

American and British English: a conflict for the young Swiss ?

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Tous ceux qui s'intéressent à la question de la présence de l'anglais en Suisse ont pu remarquer l'avance de cette langue dans notre pays. Mais si encore jusqu'au milieu de notre siècle l'anglais que les Suisses rencontraient était surtout l'anglais de l'Angleterre, aujourd'hui, c'est plutôt celui des Etats-Unis.

Par contre, il a été démontré que l'anglais enseigné dans les écoles suisses demeure l'anglais anglais. Parallèlement, les jeunes Suisses rencontrent beaucoup d'anglais américain dans leur vie quotidienne: en lisant des journaux, en écoutant de la musique, en regardant la télévision, etc. Cette coexistence d'anglais anglais et d'anglais américain crée-t-elle un conflit pour les jeunes Suisses ?

1. Introduction

It is obvious that there has been a tremendous increase of the use of English in Switzerland the last fifty years. But it might be surprising to know that before World War II English was seldom seen or heard in Switzerland.

Before World War II the presence of English [in Switzerland] could be felt only where the citizens of the Anglo-American countries — then above all Britain — came into contact with Swiss citizens. (Dürmüller, 1992, 355)

English was introduced in Swiss universities in the second half of the 19th century. The first university which offered English courses was the University of Zürich in 1851. At the University of Neuchâtel, a two hour optional class on Elizabethan literature began in 1868 (*Impartial*, 4.11.1995, 10). But then, English was only learned by an elite and the emphasis was laid on written comprehension and translation. But very few Swiss people had contact with the English language. English was then a completely foreign language. However, the situation changed little by little. The two World Wars helped to determine this evolution and especially the second. Before the twentieth century, Swiss people could only hear British English. And in fact, until World War II, British English was the norm. But after the successful interference of the American Army in World War II, the United States began to have a big impact on the European countries and Switzerland was no exception. From then on,

American culture and language have spread in different ways in Switzerland. American English has invaded all kinds of domains, so that now, it is almost an everyday habit to meet some American words or phrases.

In this paper, we will try to see in what ways American English is present in Switzerland. But we will focus on domains influencing teenagers. There are many reasons to take a closer look at young people. First, it has been shown that young people around the world are especially attracted towards the English language. Secondly, teenagers are in the age group most exposed to the American culture and language. And thirdly, it seems that there might be a gap between the English language teenagers are taught in school and the one they meet in everyday life. So in this study, I will try to answer questions such as:

Are young people really influenced by the flow of American English and culture ? Are they really taught British English in school ? And if the answer is yes, is it a problem to learn British English in school and then to meet American English in everyday life ? Or, can teenagers not even tell the difference between American and British English ? What language do they speak with their neighbors from the German part of Switzerland ?

2. The English teaching strategy in Switzerland

To see if there really is a gap between the English young people meet in everyday life and the one they are taught in school, we need to look closely at the English teaching strategy. I have found no specific study for the "canton de Neuchâtel", but Wyler and his co-workers have carried out a big survey examining the Swiss situation in general. (Wyler et al. 1982)

Through their study, it appeared clearly that teachers are more British oriented than American oriented. 96% of teachers claim to use British English in the classroom. In general, it is because the Swiss university they attended was British oriented and because they personally went to England. But when asked about literature, Swiss teachers seem to read as many American or British books with their pupils. In short, teachers are more British oriented because of the result of their education, but they are not hostile to American English and especially not to American literature.

But Wyler and his colleagues also inquired among headteachers. Two thirds of them said that they would hire a teacher with American background, but paradoxically, they think that British English is the norm to be taught in a classroom. Answering the same questions as headteachers,

only half of the boards of education said that they would hire a teacher with an American background. But American oriented teachers would be expected to use British English in the classroom.

So it is clear that the authorities are more British oriented. And even if teachers are more open towards American English, British English is the norm taught in Swiss schools.

2.1. The situation at the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds

Before anything else, I want to explain what is meant by the term "the Gymnasium". The Gymnasium is a secondary education school; it corresponds to the Lycée.

I have not studied the case of the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds in as much detail as Wyler and his co-workers did, but for my research I needed to know if British English is also the norm taught in that school. Here is what I found: There are seven English teachers at the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds. All the teachers had studied at the University of Neuchâtel, which has always been British oriented until now. It is true that the situation will be different from October 1996 as an American professor of English literature has just been appointed. Then both orientations, a British one as well as an American one will be offered to the students, which was not the case for the teachers of the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds at the time of their studies.

