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LANGUAGE POLICY IN SWITZERLAND

Abstract. Switzerland is often referred to as a success story for handling its linguistic and cultural diversity. Traditionally four languages have been spoken in relatively homogeneous territories: German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic (Romansh). The first three have been national languages since the foundation of the Confederation in 1848; the fourth became a national language in 1938. In effect, The *Law on Languages*, in effect since 2010, has regulated the use and promotion of languages and enhanced the status of Romansh as one of the official languages since 2010.

While Swiss language policy is determined at the federal level, it is in the actual practice a matter for cantonal implementation. Article 70 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, titled “Languages”, enshrines the principle of multilingualism. A recent project to create legislation to implement multilingualism across the cantons, however, has failed. Thus Switzerland remains *de jure* quadrilingual, but *de facto* bilingual at best, with only a handful of cantons recognizing more than one official language (Newman, 2006: 2). Cantonal borders are not based on language: the French-German language border runs across cantons during most of its course from north to south, and such is also the case for Italian.

Keywords: language, linguistic, policy, Switzerland

Even though Switzerland takes pride in its multilingualism, it does not necessarily mean that the Swiss are multilingual. The use of the territoriality principle has resulted in the homogenization of the different cantons and a decreased language contact. A symbolic choice of languages can be seen in Switzerland’s official name that is reflected in the Latin name *Confoederatio Helvetica* (“Swiss Confederation”). In order not to symbolize any connection with any of the four national languages and in order not to regard one language as superior to another, Latin was chosen as a neutral language. This choice also symbolizes a Swiss state, which wants to preserve and praise the equality of languages and in that way promote multilingualism and the equality of languages as a unique feature of Switzerland.

The aim of this contribution is to analyze language policy in Switzerland, discuss the conditions resulting in language diversity in a multilingual state and explore the advantages and disadvantages of the Swiss model.

Historical foundations of Swiss multiculturalism

Switzerland was established in 1291 as a defensive alliance among three cantons: Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden. Thus, three German-speaking cantons established the early Confederation of Switzerland. Areas of current French-speaking cantons (except from Fribourg, which joined in XV century) and Ticino joined the Confederation only at the beginning of XIX century (Grin, 1998: 2).

Switzerland has always been permeated with the ideas contributing to the principle of friendly co-existence with two religions and four languages in one territory (Rellstab, 2001: 2). Paradoxically as it may seem, it was during the German beginnings of Switzerland that the bases of its later multilingualism originated. The confederation, formed as the alliance of valleys and cities that developed and spread across Alemannic Switzerland in the late Middle Ages, struggled to preserve the old traditions of local communal democracy against all the territorially inspired attempts to unify initiated by either secular or religious leaders. While most modern states were built by taking actions against the particularism of their various parts, Switzerland emerged as a state contrarily, by preserving and propagating both the particularism and the autonomy of its constituent elements. Each of the ancient Swiss localities (Orte or Stände – the original cantons) performed its actions and ideas solely for itself. The thirteen Orte (Zürich, Bern, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Glarus, Zug, Freiburg, Solothurn, Basel, Schaffhausen, and Appenzell) were constituted following completely different principles, enjoying political autonomy, being sovereign polities that were merely linked to one another through bilateral or multilateral treaties and alliances pledging them to mutual assistance in case they were attacked from outside. Linguistic diversity was hardly significant during this period. There were neither fixed institutions in this alliance nor bodies, only an assembly of delegates – the Tagsatzung or Diet – that was not empowered to take binding majority decisions. Numerous archaic-seeming Swiss customs and beliefs seem to have their roots in these beginnings – from cultivating particular customs, through the desire to retain the individual political constitutions and institutions, using the different dialects. The Swiss equivalent of Italian notions of parochialismo or campanilismo

is *Kantönligeist* (“canton spirit”), which involves much more than mere folklore (Schoch, 2000: 18).

It is possible to define the birth of Swiss multilingualism precisely. It began in 1798, with the invasion of French troops and the half local, half imported revolutionary ferment. The old confederate estate-based system of rule failed to put up more than isolated resistance to this intrusion, and the old political order was finally destroyed. Revolutionary France helped Switzerland achieve individual political freedom, “the transition from oligarchic to egalitarian democracy”, and the liberation of the subject territories. With the *République Helvétique*, it entrusted it with a short-lived, centralistic unitary state along French lines, and, in constitutional terms, the start of multilingual Switzerland. (Schoch, 2000: 22).

