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# The variability of boundary-making in the context of intra-national student mobility in Switzerland. An essay

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## 1. Quantifiable origin?

"Are you one hundred per cent Ticinese?" asked Carla, a young woman who had just started studying law at the University of Bern. I had never thought of myself as having a quantifiable origin and must have looked at her in bemusement. Carla continued, "I mean, are both of your parents of Ticinese origin?" Before I could provide an answer, Carla explained that some of her peers with whom she regularly took the train from and to Ticino – the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland – had mixed origins, e.g. one of their parents was from German-speaking Switzerland or from across the national border (from Italy). Later in our conversation, I became aware that Carla's question aimed at discovering if I was competent in the Ticinese dialect.

Thanks to the interview with Carla – according to her calculation, I am zero per cent Ticinese – it became clear to me that for Carla people and their Ticinese authenticity may be defined by their parents' geographic origin. Furthermore, it became evident that for Carla origin was quantifiable and firm. By categorizing some of her (Italian-speaking and Ticinese resident) peers as "not 100 percent Ticinese", she established relevant boundaries (cf. Barth 1969). She distinguished Ticino, one of 26 member states (so-called cantons) constituting Switzerland, and "its authentic people" and therewith attributed them dialectal competence.

This example shows how categorizations are generated in mundane interactions and how the delimiting boundaries may be linked to different kinds of borders, which are not always given the same importance. Depending on political-economic conditions, momentary interests, situated social practices and ideologies, borders can be brought to the fore or downplayed; they can fade or fully vanish. Drawing on data from a sociolinguistic and

ethnographic project focusing on student mobility across language borders in multilingual Switzerland (Zimmermann 2017a), I will illustrate the variability of boundary-making. Between 2011 and 2014, I interviewed soon-to-be and newly enrolled students who had chosen to study in German-speaking Switzerland and who had either attended high school in the Italian-speaking or the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Furthermore, I spent one year conducting an ethnographic study of an Italian-speaking student association in Bern (Zimmermann 2017b). In the following, I will concentrate on students like Carla – young people who were based in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland before opting for studies in the German-speaking region.

## 2. When and why borders do (not) matter

"You know", explained Filippo to me, "studying in Italy is something else. It's just ... I mean, it's not that serious. I prefer the Swiss seriousness. And after all, what do you do with a diploma from Italy? It just does not have the same kind of value as the one we get here."<sup>1</sup>

I encountered Filippo in autumn 2011 in Bern at an event at which newcomers were welcomed by the Italian-speaking student association. About 150 students, all with a link to Ticino, participated. There were newly arrived students as well as more advanced students who had returned to the University after the summer break. The students were circulating between buffets where drinks and snacks were offered. In this setting, I stood in a small circle of students and was introduced to Filippo, who had just started his studies. He had opted for veterinary medicine at the University of Bern. In Switzerland, veterinary medicine is only offered in Bern and in Zurich and the yearly number of enrolled students is limited. Filippo had to meet the requirements of a *numerus clausus* and was assigned to the University of Bern, which he had also given a preference for when signing up. Once Filippo had finished his short introduction, others joined in, supporting his choice of Bern, and praised him for not being tempted to go to Italy. Filippo said that registering in Italy would only have been his plan C. He would rather have retried the *numerus clausus* next year, hoping to get accepted in Switzerland, instead of embarking on an Italian study adventure. Once the Swiss border was crossed, one would encounter mainly lazy or not-so-clever Swiss students, plus the chaos produced by the Italian staff at university<sup>2</sup>. Filippo added that these border crossers would not have to deal with the linguistic challenge (i.e. related to the fact that the majority of Swiss universities are

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<sup>1</sup> All the conversations I had with the students took place in Italian. I have translated some of the data into English for the purpose of this contribution.

<sup>2</sup> Neither Filippo nor the other students chatting to each other have actually ever been enrolled at an Italian university. They therefore do not speak from experience; they rather reproduce the common discourse on Italy and its higher education system.

situated in the German or French speaking parts of the country; the only University situated in the Ticino offers only a limited amount of subjects), which would facilitate the studies fundamentally.