All the teachers had gone to England to learn English, except one who was a Canadian married to a Swiss and another teacher who had married an American and lived in the United States for two years. But this teacher even said that she tried to use British English in the classroom. Asked about literature, all the teachers answered that they study British and American authors with their pupils. So it seems that the teachers of the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds confirm to the results of Wyler's team's survey.

3. The presence of American English and culture in Switzerland

As seen earlier, the presence of British English in Switzerland is not a very recent phenomenon. But although in 1959, as Charleston says (1959), it was impossible to know whether the influence was British or American, today it is different. The English present in Switzerland nowadays is mostly American. Many fields such as technology, science and business have been Americanized. But what is more striking, is that even the everyday life of almost any Swiss is touched by American culture and

language. And teenagers seem to be especially sensitive to this American invasion.

For example, Cheshire and Moser (1994) have shown in their article "English as a cultural symbol: the case of advertisements in French-speaking Switzerland" that American language is often used directly in certain advertisements; in others, an American connotation or style can also often be observed.

American English is also often watched by young people at the cinema or on television. And even if American movies or "soap operas" are often dubbed, young people commonly hear American music, feel American culture, read visual inscriptions of American English.

Tennagers also listen to lots of music. Of course, in general they hear a variety of "Englishes". But many famous groups preferred by young people are American. There are other domains where young people meet American English and culture, but there is no need to go further to show that young Swiss people do meet a fair amount of American English in their everyday life. But through this research I wanted to check if this was true. So one part of the questionnaire was devoted to that. But time has come to present more precisely how I proceeded.

4. Presentation of the survey

For this study I chose to visit two classes of the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds. There were 37 participants. Of course it was during their English class, but the students did not know what I was looking for. I only told them I was doing my "mémoire" on foreign languages. If they had known from the beginning that I was looking for information about their relationship with the English language, they might have changed their answers in order to be "correct".

4.1 *The participants*

It is interesting to inquire among young people because they seem to be very much attracted towards the English language.

Inquiries held among students in various European countries show a stable preference for English, because of its usefulness and popularity. (Görlach and Schröder, 1985, 231)

But there are other reasons to choose specifically third-year students at the Gymnasium. First, the two classes chosen were interesting to study because the students were going to pass their "Maturité Fédérale" examination one month later, which means that at that point of their studies

there was a greater probability that they could tell the difference between British and American English. Secondly, the main orientation of these two classes was the learning of foreign languages. In one class they learned German, English and Italian and in the other, German, English and Spanish. Therefore I hoped to find participants really interested in the issue of foreign languages. Thirdly it was important that the teacher of these classes would be representative of the whole body of English teachers in Switzerland. That means that the teacher chosen should have a British background, use British English in the classroom, but be open to American literature. Mrs Popenfoose appeared to fit these characteristics. (Her name has been changed to preserve her anonymity).

Fourthly, it was also important for my study to choose a part of the population that was especially permeable to American influences. And in general, teenagers are more subject to American culture than adults because they listen to lots of rock music, often watch television in English, often watch American movies, etc. But what did I ask these participants ?

4.2 *The questionnaire*

I elaborated a questionnaire trying to find answers to the questions presented in the introduction. The questionnaire consisted of four parts.

In the first one, the teenagers had to answer questions about their background in foreign languages in general. They were asked about their schooling; of course I needed to know if their former English teachers were more American or British oriented. I also asked them about their trips to foreign countries, but I was especially looking for the ones who had gone to English-speaking countries. In this part I also asked the participants which language(s) they use for international as well as for intranational communication.

In the second part, the participants were asked lots of questions about their everyday habits of reading foreign newspapers, listening to foreign music, watching foreign television channels or movies, etc. With these questions, I was trying to see if they get more British or American influence in everyday life.

Through the third part I wanted to know if eighteen-year old people could tell the difference between spoken American and British English. So the students listened to the same text but spoken in four different "Englishes". As they were not supposed to know that I was only inquiring about American and British English, I mixed these two variants with two other

kinds of English: Indian English and Scottish English. So after listening two times to the tape, the students had to write down which kind of English they thought it was.