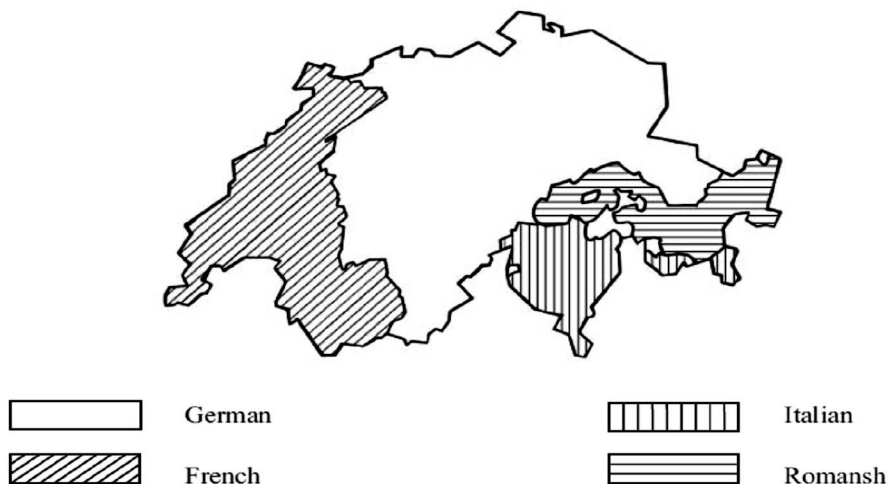
Till the end of XVIII century Switzerland was German-speaking. Thus, its multilingualism guaranteed by the constitution is quite new. The final confirmation of multilingualism was guaranteed in 1848 when the constitution was established and stated that the three biggest languages spoken in Switzerland were recognized as national and official ones. This solution was regarded as an anomaly in Europe at a time of an ideology of the unitary-nation state (Grin, 2005: 2). Romansh did not receive a status of national language till 1938. It was recognized partly official in a new constitution of 1999. Neither race, nor common language have created the state of the Swiss Confederation. It has been formed – as a contrast to all great neighbors, in a political thought and will (Bächtiger & Steiner, 2004: 41).

Linguistic distribution

La Suisse Romande is a French-speaking part of Switzerland, die Deutschschweiz is a German-speaking part of the state, la Svizzera italiana (restricted almost entirely to the canton of Ticino) is an Italian-speaking territory (Durham, 2006: 10). The Swiss language borders have been shaped by two historical processes: the romanization by the Celts and Rhaetians and the expansion push of the Alemannians (Weinreich, 2011: 70).

Four linguistic territories are hardly homogenous. There is the large German-speaking territory in the Northern and Eastern Part of Switzerland, the French-speaking “Romandie” in the West, the Italian-speaking territory in the Southern part and finally some little Rheto-Romanic (or Romansh) islands in the Canton of Grison (Richter, 2011: 189). Switzerland is divided into 26 cantons. Seventeen of these cantons declared to be German-speaking.

Map 1. National languages spoken in the municipalities in 2000



Source: Brohy, 2005: 135.

Four cantons formally are declared to be French-speaking ones and one canton – Ticino – is stated to be Italian-speaking.

