

German, French, Italian,
Romansh – and now English?

Swiss cantons bear brunt of nation's multilingualism

BY MALCOLM MACLAREN

FOUR LANGUAGES APPEAR ON SWISS FRANC BILLS AND the country's name in Latin – *Helvetica* – appears on its coins and postage stamps. The four languages – German, French, Italian and Romansh – appear on franc bills because they are the languages of the Swiss Confederation. *Helvetica* alone appears on coins and stamps as a concession to size constraints. In making these choices, the unity of Switzerland is challenged by its underlying diversity. The official response has been to seek their accommodation. Governments have sometimes attempted to encourage – and sometimes to downplay – diversity.

How effective has the Swiss approach been? It's not easy to preserve harmony and encourage understanding and exchange between different linguistic communities, especially while maintaining and promoting the less-used Italian and Romansh languages. The canton of Grisons, officially trilingual, has often been described as "Switzerland in miniature" and offers insights into what Swiss linguistic politics has achieved.

Switzerland is above all marked by its diversity, which has defined its politics throughout its history and has been characterized by efforts to overcome divisions, fragility and internal conflict. Diversity motivated the choice of a federal system of government in 1848 and is the reason for the existence of 26 cantons and about 2,728 municipalities in a land with just over 7 million inhabitants and 40,000 square kilometres. Switzerland is not a nation in the traditional ethnic sense because it is not based on a common language, religion or culture. It is what

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Four official languages grace Swiss franc notes – French, German, Italian and Romansh. The cantons in Switzerland have a larger multilingual task than the federal government because schools and hospitals are located in bilingual areas of many cantons.

German speakers call a *Willensnation* – a country based on the desire of citizens to live together peacefully in diversity. The challenge for political institutions has been to facilitate coexistence of linguistic or other communities and development of a common Swiss society.

Language and the law

According to the Federal Census of 2000, German is spoken by 72.5 per cent of Swiss citizens, largely in the north and centre of the country, French by 21 per cent, to the west, Italian by 4.3 per cent, in the south, and Romansh by 0.6 per cent, in the south-eastern canton of Grisons. Article 4 of the Federal Constitution states that the national languages are German, French, Italian and Romansh, and confirms that linguistic diversity and the

desire to live together are the political and conceptual foundations of the nation. In particular, Romansh is not to be considered a relic, but rather a living language, with its well-being, like that of German, French, and Italian, a matter of concern and a prerequisite for linguistic harmony. The Constitution does, however, make a concession to practical constraints: while Romansh speakers

must be able to communicate with the Federal administration in their language, not all federal legislation must be translated into Romansh.

Switzerland's multilingualism is ensured through the individual's right to linguistic freedom (Article 18) and protection of the linguistic communities' integrity and homogeneity (Article 70). These potentially conflicting principles are implemented through the nation's federal structure.

According to Swiss jurisprudence and legal doctrine, the principle of "linguistic freedom" means the right to use any official language in communications by private parties with the state and between themselves.

The protection of this constitutional right is, however, qualified by the territorial principle, which permits linguistic

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freedom to be limited to preserve the traditional makeup, boundaries and homogeneity of linguistic territories. By ensuring that linguistic communities have the space they require, the territorial principle recognizes that an individual can only realize himself or herself as a member of a linguistic community.

Linguistic territories are not protected for their own sake. Rather, this determination is made at the cantonal level. While the federal government must take certain measures on behalf of Italian and Romansh, as well as of linguistic harmony generally, its role is secondary to and supportive of that of the cantons. Language, like culture and education, is a cantonal matter. The cantons enjoy considerable discretion in designating the languages of cantonal administration and schools, and determining how use of language should be regulated. They bear the main responsibility for realizing – and where necessary, reconciling – obligations relating to linguistic rights and territories.

