

## **Communication in a plurilingual city: The case of Biel-Bienne**

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The city of Biel-Bienne is bilingual: both French and German are the official languages. It comprises 61.3% German- and 38.7% French-speakers. However, behind the sheer figures there is a complex linguistic mosaic. Many Biennese inhabitants are in fact bilingual to some extent, and there are many in-migrants with various first languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish, to name only a few from a couple of dozen.

In public space, however, the official languages are clearly dominant, one comes in two varieties, the Biennese German dialect and standard German, the other one as Biennese French (provided that it exists!). The linguistic repertoires of the citizens depend on age and form of acquisition, which generate diverse competencies. Here are a few prototypical examples.

A child reared in an Alemannic family acquires the Biennese dialect first, then standard German at school, in its Swiss version, which is influenced by literacy and, more often than not, by negative attitudes. From 5th grade on, the child gets French language art lessons taught by a German-speaking teacher, s/he learns what is called „français fédéral“. But previously, the child has certainly learned a few French words, as monolingual ghettos do not exist in Biel-Bienne. A form of trilingualism develops, made of dialect-standard diglossia and L2, French in this case.

A child growing up in a francophone family acquires French in her/his family and in kindergarten. Simultaneously, s/he gets in contact with the Biennese dialect, building up at least receptive competencies. In primary school, the child learns to read and write in French and from 3rd grade on s/he will start to learn German, usually with a francophone teacher, in its standard variety, but with a French accent. Here again, this is a case of trilingualism with French, plus two varieties of German.

The offspring of a bilingual German-French family acquires French and the local dialect as first languages. Schooling in one or the other language determines the language of literacy. The other one will be introduced as first foreign language a few years later. If this is German, there will be a peculiar gap between the Biennese dialect, spoken without a foreign accent, and standard German, spoken with a French accent.

Concerning the school language of allophone children, there is the choice between the two official languages. Spanish-, Portuguese- and Italian-speaking families usually choose French; Turkish and Serbo-Croatian-speaking families choose German. But since the other official language is compulsory, we also have a complex linguistic situation in this case.

During a four year research project, we have investigated in this linguistic landscape the communication patterns of the Biennese people and what they think about plurilingualism in their city. In public space, the person opening a verbal exchange determines the language. In the service sector the customers choose the communication language. Examples drawn from our corpus give evidence of language choices, even when competencies are minimal. The counter-example of Fribourg/Freiburg demonstrates that French is the default language in this case, but the German-speaking Fribourgeois are also in a trilingual situation, with Alemannic diglossia and French as L2.