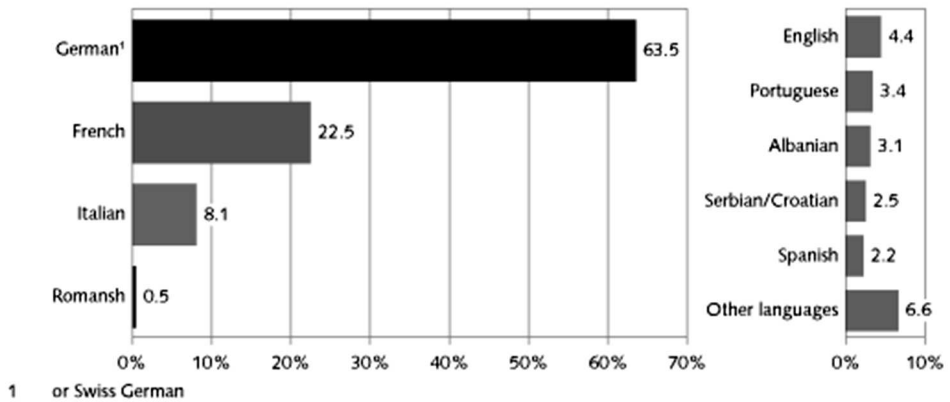
The issues related to the language policy are managed in particular cantons, not the Confederation. The Art 70 of the Swiss Federal Constitution states that the official federal languages are German, French and Italian. Rhaeto-Romansh is also an official federal language for communication with speakers of Rhaeto-Romansh. According to the quoted Art, the cantons determine their official languages. In order to ensure harmony among linguistic communities they respect the traditional linguistic composition of their territories and show consideration towards established linguistic minorities. Federal and cantonal authorities promote understanding and exchange among the linguistic communities. The federal authorities support multilingual cantons in the fulfillment of their special duties.

How does the language policy work in Switzerland?

Switzerland was never united by a common language (Fulgenzi, 2007: 2). The Swiss linguistic map is traditionally territorial, i.e. the four linguistic communities are in fact confined to four separate, essentially monolingual geographical regions. Nevertheless, in certain areas the languages permeate one another, so the society is exposed to a considerable degree of individual plurilingualism, a competence to use several languages in a natural manner,

Graph 1. Main languages in Switzerland, 2013 (in %)

Languages declared as main languages, 2013



¹ or Swiss German
Permanent resident population living in private households.
Persons interviewed could indicate more than one main language.

Source: FSO – Structural survey (SS)

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easily switching between them. This partly results from language policy measures, such as language legislation and acquisition planning, as well as simply to contact phenomena (Pandolfi et al., 2013: 8).

In accordance with 2002 national census, more than three fifth of all Swiss people speak German (not Standard German, but Swiss-German dialect). Above one fifth speak French, fewer than one tenth speak Italian and the proportion of Romansh speakers is in marked decline. However, the population of Romansh-speaking region is functionally bilingual, or even multilingual due to socio-economic reasons (Hutterli, 2012: 16). The massive wave of immigration – deliberately driven by government and business in the decades following the Second World War – brought breakthrough changes to Swiss society and the use of languages. The period of economic boom resulted in shaping a modern consumer-society; at the same time, the so-called guest-workers, followed by returnees, refugees, and asylum seekers, hammered far-going social changes. During the last few decades, Switzerland – “whether it liked it or not – developed into a multicultural society” (Schoch, 2000: 15). However, Switzerland’s multilingualism spreads much further; nearly 20 percent of Switzerland’s residents are of foreign origin and speak many other languages than the four officially approved by the Swiss government. The languages which have overtaken Romansh (apart from four national ones) are: Portuguese, Albanian, Serbian, Croatian, Spanish and English.

Peaceful language coexistence is based on three principles: 1) language equality, 2) language freedom, and 3) territoriality. The language equality means that four national languages are equal despite the fact that the highest number of the Swiss speak German. Peaceful coexistence of languages is unique in comparison with e.g. Belgium (Kuźelewska, 2015: 5). However, the idea of long equality was not so obvious in the time of establishing the Confederation in XIX. In 1840 the ideas of influence by German-speaking majority have been observed. According to Hess, “three quarters of the Swiss speak German, the rest has no choice” (*Nouvelle*, 1986: 554). At the beginning of the XX century a conflict between German-speaking majority over French-speaking minority became serious. The reason was national census in 1900 that showed the smaller number of German-speaking people than previously. As a result, the League for Defence of German Language was established. Nowadays, among 26 cantons three of them are bilingual, one – trilingual, four – French-speaking and the rest are German-speaking. German is still one of four equal national languages.

