

Ecological niches, emergent genres or emergent communities of practise? English as an academic lingua franca at the French-German bilingual University of Fribourg-Freiburg

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In this presentation, I will look at ELF data collected at “Switzerland’s Bilingual University” and consider the question as to where, when, why and how speakers from different L1 backgrounds who could (and should?) be using French and German actually use English as a 2nd/3rd /4th language in academic contexts. Necessity and economy in internationally composed local research teams, whose members do not share any other language, are on record as obvious reasons, but English is hardly ever a neutral option. While English has been perceived as and opposed as a threat to bilingualism it has at the same time reinforced its role as a sine qua non of academia and is under consideration as an additional or the only medium of instruction in some post-graduate courses. Not only students but also staff are torn between demonstrating academic communicative and study skills in their L2 partner language French or German and simultaneously using, practising, improving and displaying English as an academic and professional tool. Whereas English as a native language may typically dominate, ELF as a 3rd or 4th language may need to be supported and promoted in its ecological niches at this university. But is this biological metaphor always appropriate? The case of the Psychology Lunchtime Seminars as an emergent genre and an emergent community of practise will be examined in more detail, taking into consideration the role of choices and strategies in coping with the imperative to use ELF under plurilingual conditions.