The fourth part was only written. The exercise was to fill in blanks in fifteen different sentences. The blanks were to be filled by one word chosen from two synonyms that were given, and of course one was British and the other American. The results of this exercise would tell me if the students' choices were influenced by the British vocabulary they learn in school or by the American vocabulary they meet in everyday life.

But of course, the best way to know about this questionnaire is to look at it. (See appendix No 1)

5. The participants' English background

Here are the results to the first part of the questionnaire. The survey showed up ten bilingual participants, but none spoke English at home. I was not surprised to find that all the participants had learned English in school. Of the 37 participants, 27 were taught only British English. But 10 participants were in direct contact with either American or Canadian English during their schooling. So I think that this survey shows more variety in English teaching than what Wyler's team had found.

When travelling, young Swiss often communicate in English; 35 participants said that they use English when travelling abroad. But German was also named 25 times. Italian and Spanish seem to be used quite often too. So even if the participants often choose to speak English in foreign countries, they are willing to try to speak many foreign languages and they do not seem to wish to speak only one lingua franca abroad.

As I had the opportunity in this survey I decided to ask the participants what language they use in German-speaking Switzerland. It was to know a little bit more about the status of English in Switzerland. The results of my survey surprised me very much. Only one participant said that she uses English in German-speaking Switzerland, and on top of that, English was cited along with German. Nevertheless, it is important to add that this participant had stayed in England for six months.

Of course these results are very surprising if we consider Dürmüller's studies (1986, 1991 and 1992). So how can I explain that ?

First of course, the size of this survey does not allow me to assert that English is never used by young people for intranational communication in

Switzerland. Secondly, the fact that this questionnaire was filled in by the participants directly in school might have influenced them to choose the politically correct answers. But finally, Andres and Watts might be right in saying that

It is, for instance, extremely difficult to prove or disprove claims to the effect that young people from the Romandie and the German-speaking part of the country frequently talk to one another using English. (Andres and Watts, 1993, 126)

So I do not really know what to think of my results. I just know that I definitely agree with those who claim that a survey on a large scale is needed to know more about the status of English in Switzerland.

In this part of the questionnaire I also needed to know how much direct contact with different forms of English the participants get when travelling in English-speaking countries. They named five countries: Australia, Canada, England, Ireland and the United States. England is the country most visited by the participants, that is to say by 12 people. Australia, Canada and Ireland were each visited by two participants. And what can be surprising is that only one person went to the United States. So only 15 participants out of the 37 had had direct contact with native English speakers, and in general they met British English. As I hoped, this question pointed out three students who had spent a long time in an English-speaking country. One participant had spent one year in Canada, another ten months in Australia and the last one six months in England.

So to sum up, the English background that young Swiss get through school or when travelling is in general British oriented.

6. American and British influence on the participants' everyday life

If this second part of the questionnaire was not difficult to elaborate, then, the hard part was to analyse the participants' answers. In fact trying to measure the amount of American or British influence that teenagers get in everyday life appeared a much more difficult task than expected. So unfortunately, the questions about cafés and restaurants, as well as the one about clothes did not bring me any information for my subject.

The first question of this part was about the reading of foreign newspapers. 19 participants do read papers written in foreign languages, but only 10 of these get either a British or an American influence, or a mixed influence by reading the paper. The papers cited were *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The European*.

Of course, young people meet much more American or British English while watching television. It was found that 27 participants meet some sorts of English while watching foreign television channels. MTV is definitely the participants' favorite channel. So because of that, I was surprised to discover that the English that young people watch on television is most of the time British English. So of the 27 participants who watch television in English, 15 watch only British English. But of course they also hear American English from time to time depending on the origin of the music groups that are shown. The 12 others watch both American and British English on television. It can also be added that 14 participants meet American English each time they watch serials or movies using the "bi-canal", that is to say watching serials or movies directly in their original language and not dubbed. Continuing in the same domain, 22 participants watch American or English movies at the cinema.

The question about advertisements was especially difficult to analyse because some participants cited products whose advertisements I could not find or which I could not see anymore. But what I can be sure of is that 10 participants get some American influence through advertising because they cited American oriented advertisements. But of course the American influence that young people get through advertising is more important than that, as no one in our society can pretend not to be under this pressure.