Language freedom principle is recognized by the Federal Tribunal as a fundamental right. This principle implies the right for residents to use any language of their choice in the private sphere, including the language of business and commerce (Grin, 1998: 4). In fact, territoriality principle results from the Constitution (Art 116) and is referred to as an unwritten constitutional principle, ascertained by the Federal Tribunal (Supreme Court) from al. 1 of art. 116 of the Federal Constitution. It states that it is incumbent upon the cantons, within their boundaries, to secure the extent and homogeneity of their language territory. In other words, federal jurisdiction preserves the stability of language boundaries. Cantons usually tend to be more lenient considering this issue but there is no right for citizens to be educated in another national language (Grin, 1998: 4). The principle of territoriality often results in the fact that in the most Swiss communities only one language is spoken (Schmid, 1981: 26). Every single Swiss has the right to use his/her mother-tongue; however, in relations between inhabitants and authorities the language of the majority is used on the territory. It means that the territoriality principle prevails over the language freedom. The principle of territoriality denotes only one official language within a particular canton, often the local language as most cantons’ official languages fit the language boundaries, although there are a few bilingual and even trilingual cantons (Grin & Korth, 2005: 69).

The stability of language boundaries is enshrined in federal jurisdiction. It means that there is no right to French-language education in

German-speaking Switzerland, and vice-versa. Switzerland, with its four official languages, lacks a clear cut national identity (Füglister & Wasserfallen, 2014: 418). Swiss people identify themselves with the regions and the cantons in which they live. While Swiss language policy is determined on the federal level, it is still in actual matter of practice for cantonal implementation. Quite serious problems are observed on the linguistic borders of the cantons Valais, Bern, Fribourg. The majority of the Swiss living in Fribourg canton are French-speaking, but the city Fribourg is German-speaking. For some, this situations reminds of a kind of “germanization”, for others, the territoriality principle in the counties where the majority are German-speaking citizens results in using French in all official institutions, including schools. This solution cannot be convenient for the pupils and their parents.

The principle of linguistic territoriality is the basis of education policy that recognizes the rule of a language of instruction being determined by the canton. Despite a canton’s decision to use a certain language in its schools, it supports multilingualism in the region by offering courses on Switzerland’s other official languages (Grin & Schwob, 2002: 413). Establishing French schools in German-speaking Switzerland was prohibited by the Federal Court, with an exception of Bern, where it is allowed considering the presence of federal employees. The justification cited is that German-speaking Swiss might then want to settle German-speaking schools in Ticino and in French-speaking Switzerland. On the other hand, the committee concluded that, in those very areas where a linguistic minority transformed into a majority, as it frequently happened in communes in Graubünden, the territorial principle did not work (Schoch, 2000: 55).

A particularly sensitive matter concerning the sphere of the language freedom is the possibility of teaching a particular tongue. The already mentioned sentence of the Federal Court in 1965 stated that the cantons are free to manage the issues of the language use in education (the case concerned the administrative discretion to limit the admissibility of the French language in the German-speaking canton of Zurich by imposing a duty to continue their education after two years of teaching in a private French school, in the German-speaking schools. With time the adjudication line has evolved towards a wider understanding of the mother tongue in Switzerland. The Federal Court Judgement of 15 July 1996 perfectly expressed it (Aleksandrowicz, 2011: 111), which abrogated the decision obliging a child residing in the German-speaking local municipality Mörigen to attend to a local German school, and not to a French school in another municipality. The Federal Court recognized this decision as violating the freedom of the

mother tongue spoken by the person (as opposed to the official language in the municipality of their residence), which resulted in recognizing their individual freedom of language as prior to the principle of territoriality and linguistic uniformity of the municipalities. Finally, it was admitted that education authorities must not order an individual to attend a school with the language of instruction that is official in this region. On the other hand, for a school in another municipality with another language of instruction it is not obligatory to offer a place to the student in this situation. Nevertheless, this situation is not banned – in this case these are parents/ guardians of the student who handle the costs of education even at primary level. (Aleksandrowicz, 2011: 112).

