

Grüezi, bonjour, allegra, benvenuto : a nation of polyglots

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Grüezi,
bonjour,
allegra,
benvenuto:

A nation of polyglots

With four national languages, dozens of dialects and a total of more than 250 spoken languages, Swiss multilingualism is alive and kicking – and on the rise. However, the advance of English as Switzerland’s “fifth national language” can no longer be ignored.

EVA HIRSCHI

Renata Coray grew up speaking Romansh and Swiss German in the canton of Basel-Landschaft. She studied in French and German in Fribourg, currently lives in Zurich, often spends time in Surselva, reads through English texts at work, and Italy is her favourite holiday destination. Not all Swiss are as adept at languages as Coray, who works as a project manager at the Institute of Multilingualism in Fribourg. However, the latest Federal Statistical Office (FSO) languages survey shows that Swiss multilingualism is very much on the rise. Over two thirds of the Swiss population – 68 per cent to be precise – regularly use more than one language. The figure was 64 per cent in 2014. And it’s not restricted to two languages: 38.4 per cent regularly use two, 21.3 per cent three, 6.4 per cent four, and 1.7 per cent as many as five or more languages. It is worth noting that standard German and Swiss German were not classed as two different languages in the survey.

“Increased mobility, enhanced language teaching, a more cosmopolitan population, and improved communication

through new media and the internet and other channels are helping to fuel multilingualism,” says the sociolinguist Coray. Another reason for the increase is that the questioning in the study has changed, she adds. Until 1990, respondents were asked to indicate just one mother tongue (even if they were bilingual). Since then, respondents have been able to include any dialects, and, since 2010, up to three main languages.

Over- and under-representation

Despite its rise, multilingualism remains politically sensitive in Switzerland – exemplified by the long struggle to preserve Romansh and the controversy surrounding early-age language teaching of English at the expense of French in many schools. The promotion of the national languages – particularly the minority languages Italian and Romansh – is, however, enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Coray: “Quite a lot has been done at political and legislative level, but the reality on the ground is sometimes different.” According to research in 2020 by the Centre for Democracy Studies in Aarau, German speakers are significantly over-represented and speakers of the minority languages under-represented in around two thirds of all departments within the Federal Administration, for example.

