

## SIEGFRIED WYLER

### *Linguistic Pragmatism in Foreign Visitors Information*

People moving about either at home or abroad need information to find their way, to reach wherever they need or wish to go, or to carry out whatever activities they have in mind. They also have to know what they are allowed or not allowed to do. This has, in fact, led to a fairly consistent verbal system of information. Information in words is generally very succinct, often but a single word - say "Zurich" - or, less often, a short phrase - such as "P 30 Minuten" - or even a full-fledged or elliptic sentence like "Geleise Überschreiten verboten". Other times, information is given without words, using ideograms instead. This sort of information is intended primarily for the local population - that is, for those living in the respective region or country. Therefore, it is generally provided in the language of the region or country involved. We are so used to this practice that we tend to take it for granted, without paying it any special attention. Actually, many of these verbal patterns have become stored in our minds and have assumed the nature of signals: "Stop", "Ralentir", "No entry", "Geldwechsel", "Bancomat" and so on. Likewise, ideograms, whose meaning must in reality be interpreted, are familiar patterns: any drawing of a man or woman indicates the respective lavatory, an upward sloping aeroplane means "Departures", etc. Such drawings are part of a non-verbal system of information that includes colours, like green for "go" and red for "stop".

Among other modern developments, our era is characterised by immensely increased mobility. In former times, travel abroad was restricted to people of wealth or those on important missions -Goethe's "Italienische Reise" by coach or Laurence Sterne's description of a "Sentimental Journey through France and Italy" come to mind. It was only in the 19th century, with the arrival of the railway and the first journeys organised by Thomas Cook, that travelling at home and abroad became possible for a wider public. We may therefore ask how information originally devised for the locals or natives is made accessible to foreign visitors - who may or may not be familiar with the local/native language and practice - and what is done to facilitate their orientation.

If all persons spoke the language of every country visited, nothing would have to be done to help them. Obviously, this is not the case. Let me give you a personal example: We were driving through Holland and trying to find our way to our next destination, which was Lüttich in Belgium. Hence, we were on the lookout for a signpost indicating "Lüttich" or, perhaps, the French "Liège". We drove around for a good while before we realised that "Luik", pronounced "leuk", was the place we were looking for. A motorist in Engadine might have a similar experience upon reading "Schlarigna" on a signpost when trying to find "Celerina". Here, however, contrary to Holland, the tourist factor has been taken into consideration; therefore the signpost in the Engadine shows both names - "Schlarigna" and "Celerina".

The problem under discussion is how a country solves the language question for visitors who do not know the language of the country, in order to provide them with the basic information to move about there. To answer this question, we must first determine the areas where such information is of importance.

People nowadays generally arrive in a country by car, rail, boat or plane. As a consequence, their first encounter with important linguistic information is in the form of

- I.
  - a) signposts for motorists;
  - b) words and texts for orientation at train stations or ports, for people travelling by rail or boat;
  - c) notice boards and printed matter directing people at airports, for those travelling by plane.
- II. A second category comprises information given by banks, in particular on automatic machines for cash, so that foreign currencies can be changed or cash can be received using credit cards.
- III. A third group may consist of general information about a locality, including the locations of the post office, hotels, restaurants, and so forth.

Visitors need to know where to find what. A case in point would be, for instance, the airport at Bonn-Cologne - until 1999, Germany's capital - where such information is given fairly systematically, with the help of three signs forming a small block:

- a. an ideogram, plus
- b. the German word, plus
- c. the corresponding English word.

Now, if you have a Pole speaking only Polish (and perhaps Russian) - such a person will have to rely on the ideograms, since no other help is available. This may not always be so easy, given the ideogram for, say,

Friseur/Hairdresser, or

Fahrschein/Elevator, or

Mietwagen/Car rental

Moreover, no ideogram whatsoever is given for "Flugsteige/Gates". The printed material, for instance on the "Airport Transfer Service", is in German and English. On the other hand, information for the "Köln Messe" is provided in German, English, French, Italian, Spanish and Dutch - presumably, the main visitors to the Cologne Fair.

Visitors arriving at Barcelona Airport find information in Spanish, Catalan and English. Would not Spanish and English suffice? From a practical point of view, certainly so, since the natives of Barcelona also speak and read Spanish. However, Catalan is used to underscore the national identity of Catalunya. In other words, information here is coupled with politics.

One may now ask how a multilingual country such as Switzerland handles this problem. Switzerland has four official national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. Do all four exist for national reasons, perhaps, or in order to offer foreign visitors a choice?

