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Italian language in decline

The importance of the third Swiss national language is constantly declining. Increasingly fewer pupils are learning Italian, and Italian-speaking Switzerland is underrepresented in the federal administration. Berne is attempting to redress the balance through the Language Law.

By René Lenzin

Paradoxically, while Italian culture is a well-established part of the street scene and lifestyle in German and French-speaking Switzerland, with pasta and pizza a firm fixture on menus north of the Gotthard Tunnel, the Italian language is becoming increasingly less significant in Switzerland. Italian is now a much less popular option at secondary schools in German and French-speaking cantons. The number of people studying Italian at university fell by 42% between 2000 and 2009. In a 2008 sub-study of the national research programme on linguistic diversity in Switzerland, just 9% of French speakers considered Italian to be a useful language. Despite being a national language, Italian does not enjoy a high standing in Switzerland. According to the same study, English is regarded as the most prestigious language by the Swiss population, ahead of French, German and Spanish.

This trend contrasts starkly with Switzerland's image as a multilingual nation shaped by the will of the people. It is also at odds with the Language Law which recently entered into force. Federal government wants this law to

- enhance Switzerland's status as a nation of four languages
- consolidate national cohesion
- promote individual and institutional multilingualism in the national languages
- preserve and promote Romansh and Italian as national languages..

Official figures are deceptive

The Language Law further stipulates that federal government should ensure "appropriate representation of the linguistic communities in the federal authorities". However, according to the above-mentioned

research programme, Italian does not have the status in the federal administration that it deserves. While at 5% the proportion of Italian-speaking federal government employees in fact exceeds the Federal Council's target of 4.3%, this is only because of the translation services and bilingual employees, in other words people with an Italian background who grew up in German or French-speaking Switzerland. The study therefore concludes that Italian-speaking Switzerland – i.e. the canton of Ticino and the southern valleys of Grisons – are underrepresented in Berne.

Another aspect to consider is the fact that the higher the salary band, the fewer Italian speakers in it. Between 2000 and 2007, the proportion of Italian speakers across the entire administration averaged 5.3%. In middle management positions, this figure stood at just 3.9% and in senior management at only 2.5%. When the long-serving director of the Federal Statistical Office, Carlo Malaguerra, retired several years ago, there was a period during which there were no office directors from Italian-speaking Switzerland at all. There are now two again – Bruno Oberle (Federal Office for the Environment) and Mauro Dell'Ambrogio (State Secretariat for Education and Research).

The low number of original documents produced in the third national language also highlights how little importance is attached to Italian in the federal administration. The proportion of such documents produced between 2000 and 2007 stood at just short of 2% (German: 77.2%, French: 20.8%). The authors of the above-mentioned study put this down to the fact that few Italian speakers hold senior positions. Added to this is that most federal government employees from German and French-speaking Switzerland have a poor knowledge of Italian, which is why Italian speakers tended to draw up their documents in one of the other two official languages.

Ticino MP speaks French

Members of Parliament from Italian-speaking Switzerland have also experienced the same thing. According to the Language Law, all Members of Parliament can express themselves "in a national language of their choice in the sessions of the Swiss councils and their committees". However, Chiara Simoneschi-Cortesi, a National Councillor from Ticino who was President of the National Council last year, says this provision is an illusion in practice. Anyone who wants to be heard and understood must speak German or French. She explains that she herself chaired meetings of the Council in French to put down a marker at least for the linguistic minorities.

The last Federal Council election was also a disappointment for Italian-speaking Switzerland. Politicians from Ticino stood for both the Free Democrats and the Christian Democrats as would-be successors to Pascal Couchepin, yet neither was even selected as their party's candidate. Italian-speaking Switzerland has not been represented in national government since Flavio Cotti stood down in 1999. There are now calls to increase the number of Federal Councillors from seven to nine to ensure Italian-speaking Switzerland has a permanent seat.

Retreat on both sides

However, such proposals cannot be introduced overnight. Improving the position of Italian in the federal capital also presents a challenge. This is partly owing to the attitude of Italian speakers themselves. Human resources managers constantly say how difficult it is to attract people from Ticino and Italian-speaking Grisons to positions in Berne. And many return home before they are able to rise to more senior positions. While the media in Ticino points to growing alienation between their canton and the rest of Switzerland, they should also be mindful of their own failings. Newspapers from southern Switzerland have reduced their presence in the Federal Palace enormously in recent years.