It is especially the canton of Zurich (arguably the single most powerful canton in the country and its economic leader) that decided, in December 1997, to increase the proportion of English in the compulsory school syllabus, while reducing the proportion of French (Fulgenzi, 2007: 6). This measure, generally supported by the local public, caused a certain amount of confusion in official circles, both in the governments of other cantons and in the “CDIP” (the permanent conference of cantonal ministers of education). This mobilized the latter to commission a report (Lüdi et al., 1998: 5), tabled in July 1998 and currently under discussion, to re-examine and re-consider in depth the motivations and processes of second language instruction in Switzerland. In many ways, the report could just ratify Zurich’s choices, by acknowledging English as an international language; yet it stands firm that for a variety of reasons (not only national cohesion, but also economic benefits) national languages must preserve a priority as second languages in the education systems of the respective cantons. This priority, no longer defined in terms of syllabus endowments, is defined in terms of language proficiency being the result of the situation – which of course brings the problem of employing appropriate measures helping achieve and analyze the expected results, if they are seen as wholly independent of syllabus endowments, and if these endowments are expected to consider English to be the language prior to other languages (Grin, 1998: 6).

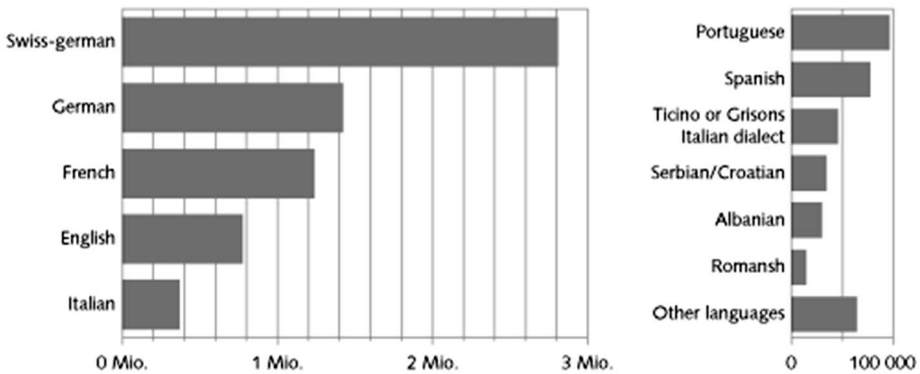
Teaching a second national language is a traditional part of compulsory schooling. Recently, however, language teaching has undergone major reforms: an agreement (*HarmoS*) between a majority of the cantons has been drawn up in order to harmonize both the sequence of subjects taught and the educational goals to be achieved. The concrete changes to language teaching include an obligation to teach English alongside a second official language for all students. In addition, the first foreign language must be introduced by the third class at the latest; the second foreign language by the fifth class. In

future, German will be the first foreign language taught in French-speaking parts of Switzerland and in areas of Graubunden where Rhaeto-Romanic or Italian are the regional languages; French will be the first foreign language in Italian-speaking Ticino and in many German-speaking cantons in western Switzerland. In the German-speaking territories of Graubunden, Italian will be the first foreign language, while a majority of the German-speaking cantons in central and eastern Switzerland will introduce English as the first foreign language. The fact that a part of German-speaking Switzerland chose English over the national language French was widely criticized (Brohy, 2005: 138–139).

Graph 2. Languages spoken at work in Switzerland, 2013 (in %)

Languages usually spoken at work, 2013

In number of speakers



Employed persons, persons interviewed could indicate more than one language.

Source: FSO – Structural survey (SS)

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Swiss German is the most widely spoken language at work (66,0% of employees), followed by German (33,4%), French (29,1%), then English (18,2%) and Italian (8,7%). The term Swiss German includes any of the Alemannic dialects spoken in Switzerland (Steinberg, 1996). The dialects are divided into three dialectgroups/categories: Low Alemannic (to which only Basel Swiss German belongs), High Alemannic (Bern Swiss German, Zurich Swiss German and Grisons Swiss German), and Highest Alemannic (Valais Swiss German and a number of villages in Grisons). (Leemann, 2012: 70). It is only writing and reading skills that demand the use of the Standard German, as Swiss German lacks a formal writing system. Considering its oral use, Standard German is restricted to the school context, mass me-

dia and public speeches. Statistically, Standard German is used most extensively in schools, yet it is only spoken during school lessons. As Barbour notes, the use of Standard German is a matter of convenience (Barbour, 2000: 159).