Of course, while listening to music, eighteen-year-old people meet different kinds of "Englishes". But the groups cited come from mainly two origins: England and the United States. American groups were cited 18 times and English groups 16 times. So in fact we see that young people meet about the same amount of British or American English while listening to music. I just want to add that Irish English is also commonly met in this context.

So finally, I tried to determine what kind of English the participants hear the most in their everyday life. So I counted how many times the participants had said that they meet American or British English in the domains asked (papers, television, movies, music, etc.). This is what I found:

- 16 participants meet both American and British English
- 14 participants meet more American English
- 6 participants meet more British English
- 1 participant does not meet any kind of English

These results really show an evolution. In the past, only British English was seen in Switzerland. Today, American English is really frequent in

many domains in Switzerland. Nevertheless, it seems that Swiss people meet both British and American English in their everyday life.

7. Identification of spoken American and British English

If the identification of British or American English is not very obvious in written text, it is easier to recognize spoken British or American English. As said earlier, for this third part of the questionnaire, the participants listened to the same text said in four different kinds of English. 34 participants heard differences between these languages. 22 preferred American English, although 7 did not know it was American English.

No participant recognized the four kinds of English, that is to say that none discovered where the Indian speaker came from. One participant identified three "Englishes": Scottish, American and British English (R.P). 20 participants recognized American and British English (R.P) and 13 identified one kind of English. So in fact, American English was identified by 28 participants while 26 recognized British English (R.P). It is interesting to notice that even if students are taught British English at school, they can recognise American English very well; that is a confirmation that they meet a lot of American English outside school. So in general, students can tell the difference between the two variants (American and British English), but for 40% of the participants it is still a difficult task.

8. Choosing between British and American vocabulary

Through the fourth part of the questionnaire I wanted to see if the participants personally use British or American vocabulary. They had to fill in blanks in fifteen different sentences choosing between American or British words. But the last sentence had to be abandoned because it appeared to cause a problem.

In eight sentences the British words were chosen very clearly:

- Holiday* was chosen by 37 participants
- Chips* was chosen by 35 participants and *French fries* by 2
- Tap* was chosen by 35 participants and *faucet* by 2
- Flat* was chosen by 32 participants and *apartment* by 5
- Queue* was chosen by 31 participants and *line* by 6
- Autumn* was chosen by 31 participants and *fall* by 6
- Sweets* was chosen by 29 participants and *candy* by 8
- Handbag* was chosen by 29 participants and *purse* by 8

In three sentences, British words were also preferred but American words were often chosen by many participants:

Full stop was chosen by 22 participants and *period* by 15
Lavatory was chosen by 22 participants and *restroom* by 15
Lorry was chosen by 21 participants and *truck* by 16

And finally in three sentences the American word appeared more popular among young people of the Gymnasium of La Chaux-de-Fonds:

Movie was chosen by 29 participants and *film* by 8
Highways was chosen by 27 participants and *motorways* by 10
Trash can was chosen by 13 participants, *garbage can* by 14 and *dustbin* by 10

In this exercise, five words that were proposed can easily be related to French. Two are American, *apartment* and *vacation*, and three are British, *queue*, *film* and *autumn*. So did the participants systematically choose these words ? No, they did not do so in all the five different sentences. Nevertheless in two cases they did choose the word that is close to French (*queue* and *autumn*). So in these two sentences, it is difficult to know whether the participants chose *queue* and *autumn* because they belonged to the British vocabulary learned in school or because they were close to French. But it is clear that French is not the participants' dominant influence for choosing such or such word. On the other hand, the participants' choices seem to indicate that the British vocabulary learned in school is the norm used by young people.

To clarify this aspect, I thought that it would be interesting to compare Mrs Popenfoose's results to the results of the participants (Mrs Popenfoose was the participants' teacher at the Gymnasium). Their results correspond in almost 13 sentences. In one case Mrs Popenfoose chose the British word *dustbin* while the participants had chosen *trash can* or *garbage can*. And I said "in almost 13 sentences" because Mrs Popenfoose uses both *movie* and *film*. So this survey shows that a majority of young people use the vocabulary learned in school and spoken by the teacher.

9. Conclusion

To end this paper, I would like to try to answer the questions that were raised in the introduction. But before that, I must say that I am aware that the size of this survey does not allow absolute generalities.

