

Social Media: Switzerland writes in English

The use of social media brings with it new research methods. Scientists from Lausanne have analyzed languages and topics of Foursquare users in Switzerland.

By Mark Schröder, Computerworld.ch, 08.08.2013

In the German speaking part of Switzerland, German is the main language, similarly with French in Romandie and Italian in Ticino. This impression is conveyed by surveys conducted by the BFS (Federal Statistical Office). However, surveys cost a lot of money. Social media, which are cheaper and a quite recent technology, help in understanding how languages are used in the different regions of Switzerland.

Researchers Darshan Santani and Daniel Gatica-Perez from Idiap Research Institute at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) have analyzed which languages are actually used in Switzerland today. They used the Foursquare location service to determine the location of a user. Within the Foursquare app, written comments are used to determine the used language in each place. The analysis is based on 8748 Foursquare members who were active in 9010 places in Bern, Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich, and Ticino.

Foursquare is a location-based service for smartphones, in which registered users can signal their contacts at which place they are via check-ins. The places that users define themselves often times are tourist sights, places, or businesses. Brief tips can be recommended and could help the next visitor. A business owner can grant a bonus to Foursquare users when they check-in or add comments.

The analysis of the researchers showed that most of the comments in the five regions were mainly in English. The local language follows in second place. The researchers argue several reasons for the dominance of the English language. The first reason is that the majority of the Foursquare users are tourists. Second, local firms employ many skilled workers from abroad. Third, Swiss communicate with friends or colleagues in English to be understood by everyone. Based on the English-speaking locals, the researchers evaluate that 18 percent of users are multilingual. By comparison, 81 percent use only one language.

Based on the Foursquare comments, the researchers categorized the users into two groups: tourists and migrants. In the 21'780 comments, four themes were identified falling into three regions: Zurich dominates in transportation (airport, Swiss airlines, trains); Lausanne dominates in fast food (burgers, chips, fries) because of the many students; Ticino dominates in Italian food (pasta, pizza, tiramisu) and Swiss-German food (sausage, hash browns, sausage) because the Italian-speaking canton is a popular tourist destination.

For Santani and Gatica-Perez, the current findings are the starting point for further research. They want to analyze the Foursquare data further to study the migrant and tourist groups better. The former are active for a longer period of time in one place and the latter only for a short time.

Courtesy Translation: Sumit Kumar and Aditi Maheshwari

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