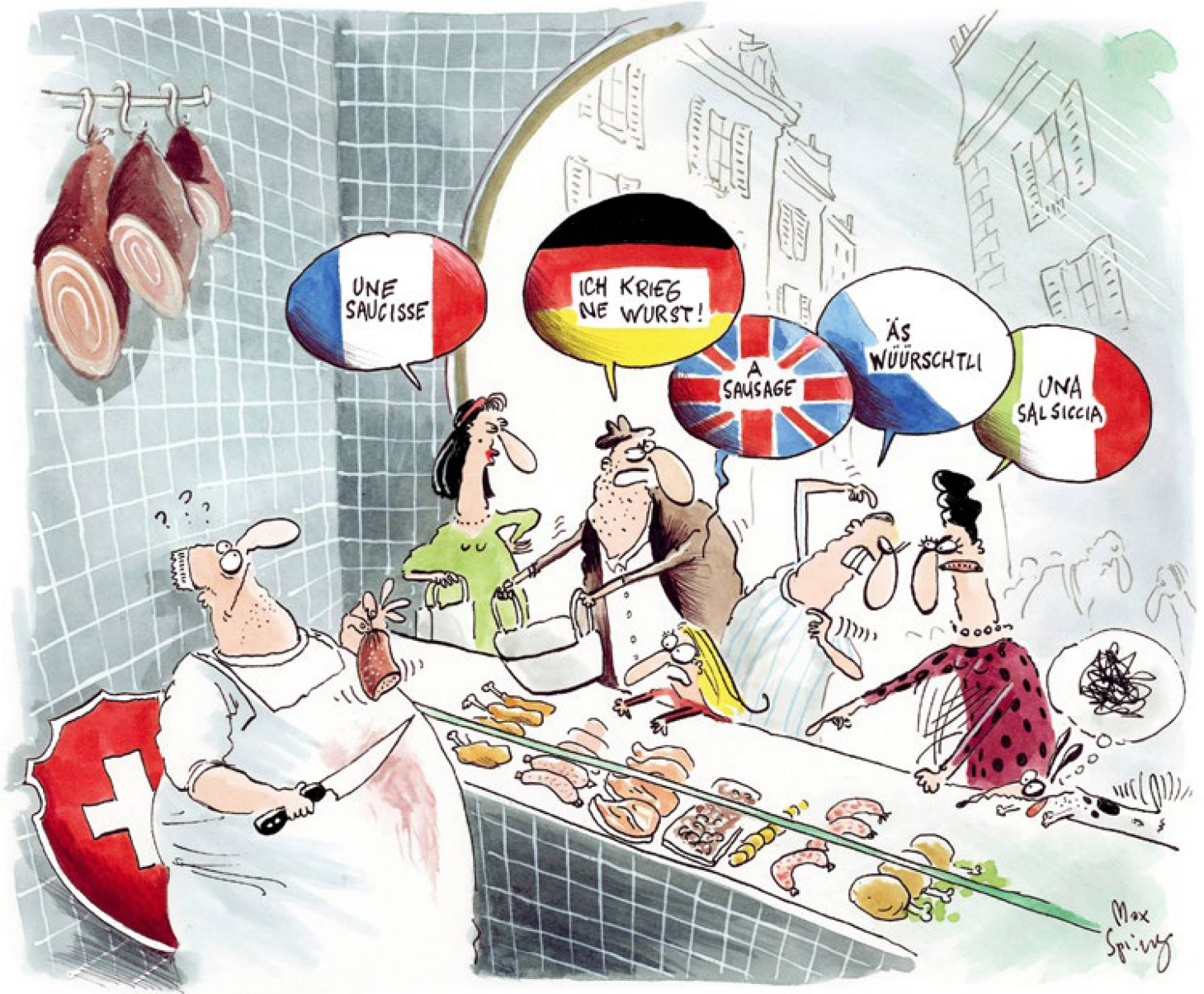
There is a similar problem in Grisons, says Coray. Grisons is the only canton with three official languages (German, Romansh and Italian), yet German continues to dominate at the administrative level. Does it even make sense to promote Romansh if only 0.5 per cent of Grison’s permanent resident population give Romansh as their main language and only 0.9 per cent regularly use it – especially



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Renata Coray

as almost all Romansh speakers also speak German anyway? “It is true that my grandmother’s generation was probably the last to speak only Romansh, but promoting language diversity is nevertheless important for national unity and is part of who we are as a nation.” Switzerland’s vari-



ety of languages even appears to have economic benefits. A study carried out by the University of Geneva in 2008 found that multilingualism accounted for nine per cent of Swiss GDP. A new study is currently ongoing, because this percentage is likely to have increased in recent years.

Motivating young people

Naomi Arpagaus from Grisons is another fan of language diversity. The 21-year-old grew up speaking Romansh as well as Swiss German, learned English and Italian at school, specialised in Spanish at upper secondary school and is now taking French lessons. “I currently live in Berne because I am studying there, so I use a lot of German from day to day. However, I mix a lot with friends who speak Romansh.” This language is close to her heart. As president of GiuRu, the Swiss association of Romansh-speaking young people, Arpagaus does a lot to promote Grison’s minority language and encourage interaction among speakers of the canton’s

five Romansh dialects: Sursilvan, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Puter and Vallader.

“We organise Romansh concert and games nights, we have our own column in the Grisons daily newspaper “La Quotidiana”, and we are in contact with speakers of other minority languages around Europe,” she explains, adding that there is great interest in Romansh among younger people. “Many believe that speaking Romansh puts them at an advantage. Romansh is a gateway to other Latin languages like French, Spanish or Portuguese. And it is almost like a secret language.” But young people use German on social media, not Romansh, don’t they? “People of my age mainly post in English,” she laughs.