This event was the first of 43 that I attended for participant-observation. An invitation had been circulated that immediately caught my attention. It clearly targeted students from Ticino – the invitation began: "Se sei ticinese e vivi qui a Berna, ..." / "If you are Ticinese and live here in Bern, ...". When checking the statutes of the association, however, they claimed to be open to anybody who "would comply with its aims without distinction of race, social, confessional, cultural or political origin" ("L'associazione è aperta a tutti coloro che si riconoscono nei suoi scopi, senza distinzione di razza, origine sociale, confessionale, culturale o politica"). Furthermore, the different member categories were listed, which included other people not from Ticino, such as those from one of the four valleys in the Italian-speaking part of the canton of Grisons (Mesocco, Calanca, Bergella and Poschiavo) as well as those from Italy. However, despite taking part in nearly all of the events organized by the student association for just over an academic year, I never encountered anybody from one of the four valleys or from Italy.

Despite this clear discrepancy between the relatively open statutes on who was able to become a member of the student association, and the members actually present at the events, the national border between the Italian speaking parts of Switzerland and Italy was sometimes downplayed and some characteristics would be associated rather with the common language (and related cultural background) than with nationality. The students emphasized, for example, that spontaneity or open-mindedness disappeared once one had crossed the 'Gotthard Pass' when travelling from the Ticino to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Simona, for instance, a Law student studying for her master's degree, explained during one of the weekly get-togethers at a bar that the obsession with planning well in advance was something she only experienced with Swiss Germans and that one would never encounter that beyond the 'Gotthard Pass'. Her friend nodded in assent and confirmed that it was just the people from the south who have this "mentality" (in this case referring to their spontaneity) in common. Similar statements were made on a regular basis, claiming "Italianità" as a parameter clearly distinguishing the people from German-speaking Switzerland and those from the south.

In these accounts, different categorizations underline different borders. Cantonal borders are accentuated, for instance, when students from Ticino are to be distinguished from those not originating there. Linguistic borders are highlighted going beyond the border of the canton of Ticino, e.g. when seeking to encompass potential members for the student association. National borders are emphasized, on the one hand, when comparing the quality of higher education, or, on the other hand, momentarily eliminated when blending the

Italian and Ticinese "mentality" and contrasting it with some other "mentality" seemingly to be found in Swiss Germans (cf. Anderson 1983).

Surely, these categories and border constructions have to be contextualized; they have been made by students who a) see themselves as part of the Italian-speaking minority of multilingual Switzerland, b) who relocated from Ticino to the German-speaking region in order to study, and c) who joined a social network consisting of other students from Ticino, a context in which the legitimate discourse requires the belonging to a specific category and therefore the emphasis of certain borders (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

Beyond the contextual cues necessary to understand these boundary constructions within a specific social network, borders and their importance have to be put into a broader perspective of spatial socialization. When drawing on specific borders, the students' border conceptualizations are based on units that they are familiar with (cf. Paasi 1996, 2009). They have been socialized in a certain way, operating with space as one of many parameters to categorize and organize the world (cf. Auzanneau & Greco 2018).

### 3. The importance of spatial socialization

From an early age, we are informed about all sorts of categories in relation to spatial limits, such as where our garden ends and which part of the street belongs to the next residential area. The importance attributed to space is also reflected in official educational documents. Even if the process of spatial socialization begins before enrolling in the education system, two examples taken from the Ticinese curriculum<sup>3</sup> produced for early-years pupils illustrate that the issue of space and boundary-making is manifested in the aims of the document. For example, one of the objectives for kindergarten stresses the importance of space and its organization in our society: "riconoscere l'organizzazione sociale e territoriale, l'utilità, le funzioni e i ruoli degli ambienti quotidiani (casa, scuola, edifici del [sic] quartieri, mestieri, servizi, ecc.)"<sup>4</sup> According to another objective, children in their first years of school should be able to "riconoscere e orientarsi negli spazi di vita famigliari e locali".<sup>5</sup> As becomes evident when looking at these objectives, spatial socialization starts at a very local scale in the early years. Later, space is seen at a larger scale, such as going from the neighbourhood to the river nearby, to the mountain in

<sup>3</sup> Curricula from other Swiss regions could also have served to make the point, as they are comparable to the example from Ticino when it comes to the importance attributed to space.

