
Language and identity in Switzerland

KEITH DAVIDSON

A proposal for Federal status for English as a Swiss language

I HAVE written previously on the role of English as a vehicular language in plurilingual Switzerland (ET42, April 1995) and more recently on the cachet of English in the Swiss media (ET95, September 2008). Switzerland sits at the heart of Europe, not as a member of the European Union but with continually negotiated bi-lateral arrangements and now relatively open borders. As elsewhere in Europe English is widely used in academia, administration and the big corporations, but there is a surprising suggestion from the Swiss scientific community that English should now be given formal recognition as a Swiss language.

This is reported in the UK insert in a recent English edition of *The Swiss Review* (see panel). The review is published quarterly in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in 14 regional editions for the Swiss Abroad – an official constituency of the Swiss Confederation representing some 10% of the population. It includes generations of ‘Swiss’ (by parentage) abroad who may have little if any command of the national languages (hence the global editions), particularly of the very distinctive forms of the spoken language in the Germanic Cantons; also the ‘foreign nationals’ comprising over a fifth of the inhabitants of Switzerland, if mostly from bordering countries, many from elsewhere in Europe and the rest of the world. What both groups may have in common is some ability in English as a Shared Language (EShL – I offer this term if only as a distraction in the current English as a lingua franca/World English/es (ELF/WE) debate, as in ET94, June 2008).

But ‘national languages’ needs to be nuanced, and the article is a little misleading. The revised Federal Constitution (see Panel 1)

makes a distinction between the four historical National Languages (Art. 4) and the three Official Languages (Art. 70) – the minority Latin dialects of Romansh recognised for official purposes only in the Alpine communes of the Graubünden Canton. The Constitution is resolutely plurilingual and published on the Swiss Confederation website in Spanish and Portuguese (for the South American ‘Swiss?’), Arabic and Japanese (for commercial and financial interests?), and Nepalese (?), as well as of course in English, in addition to the National Languages – with attention paid to ensuring the continuing viability of Romansh and Italian, both evidently felt to be at risk. It is noticeable in the French-speaking Cantons that street signs in French and German often yield third place to English at the expense of Italian, and Romansh rarely appears outside its own communes.

‘The freedom to use any language is guaranteed’ (Art. 18), and there are criteria for the use of English in official Swiss publications.



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English

1

While English is not an official Swiss language, its use is nevertheless widespread in the private sector[;] this is self-evident given Switzerland's export, services and tourism industries. However, as far as the government sector is concerned, there is no legal requirement for documents to be made available in English.

What do we mean by 'English'?

As Switzerland is a European country with close ties to the European Union, the Federal Chancellery applies the conventions of British English, the exceptions being when correspondence or documents are specifically intended for a US audience.

Federal Chancellery

What more can be expected (see Panel 3)? It is certain to be resisted. According some kind of 'partially official' Federal status to a non-indigenous language would set a precedent for other World Languages and raises issues of national identity.

If the Swiss Confederation, as we now know it, was established after the Catholic separatist civil war of 1847, it is founded on the traditions of diverse minor states, principalities and communities in central Europe banding together to secure their independence, as symbolised in the legendary Rütli Oath of the Cantons of Uri Schwyz and Unterwalden in 1291 (as in the 1991 celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the founding of the Confederation) and in the tales of William Tell. The Cantons retain relative autonomy under the Federal Constitution, revised in 1999, and the four National Languages have iconic value in representing these traditions – in which of course English has no role.

It is also part of the Swiss traditions since the Civil War to reconcile their historical differences, religious and linguistic as well as political, in constitutional checks and balances and the 'direct democracy' in which all legislation is in effect based on national referenda. But the National Languages still represent a significant political divide in terms of national identity. If Switzerland, with its honourable record of international commitment, is now a member of the United Nations (leaving the Vatican finally isolated), it was largely the majority Germanic Cantons

Should the Swiss make English their FIFTH official language?

2

A government organisation in Berne has sent shockwaves throughout the country by suggesting the time had come to start considering making English the fifth official language.

The proposal is made by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Sfr. 500 million per year supporting research projects in a variety of disciplines – particularly those that can be developed on an international scale.

This is not the first time there has been talk of putting English on a par with German, French, Italian and Romansh, and it's not likely to find much general support outside the scientific community.

But the report could have an effect in government circles, where there is an obligation to treat all residents equally.

It says public administrations should learn to communicate with all citizens, and a knowledge of English would help achieve this.

Growth of the Swiss Abroad

More and more Swiss are now living outside Switzerland. The latest government statistics show the total has now reached 676,176. Sixty per cent of them (405,393) live in countries of the European Union, and 28,438 have made their homes in the UK.

'Switzerland in the UK', 2/09, *Swiss Review*, the magazine for the Swiss abroad, April 2009

who opposed membership of the European Union. This is the so-called 'Rösti Graben', the mythical cultural-political boundary ('ditch/dyke') between the Germanic, Rösti-eating, Cantons and the rest of the Confederation. (The iconic 'roasted' potato dish is of course now universal.) While deferring to standard High German in the written language, the Germanic Cantons maintain defiantly different dialects in the spoken language, and are unlikely to be sympathetic to promoting Federal status for what is not a historical Swiss language.

It would take some doing in any case, either from a 'popular initiative', a proposal supported by sufficient numbers to trigger a referendum, or from a proposal handed down from the Federal Council for a referendum similarly.

3 **Make English an official language, study urges**

Researchers have suggested making English a semi-official language in Switzerland as a way of attracting more foreign professionals to the country.

Well-qualified foreigners only tend to stay in Switzerland for a couple of years, not always enough time to learn a national language, the study says. Making more legal documents and forms available in English would make their life easier and boost recruitment.

It is just one of the recommendations in a study carried out as part of the national research programme, 'The diversity of languages and linguistic capacities in Switzerland', initiated by the government in 2006 to find ways of capitalising on and preserving the country's linguistic diversity.

Their recommendation for the government to consider English 'partially official' would include the systematic translation of legal documents in areas such as taxation or employment contracts for staff.

[Achermann] notes that the recommendations are not completely out of step with current policy, citing regulations introduced last October [2008] by the government whereby the most important Swiss laws must also be translated into English.

'I think we are far from having a policy where English would have the same legal status as German or French' [or Italian?].

He says that although there is an 'open' climate in government towards linguistic diversity, not all of their recommendations are expected to be received favourably.

Jessica Dacey, swissinfo.ch

4 **Languages in the Federal Constitution**

Art. 4 National Languages

The National Languages are German, French, Italian and Romansh.

Art. 18 Freedom to use any language

The freedom to use any language is guaranteed.

Art. 70 Languages

- 1 The official languages of the Confederation shall be German, French and Italian. Romansh shall also be an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh.
- 2 The Cantons shall decide on their official languages. In order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, the Cantons shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take account of linguistic minorities.
- 3 The Confederation and the Cantons shall encourage understanding and exchange between linguistic Communities.
- 4 The Confederation shall support the plurilingual Cantons in the fulfilment of their special duties.
- 5 The Confederation shall support measures by the Cantons of Graubünden and Ticino to preserve and promote the Romansh and the Italian languages.

The Constitution of the Swiss Confederation (as of November 2008)

Either way it would have to go back and forth between Parliament and the people, the Cantons and the Federal Council, to arrive at the consensus which is the basis of Swiss legislation. Don't hold your breath! ■