Take the country's bank notes, where, beside the figure 100, are written "Cent Francs", "Cento Franchi", "Hundert Franken", "Tschient Francs". To be honest, the informative value here is both minimal and redundant, since the amount is already provided in

numbers. The information supplied in four languages serves either to feature national identification for a multilingual country or to allow every Swiss citizen to have the sum documented in his or her mother-tongue. It is certainly not provided on behalf of foreign visitors.

But how is linguistic information for tourists handled in each of the four language regions?

- a) Signposts: These generally give the names by which places are known in the area concerned<sup>1</sup> - that is, in German in the German-speaking regions, in French in the French-speaking and in Italian in the Italian-speaking. Some problems arise along the linguistic frontiers between the German- and the French-speaking areas, where a number of towns and villages have different names in German and French - for instance, Biel and Bienne, Freiburg and Fribourg, Twann and Douane, Neuchâtel and Neuenburg, Murten and Morat, and so on.

In the Engadine, a highly touristic area of the country, Romansh and German are the languages of the valley. The signposts there do not follow the general principal of the country in the matter: "Scuol", in German "Schuls", is signposted in Romansh, whereas "Puntraschinia" is indicated in its Italian form of "Pontresina". "Samaden" is signposted as "Samedan", but "San Murrezzan" becomes "St. Moritz", although in St. Moritz itself - on the whole a prevalently German-speaking town - all street names are in Romansh: "Via Maistra" for Hauptstrasse, "Via del Bagn" for Badstrasse.

- b) Trains and train stations: The main railway system in Switzerland is the "Schweizerische Bundesbahn SBB", "Chemin de fer fédéral suisse CFF", "Ferrovie federal svizzera FFS". In its handbook, the SBB stipulates the principles for passenger information.<sup>2</sup> According to these regulations, all coaches used for inland traffic are to give all information in German, French and Italian; those used on international lines are to add English. Train stations use the names found in the official timetable, based on the 30 November 1970 Federal Council's decision on local names. The information for customer services at train stations is specially important. Thus, in the regions which are monolingual, this information is given in the respective language. On the other hand, in Basel, a German-speaking town near the French border, it is given in German and French; in Biel/Bienne, a bilingual town, in German and French as well, as it is in the bilingual towns of Sierre/Siders and Fribourg/Freiburg - with, however, the French first and the German second. In Brig, a town in the Valais canton on the Simplon railway line to Domodossola, the information is in German and Italian; the train station at Zurich Airport uses German and English.

It is interesting to note that at stations near the border, according to their clientele, the inscriptions can be in German, French, Italian and English.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a decision of the Federal Council of November 30, 1970, relating to the names of villages, towns and railway stations.

<sup>2</sup> SBB CFF FFS Fahrgastinformationen FIS, 2.7. Sprachenregelung, 1986. I am indebted to J.-P. Membrez, Delegierte für Internationale Beziehungen und Verkehrspolitik, for sending me the information of the "Sprachenpolitik" of the Swiss Federal Railways.

As a rule, announcements on the trains and at train stations are made in the language of the regions the train traverses. For instance, trains from Schaffhausen to Zurich announce in German; trains from Zurich to Lugano and Milan in German and Italian (but, at the Zurich station, also in English). On trains headed for an airport (Zurich, Geneva), English is added to the German and/or French. Trains travelling in a touristic area such as Interlaken or Chur - from where trains go on to resorts such as Arosa, Davos and St. Moritz - make their announcements in German, French and English at the hub stations Basel, Zurich and Chur.

The Rhätische Bahn is, par excellence, a touristic area railway line. Moreover, it is a railway line within a region boasting three languages: German, Romansh and Italian. The coaches are marked "Rhätische Bahn", "Ferrovia retica" and "Viafier retica". Stations are announced in German both from Chur to St. Moritz and back. However, in Bergün, a touristic site with the double-name Bergün/Bravuogn, announcements are made in German and English; while in Filisur, from where trains also go onto Davos, they are made in German, English and French. It is rather difficult to detect any consistency in this practice, all the more so since the information about the Rhätische Bahn railway line given within the coaches (on the little tables next to the seats) is in German, French, Italian, Romansh and Spanish. At the stations themselves, most basic information is given with the help of ideograms.