English is dominant

It is true that English is emerging as Switzerland’s “fifth national language” (if you discount standard German; see box). English is by far the most-spoken non-Swiss language

By Max Spring,
the “Swiss Review”
cartoonist

in Switzerland (45 per cent). Young people are particularly anglophone, with nearly three quarters of 15- to 24-year-olds shown to have been regularly using English in 2019. “And this is a good thing,” says Verio Pini. “English is actually essential.” Pini is president of *Coscienza Svizzera*, an organisation that promotes language diversity. He is a good fit for the job, given that he grew up in Ticino, studied in Lausanne and Berne, lives half the time in Berne and the rest of the time in Ticino, and also uses French, English and Spanish on a regular basis – mainly for reading the press.

English is undoubtedly important, Pini continues. “Nevertheless, it exerts considerable pressure on Switzerland’s official languages – not only on Romansh and Italian, but on German in Geneva and French in Zurich.” Languages are often only promoted in the region to which they are native, he explains. However, mobility and cultural diversity compel us to look beyond language borders. “Italian, for example, is spoken by more people north of the Alps than in Ticino.” Politicians now realise this, he adds. In its message on culture for 2016 to 2020, the Federal Council set out the objective of promoting the Italian language and Italian culture outside Italian-speaking Switzerland. However, parliament is pushing for a more concerted, dynamic approach to multilingualism that promotes national togetherness as well as integration.

“Our different language regions would certainly be able to understand each other better if everyone used English,” says Pini. “However, national and social cohesion adds up to more than getting our messages across. It also means understanding the culture of other language regions.” People

Swiss German or standard German?

Some regard Swiss German as a dialect, others as a language in its own right. Jürg Niederhauser, president of the Swiss Association for the German Language (SVDS), views this as an “ideological matter” on which linguistic factors have no bearing. Be that as it may, Swiss German is often an everyday impediment to people who come from other language regions or from abroad. Furthermore, use of Swiss German is becoming increasingly popular as more and more people prefer to talk in an informal manner. “Television coverage of sports events used to be entirely in standard German 70 years ago. Now the studio pundits speak in Swiss German,” says Niederhauser, adding that this makes it harder for Swiss from other language regions to understand – and that German-speaking Swiss have, in turn, become more reluctant to speak standard German, because it is used almost exclusively in formal contexts like at school. (EH)

in Switzerland seem quite aware of this fact. According to the FSO survey, 84 per cent of the Swiss population believe that speaking other national languages is key to cohesion within the country.

Learning languages outside school

Philipp Alexander Weber shares this view. Weber, who grew up in Winterthur, went to Fribourg to study economics and had trouble understanding French at first. “Maths was more my thing at school.” Weber quickly realised that



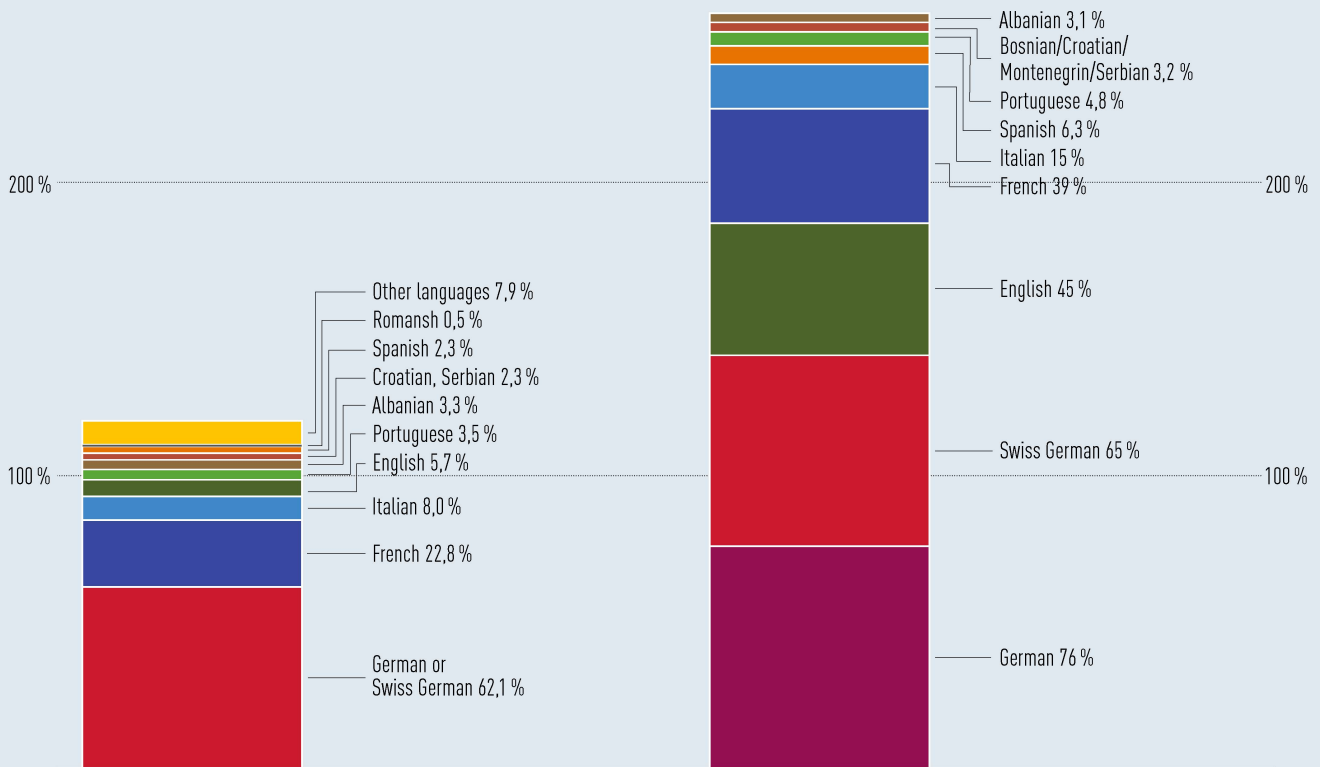
“English exerts considerable pressure on Switzerland’s official languages – not only on Romansh and Italian, but on German in Geneva and French in Zurich.”