<sup>4</sup> In English: "Recognizing social and territorial organization, the value, the function and the roles of everyday surroundings (home, school, buildings in the neighbourhood, shops, services, etc.)" [http://www.pianodistudio.ch/sites/default/files/pdf/La\\_scuola\\_dell\\_infanzia\\_del\\_1\\_ciclo\\_HarmoS.pdf](http://www.pianodistudio.ch/sites/default/files/pdf/La_scuola_dell_infanzia_del_1_ciclo_HarmoS.pdf) [accessed 12.04.2018]

<sup>5</sup> In English: "Recognize and orientate themselves in the space of ordinary and local life" [http://www.pianodistudio.ch/sites/default/files/pdf/Dimensione\\_Ambiente.pdf](http://www.pianodistudio.ch/sites/default/files/pdf/Dimensione_Ambiente.pdf) [12.04.2018]



the region, to mountains in other countries. This process of organizing space involves establishing boundaries and amongst other things allocating people/objects to a specific place on one or the other side of a border.

Spatial socialization goes with language; language is essential when labelling space and when attributing people to a specific space. Spatial socialization could therefore be seen in connection with language socialization, which can be defined as

"the process of becoming a competent member of society [...] through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations" (Schieffelin & Ochs 1986: 168).

When spending time with students from Ticino as an ethnographer, and while interviewing some of them, the extent to which spatial language was used to categorize people (e.g. the Ticinese) and to organize space (e.g. the 'Gotthard Pass', the four valleys where Italian is spoken) became very evident to me. In this way, borders are reproduced through language on a regular basis. As Schieffelin & Ochs (1986) put it, these students are all in the process of becoming competent members of society; but in particular, they are in the process of becoming socialized into their new life as students of Ticinese origin in German-speaking Switzerland. Most of the students that I have met have opted to join a specific social space, i.e. an Italian-speaking student association, in which expressing one's competence as a member requires the organization and categorization of space and the drawing of variable borders that one can label.

#### **4. Borders – inclusion or exclusion?**

Carla, Filippo and Simona have all opted for studies in German-speaking Switzerland and draw on borders and draw borders in different ways and for different purposes. Their interest and the conditions in which they navigate have to be taken into account when attempting to understand the complexity and variability of boundary-making.

Filippo creates a clear discursive hierarchy (supported by peers) between higher education in Italy and Switzerland. He has never gathered educational experience in both countries enabling him to compare and contrast the two. He instead draws on pre-existing discourse and stereotypes and assumes that a diploma from a Swiss university and the language competence acquired in the German part of Switzerland during his studies will be an investment that will pay out in his future (cf. Duchêne 2016). Filippo highlights the dedication and seriousness he attributes to his studies when explaining his choice for studies in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. By doing so, he delegitimises the dedication of those students who have not crossed the linguistic border.

Simona instead constructs a momentary coalition between the people from the south (Ticinese and Italians) to whom she attributes a similar "mentality", a

"mentality" she does not identify in the north (amongst Swiss Germans). She temporarily downplays the national category, instead accentuating the 'Gotthard Pass' as a boundary separating a larger Italian-speaking region from a Swiss German speaking region and associates different cultural behaviour with different linguistic origins/regions.

Carla, at last, quantifying the level of "Ticinità", distinguishes between people and their authenticity on the basis of their parents' (geographic and linguistic) background. In conversation, Carla scrutinizes my percentage before attributing me a non-Ticinese status, with which she also associates the lack of competence in the Ticinese dialect. This linguistic competence is according to her only imaginable when growing up with two Ticinese parents. The categorization created by Carla combines linguistic variation with social and geographic origin, thus creating boundaries within the Ticinese community as defined by geo-political borders.

For these students, boundedness and making boundaries – however variable they might be – are related to questions of belonging or not belonging and can be seen as an exercise of power. Border-drawing as a way to organize and categorize their world is thus crucial in all social relations and in the making of the rules of inclusion and exclusion, which help these students navigate their social context.

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