- c) Airports: At the airports, information is provided in the local language plus English. However, this only applies to "official" information such as "Abflug/Departures", "Ankunft/Arrivals", "Raucherzone/Smoking Section", "Kehricht/Litter" - all accompanied by ideograms. When people leave the train and enter the Zurich Airport, for instance, the welcome message is given in four languages - English, German, French and Italian - rather than in the four national languages, which would mean Romansh instead of English. Practically all the large advertising posters are in English: two are in German and one - advertising watches - is in French. In other words, the national languages are of minor relevance, unlike at the international airports of Barcelona or Malta, for example. Printed material such as information on transportation to and from the airport, or for handicapped passengers, is in German, French and English; it also contains ideograms.
- d) Post Offices: Fairly systematically, these are marked on their yellow sign plates by the word "Post" in the language of the respective area: "Post", "Poste", "Posta" for Italian and Romansh. In the Engadine, information about postal services is generally given in Romansh and German, but sometimes also in French and Italian; for example, in Samedan: "PTT Posta: Telefon, Telegraf", but "Bigliets/Fahrkarten". Information about special stamps is in German, French, Italian and English.
- e) Banks: Nowadays, the banks generally have automatic money machines where users can choose between German, French, Italian and English and, occasionally, Spanish. Neither East European languages nor exotic languages are featured.

Let me give you a last example, from a highly touristic area, the Swiss National Park at Ofenpass - or "Pass dal Fuorn", as it is signposted locally. It is important here for visitors to be informed as to where they are allowed to walk, what they are allowed to do and what is prohibited, such as walking outside the marked paths, lighting fires, throwing away litter, etc. For this purpose, large sign boards have been put up, for example near the Hotel Fuorn. These are in five different languages where

general information about the areas belonging to the Park and the Park's purpose is shown: Romansh, German, French, Italian and English. On the other hand, what is prohibited is described in only three languages - German, French and Italian - plus the respective ideograms. Why it was done this way is not quite clear. Presumably, visitors not familiar with these languages are simply referred to the ideograms.

What can we deduce from the practice of informing foreign visitors as outlined above? It would seem that we can classify the information practice into four categories:

1. Most commonly, information is provided in the national or local language plus English, and with ideograms where a pictorial form is possible or advisable.
2. The same method is applied in countries or regions where a minor language is spoken; where emphasis on the national or regional identity is intended, this minor language is added to the major language or languages. Examples are the international airports of Malta and Barcelona.
3. In the case of Switzerland with its four national languages, it becomes obvious that this unique multilingual situation hardly ever finds expression in foreign visitor information. More typically, the assumption seems to be that travellers will understand the local or regional languages. Where these are major languages, this may be a more or less viable solution. Less so, however, where a minor language such as Romansh is the main language of the area. This means that practically all information except on the main roads is given in Romansh, occasionally, in German, including for parking and parking restrictions, and leaves foreigners to cope as best they can. In other words, little notice is taken of foreign visitors. This also holds true for countries like Holland and Belgium, with the added drawback that what applies to minor roads and paths elsewhere, applies there to the main roads as well.
4. English is the alternative to all local and regional languages. The assumption here is that visitors know English or have at least a smattering thereof. It could be said that today, English is not only the language of science, technology and business, but also the primary idiom for foreign visitor information. However, English is not systematically coupled with the national or regional languages. Generally speaking, this is only the case where the people responsible for drawing up the information feel that the English version might be useful.

In conclusion, it could be said that, so far, little thought has been given to the problem raised in this paper. Hardly any research has been done in this field of tourism and language use. Based on the material collected, the only general statement that can be made about foreign visitor information is that every country, or every region, chooses the solution which it deems useful. In the first place, obviously, the information given should serve the natives/locals of the respective country/region. Where foreigners who are not familiar with the language are concerned, or where it is assumed that foreign visitors might be travelling to internationally reputed resorts such as Davos or St.Moritz, announcements are also made in English. It is evident that English is considered to be the idiom used for international information, a *lingua franca* in the same fashion as Latin used to be for the privileged few who travelled abroad. Hardly any effort is made to cater to visitors from Spain or Portugal or South America, not to mention from Eastern European countries or, surprisingly, from Japan. Actually, information in Japanese is found in the Bernese Oberland, especially in Interlaken and for the railway to Jungfrauoch, as well as - strangely

enough - at the tiny train station of the Rhätische Bahn at Alp Grüm, south of the Bernina Pass; it is hardly ever to be found at major centres such as Zurich, Bern or Lausanne. Foreign visitors who are not be familiar with the languages offered - with English in particular - are obliged to rely on ideograms which, to be honest, are not always easy to interpret and which rarely take into consideration the iconic images belonging to other cultures.

Therefore, it can be stated that there is certainly no consistent linguistic system for foreign visitor information, nor can we make out a systematic terminology for this particular purpose. To visitors, much of the information in its current form must appear arbitrarily selective or even random. Sometimes, local interests prevail, while other times national interests dictate the language choice. Or again - ideally - the information is presented in a manner that really brings the message across. I have therefore chosen the term "linguistic pragmatism" to characterise the present state of affairs.