Verio Pini

learning the language in situ was much easier than from a textbook. He therefore founded friLingue in 2007 – an organisation that offers language stays to young people in Switzerland. “I wanted to build bridges over the language divide,” he explains.

At present, around 1,000 children and teenagers aged between eight and 18 attend friLingue language camps each year. Weber has noticed that more and more French-speaking teenagers are visiting the camps. “French, the tongue of diplomacy, has always been a draw for German-speaking Swiss who regard it as a very ‘cultured’ language to learn, while French-speaking Swiss tend to have a difficult relationship with German. Simply because they learn standard German at school but then have to cope with different dialects in places like Berne, Zurich and Basel.” However, the German language became more appealing to French speakers after the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, says Weber. Germany turned into a popular travel destination for them within a few years. Many now want to go to Berlin for a gap year or to German-speaking Switzerland for a language stay.

Meanwhile, several cantons in central and eastern Switzerland have relegated French in favour of English at school. Primary schools in Uri and Appenzell Innerroden, for example, no longer teach French, while the language



Switzerland's main languages

These are the main languages (mother tongues) spoken by Switzerland's permanent resident population. The figures exceed 100 per cent when added together, because respondents to the 2019 survey were able to indicate more than one main language.

Languages used on a daily basis

These are the languages regularly used by Switzerland's permanent resident population. The figures far exceed 100 per cent when added together, because respondents to this survey (published in 2021) were able to indicate more than one main language.

Source: Federal Statistical Office



"Many believe that speaking Romansh puts them at an advantage. Romansh is a gateway to other Latin languages like French, Spanish and Portuguese."

Naomi Arpagaus

of Molière is no longer a must in Thurgau and Zurich once pupils enter secondary and upper secondary school respectively. "This has also had an impact in terms of the people signing up for our language camps," says Weber.

But school is not the only place where people are picking up languages. According to the FSO survey, 25 per cent of the population learn one or more languages from the age of 25 – of which English is the most popular.

It also goes without saying that friLingue attendees from different language regions sometimes switch to English to communicate with each other. But Weber is relaxed about this. "We don't think of ourselves as a school, but want to enthuse people about languages." Weber himself not only uses German and French on a daily basis, but English and Portuguese too. He lived as a Swiss Abroad in Brazil for ten years and has a Brazilian son who speaks Swiss German. "Languages help you to get to know and understand other cultures and mentalities. They open up new horizons."