they reached a virulence of tone similar to anti-French positions encountered elsewhere.

In the above contexts, we see diverse discourses of English depending on who is doing the talking. Some of these positively construct English as a basic

professional requirement, a global language, a language of social life, of flexibility, a chosen language, a language of identity. Counter-discourses construct English negatively as an unfair imposition, difficult, a non-neutral option. If all discourses on language serve personal interests, whose interests does the discourse of the rise of English in Luxembourg serve? Based on the above, it is a friend to people who can speak English well (the highly educated, the middle class, professionals) and for people who want to avoid other languages (non-French speakers and young locals). It is a foe to people who cannot speak English with ease (the less educated, the working class) and to people who have other languages they wish to foster (people who prefer French or who want to promote Luxembourgish).

We can expect two competing trends to build regarding the notion of the rise of English in Luxembourg. First, we are likely to see a push forward, in the form of increased pressure to expand Luxembourg's official trilingualism to quadrilingualism including English. If this is so, a question arises as to how migrant languages like Portuguese will be included in the multilingual mix. Will perceived or actual greater use of English signal a move towards an ideal of broader societal multilingualism (rather than trilingualism) or will it merely signify just one language added? In parallel, we can expect a push back, reflected in increasing resentment towards English among those whose interests are not served by its rise. Attitudes to language change with the

social context, as is evident in resentment toward German after World War II transferring to French in response to francophone migration to Luxembourg.

It is conceivable that at least some of these negative attitudes towards French will transfer to English in the future, should it appear to prevail. To see how this pans out, we need targeted research with English at the centre of the question, to explore how Luxembourg residents construct the role of English in Luxembourg society, and how they employ it to achieve their goals. This serves the purpose both of mapping multilingual dynamics in Luxembourg and addressing the broader question of how people instrumentalise language for their personal ends in a multilingual society. ◆

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L'ancien siège de la Commission mixte de Haute-Silésie à Katowice (Kattowitz). Aucune plaque ne commémore l'existence de ce non-lieu de mémoire. Source: Wikimedia Commons.