Also Italian Swiss have three levels of speech, including the local Ticinese dialect, the general Lombard dialect or Lombardic koine, and literary or High Italian (Stepkowska, 2013: 2). Romansh is divided into five main dialects, each spoken in a different part of Grisons (Pitsch, 2010: 87).

The Swiss educational system is not organized at a national but at a cantonal level and language education is predominantly focused on the two majority languages – German and French as well as the global language – English. These languages are extensively taught in all regions (Pandolfi et al., 2013: 11).

All national languages of Switzerland are used during parliamentary sessions, three of them being used most frequently – German, French and Italian (Jeffrey, 1982: 22). Practically, these are French and German that are used most commonly. Sessions are always translated simultaneously into all languages so that deputies could express their opinions easily and discuss using the language they prefer (Art. 8 para. 1 Languages Act). This rule also applies to the federal councilors (cabinet ministers) when they speak.

In both chambers of parliament, Standard German is used since members from all four linguistic regions of Switzerland are present. However, the two chambers of the federal parliament generally use only two languages in order to communicate. During proceedings, members of parliament from Ticino have to cope with German or French drafts of bills; an Italian version is only available at the final vote. Again, in the National Council – the representative chamber – and, since very recently, in the Council of States (Ständerat), in which the 26 cantons each have two seats, regardless of their size, simultaneous translation is provided in only two languages – German and French. Generally, the members from Ticino say few introductory words in Italian, for the sake of the television, and then also speak French or German.

In the National Council, debates are translated simultaneously into and from the three official languages (Art. 37 para. 2, National Council Standing Orders¹⁸); translation into Romansh is only provided if demanded beforehand. The committees present their verbal reports in two languages, German and French or Italian (Art. 19 para. 1, National Council Standing Orders). Unless the matter in question is of a particularly significant nature or exceptionally complex, the rapporteurs complement each other and do not repeat parts that had been already dealt with in another lan-

guage (Art. 19 para. 2, National Council Standing Orders). The Council President chairs the session in his or her mother tongue; essential statements and points of order expressed verbally are interpreted directly into a second official language; this service is provided by the Council Bureau (Art. 37 para. 1, National Council Standing Orders). When allowing members to speak, the President ensures that each language and point of view is given a fair proportion of speaking time (Art. 41 para. 3, National Council Standing Orders). In the Council of States, there are no explicit rules concerning the use of languages (Schwab, 2014: 5). Unlike the National Council, the upper chamber does not provide simultaneous translation of its debates: members have refused to call interpreters on several occasions because citizens expect members of the Council of States to be able to participate in the debates using at least one other national language. Documents are published in German and French, but the verbal committee reports are usually issued in one language.

The parliamentary committees do without simultaneous translation, relying on passive linguistic competence. Over the last few years, there has appeared the stronger need to ensure a greater presence of all four languages at federal level (Schoch, 2000: 16). What appears to be interesting, Swiss-German MPs do not use “Swiss-German” (i.e. one of the dialects spoken at home and in other informal contexts in the German-speaking part of Switzerland) in parliament but standard German (in German: *Schweizer Hochdeutsch*). Over the past decades, the dialects have been used more extensively. This results in certain difficulties for the French, Italian and Romansh speakers of Switzerland, who feel confused because the language they were taught in schools was Standard German.

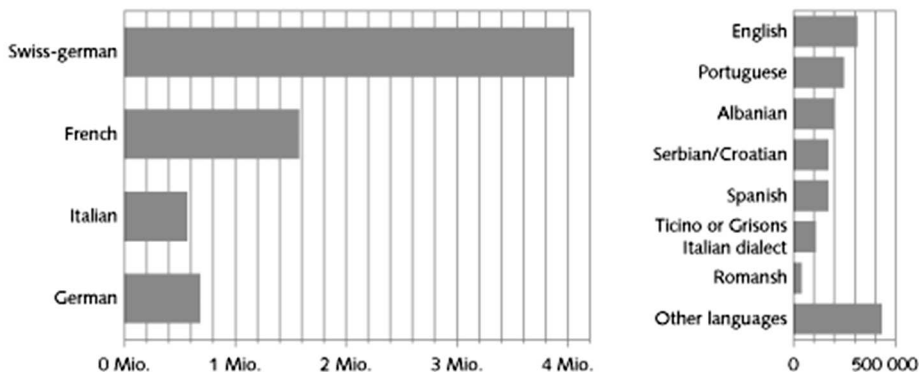
In principle, all documents, reports and drafts of legislative acts dealt with by committees and in the plenary sessions are issued simultaneously in three languages: German, French and Italian (Art. 8 para. 2, Languages Act), either online or in printed form. Other documents are made available in at least two official languages, usually German and French (Art. 46 para. 3, Parliament Act).