Linguistic territories vs. multilingualism

Swiss policy on language has maintained the desire of citizens to live together peacefully. However, tensions between linguistic communities remain and minority languages continue to be threatened:

- **Federal multilingualism, cantonal unilingualism and bilingualism.** Federally, the Swiss government is quadrilingual. Cantonally, governments operate in fewer languages. Most cantons have only one official language. Officially bilingual cantons are Bern (German-speaking majority, French-speaking minority), Fribourg (French majority, German minority) and Valais (French majority, German minority). The only officially trilingual canton is Grisons (German majority, Romansh and Italian minorities).
- **Language linked to territory.** The attempt to realize “linguistic freedom” and the territorial principle simultaneously has led to frequent legal disputes. Article 70 of the Constitution, which seems to promise protection for linguistic minorities, has been used on occasion by cantonal and municipal authorities to require their children to attend public school in the majority language. The Federal Supreme Court is called upon frequently to reconcile these two constitutional principles in areas of the country where different linguistic communities are thoroughly mixed.
- **Creating a new canton.** One way Switzerland has “solved” an internal conflict involving language is through creation of a new canton. The officially French-speaking Jura canton was split off from the officially German- and French-speaking canton of Bern in 1978 after a protracted process involving complex negotiations and popular votes at all levels. But the status of French-speaking districts of Bern canton remains a concern. The canton recently granted them limited autonomy, and groups in Jura canton want Jura to annex those districts.
- **Multilingual advantage.** Switzerland has found it especially difficult lately to have a productive dialogue between linguistic and other cultural communities and to use the great potential of its heterogeneity to its advantage. This prevailing inability has manifested itself in stark disagreement between French-speaking and other areas over initiatives to open Switzerland to the wider world.

- **“Unofficial” languages.** Switzerland is faced with two new linguistic challenges. First, one-tenth of its population – mainly foreign residents and temporary foreign workers – speaks a non-official language, with the largest group speaking Bosnian, Serbian or Croatian. Second, the onslaught of English poses a challenge to policymakers. With English becoming the lingua franca globally, and most Swiss more fluent in it than in another national language, some commentators propose adoption of English as Switzerland’s common language.

Governing a trilingual canton

The experience of trilingual Grisons canton illustrates how different languages can cause cultural problems as well as richness. The official languages of Grisons are German, Romansh and Italian. However, little Romansh is spoken in Grisons or elsewhere in Switzerland. Among Swiss inhabitants of Grisons, 73.5 per cent are German-speaking, 16.9 per cent Romansh and 8.4 per cent Italian. There are fewer than 27,000 Romansh speakers there and Romansh is used infrequently in administration or court matters.

Article 3 of the Grisons Constitution tries to reconcile linguistic variety with linguistic territories and to preserve linguistic harmony in policy-making. It provides that the canton and municipalities are to take necessary measures for maintenance and promotion of Romansh and Italian, and to encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities. Municipalities and communes are to determine administrative and school languages with the canton.

For over 25 years, the cantonal government sought to pass a language law to implement Article 3. Citizens of Grisons finally approved the law in June 2007 after heated debate. The new law sets one threshold for percentage of native speakers to designate a municipality as officially unilingual. The law sets a lower threshold for a second language when designating a municipality as officially bilingual. Each language must be one of the official languages. The law also prefers speakers of minority languages in hiring for the cantonal administration and provides that as a rule the language of court proceedings is to be that of the defendant. The law met with stiff opposition from German speakers in Grisons who felt disadvantaged.

The future of the Swiss model

The Grisons language law has been greeted by some linguists and legal experts as “a model for the whole of Europe.” Not everyone agrees. Certainly, a state with a culturally diverse population will only remain united if its communities consider the state as their own. While Switzerland has managed to survive, it has not perhaps grown together as its founders intended. Provision for powerful, homogeneous cantons may have reduced conflict but has not furthered integration.

The Swiss experience with diversity also suggests that the ability of a constitution to prevent conflict and promote understanding and exchange between linguistic communities is limited. Switzerland remains less multilingual than plurally unilingual. Multilingualism cannot be imposed from outside; it must be nourished by a collective desire from within society. 