One important aspect of my research was to know what kind of English is taught in Swiss schools. The results of the survey confirmed what had already been shown by Wyler and his co-workers (1982), that is to say that British English is the norm taught in Swiss schools. Nevertheless, it seems that some young teachers are beginning to use American English in the

classroom. This is a new phenomenon that was not shown in Wyler's team's study and that will certainly increase in the future.

What about the presence of American English in Switzerland ? Does it really influence young people ? Of course, as already presented, young Swiss meet a fair amount of American English in their everyday life, especially those living in big cities. But in fact they also hear British English a lot. So young Swiss meet both American and British English outside school. That is certainly why such a big proportion of participants was able to identify spoken British and American English.

So finally, is it really a conflict for young Swiss to learn British English in school and then to meet lots of American English outside school ? It does not seem to be the case. In fact, young people use the language they learn in school. In the last part of the survey, they clearly preferred the British vocabulary. It is true that they chose some American words such as *movie* or *highways*, but young British people are also beginning to use these words frequently. So even if young Swiss meet American English in their everyday life, this is not enough to take them away from the British school norm.

In the end, American and British English coexist in Switzerland, and young Swiss seem to put up with this situation. They use British English but often hear American English. One element that might help them in this context is that many Swiss teachers try to speak of the differences between the two variants. I think that it is a good way of linking the British English learned in school to the American English met in everyday life. But I would be delighted to read the results of a study on a large scale inquiring into the same domain.

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Appendix No 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Sexe: F M (entourer la bonne réponse)
2. Lieu d'habitation:
3. Quelle(s) langue(s) parles-tu à la maison ?
4. Quelle(s) langue(s) as-tu étudiée(s) à l'école ?
5. As-tu voyagé à l'étranger ? Si oui, précise dans quel(s) pays et pour combien de temps:
6. Quelle(s) langue(s) utilises-tu pour te faire comprendre à l'étranger ?
.....
7. Quelle(s) langue(s) utilises-tu pour te faire comprendre en Suisse allemande ?
8. Lis-tu des journaux en langues étrangères, si oui, le(s)quel(s) ?
.....
9. Quelle(s) chaîne(s) de T.V en langue(s) étrangère(s) regardes-tu ?
.....
10. Regardes-tu des films à la T. V. en bi-canal, si oui, en quelle(s) langue(s) ?
11. Regardes-tu des films en v.o au cinéma, si oui, en quelle(s) langue(s) ?
.....
12. Aimes-tu la pub, si oui, peux-tu me citer ta pub préférée ?
13. Quel est ton groupe de musique préféré ?
14. Quels sont les bistrot(s) que tu fréquentes ?
pour boire des verres?
- pour manger?
15. Peux-tu qualifier ton style d'habillement en quelques mots ?
.....
16. Quelle(s) langue(s) aimerais-tu vraiment parler couramment ?
.....

Appendix No 2

QUESTIONNAIRE

- a) 1. Entends-tu des différences entre ces langues ?
- 2. Quel anglais préfères-tu ? (cite le numéro de l'extrait)
- 3. Peux-tu rapprocher les extraits entendus d'un pays ?
- Extrait 1:
- Extrait 2:
- Extrait 3:
- Extrait 4:

b) Remplis les blancs avec un des deux (ou trois) mots donnés.

Attention ! les deux (ou trois) mots donnés sont tous corrects. Inscris simplement celui qui te vient le plus naturellement.

- 1. There was a terrible accident between a car and a (truck / lorry)
- 2. Can you throw away these old vegetables in the (dustbin / garbage can / trash can)
- 3. What (movie / film) do you want to watch tonight ?
- 4. I hate standing in the (queue / line) waiting to buy tickets.
- 5. What would you like to eat ? A steak with (chips / French fries), please.
- 6. Mary really likes the way you have decorated your (flat / apartment)
- 7. Be careful ! You can't drink the water coming out of the (faucet / tap)
- 8. Where does Peter intend to go for his (vacation / holiday)
- 9. Kids always want to eat (candy / sweets)
- 10. At the end of the sentence, don't forget the (full stop / period)
- 11. Matthew will start working this (fall / autumn)
- 12. Have you ever seen this lady without her (handbag / purse)
- 13. I urgently need to find a (restroom / lavatory)
- 14. It is dangerous to drive on (highways / motorways)
- 15. Which would you like on your bread ? Honey or ? (jam / jelly)