

On an aggressive wasp, Swiss students and the German «Sie»

When the idea came up that I could stay a semester at the IPMZ, my first (and only) Zurich experience so far came to my mind. It must have been around 1990 when I, with my dad and some of his friends, visited the zoo in Zurich. I do not recall anything we saw in the zoo, what I do recall is that I was stung by a wasp, in the neck. After staying a semester at the IPMZ, the many positive experiences I had clearly outweigh my encounter with this aggressive Swiss wasp some 20 years ago.

Of course, I knew the IPMZ as one of the best communication science departments in Europe and I had met several colleagues from the IPMZ at conferences. Staying a semester at the department only confirmed the impressions I had gathered beforehand. The department is not only characterised by an intellectual environment inspiring world-class research but, on top of that, it is characterised by a welcoming and social atmosphere not often found elsewhere. One of the things that impressed me the most was how mindful everyone approached me to make sure that I felt welcomed. The colleagues at the department made sure that I would never have to bother about any technicality you normally do not think too much about but which you have to learn when you come to a new place. In addition, working in a rather small group of journalism and political communication scholars at my home department, I experienced it as highly rewarding to have the chance to listen to and interact with colleagues from other fields of communication research, such as media economics or non-political media use. This interaction on a daily basis is an invaluable privilege.

I can only concur with my predecessors' appraisal of the Swiss students. They work hard and are well-prepared. Perhaps the Swiss students are not as talkative as students elsewhere but thinking twice before saying something probably does a better service to the academic level of a discussion than to gas whatever comes to your mind. In my experience the Swiss students came across as motivated and curious. Teaching Swiss students is fun and rewarding.

The administrative staff at the IPMZ is recognised as being among the best at the University of Zurich. They undoubtedly deserve this recognition. Everything works and if you have any question there is always one to assist you (and to my predecessors: the light in the office has been fixed, it does no longer turn itself off before you leave the room).

More generally, it was a new and rewarding experience to work at a department with German as the dominant language. I grew up a few kilometres south of the Danish-German border in a bilingual Danish-German environment. Having graduated from a Danish high-school (in Flensburg) and a Danish university (in Aarhus), having spent almost my entire adult life in Denmark (in Aarhus and Copenhagen) I was not accustomed to using German as a working language. With my bilingual background, the challenge was of course not the language itself but, rather, the customs that come with it. I never introduce myself by last name and, in Danish, we practically never use the Danish equivalent of the German «Sie», neither in writing nor when speaking. I am just «David» and everyone says «du». This is not another way of saying that Danes are more relaxed, in Danish there are other ways of marking distance. Luckily, I noticed that the Swiss quickly move to the «du» and I hope no-one was offended by me accidentally jumping to the «du» when it should have been a «Sie» first!

In short, to my single memory of my visit to the Zurich Zoo and the wasp sting more than twenty years ago, many new impressions have been added. Impressions of an intellectually highly stimulating research environment, impressions of welcoming and mindful colleagues and impressions of great students. Thank you (Euch/Ihnen) for having me!

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