As far as the judgments and justification of the Swiss Federal Supreme Court are concerned, they are issued in the language of the decision being contested. However, the parties to the proceedings are free to draft their petitions in one of Switzerland’s official languages. Petitions are not translated (*The Swiss Federal*, 2015). It is only Regeste (a short summary of the sentence) that is translated into three official languages – German, French and Italian. The rest, including justification for the sentence, is not translated into other languages.

Graph 3. Languages spoken at home in Switzerland, 2013 (in %)

Languages usually spoken at home, 2013

In number of speakers



Permanent resident population 15 years or over. Persons interviewed could indicate more than one language.

Source: FSO – Structural survey (SS)

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At home or with relatives, 60,1% of the permanent resident population usually speak Swiss German, 23,4% French, 10,1% German, 8,4% Italian and 4,6% English. Analyzing the languages usually spoken at work and at home, 42,6% of the permanent resident population have marked more than one language. English and Portuguese are the two most frequently used foreign languages indicated. Those who use Swiss German, use their own local varieties of spoken language. The Swiss who are not German-speaking find it difficult to communicate with Swiss Germans as they do learn Standard German (Bastardas-Boada, 2012: 50).

Cross-cultural interactions also are factors maintaining multilingualism in Switzerland. Only several cantons are officially monolingual, and even those being declared , are exposed to other languages through migration. People are free to move and are not to be limited by language. This means that in some cases, a person moves to a canton where he or she does not possess sufficient competencies to be able to speak the official language. Jesse Levitt describes this, citing a trend of Swiss citizens moving from German-speaking areas to French-speaking regions, making it necessary for the German migrants to learn French as a second or third language (Levitt, 2004: 86). Not only is multilingualism maintained by canton to canton movement but also by migration from other countries. Foreigners constitute nearly 20 percent of Switzerland’s resident population and it is demonstrated in the statistics that nine per cent of them use a language other than one of the four official Swiss language cantons (Grin & Korth, 2005: 70).

The specificity of Swiss multilingualism

What makes Swiss multilingualism unique? The fact that each language has its clearly defined boundaries. Each official language is used for specific purposes and in certain situations. All federal laws are published in German, French and Italian, the Federal Assembly uses French and the “Romansh normally use German” in a formal context (Levitt, 2004: 86). French-speaking Switzerland has never been a part of France. The Swiss have always stressed their independence from France. At the beginning of XIX century they started to use a word “romand” in order to emphasize Swiss dissimilarity from France and French culture. German-speaking Switzerland has never been a part of Germany, and Italian-speaking Switzerland has never been a part of Italy (Grin, 1998: 3). The linguistic boundaries do not correspond with political intercantonal boundaries. Three cantons are bilingual (French and German: Bern, Fribourg, Valais). One canton is trilingual (German, Romansh and Italian: Grison). Linguistic boundaries do not correspond to religious boundaries. The Swiss society is composed of the Catholics and the Protestants. There is no rule that German-speaking cantons are Protestant, while French-speaking ones are Catholic. Three French-speaking cantons: Geneva, Vaud, Neuchatel and bilingual Bern have played a significant role in promotion of Protestantism in Switzerland (Grin, 1998: 3).

Conclusions

Theoretically it can be declared that the number of languages spoken in Switzerland is four. In fact, due to a high number of immigrants, the number of whom is still increasing, Switzerland can be referred to as a multilingual state. Nevertheless, it does not mean that all Swiss citizens are also multilingual. They mostly grow up speaking just their mother tongue and have to acquire other languages. It means that the majority of Swiss speak only one language (excluding English). Consequently, Swiss multilingualism is not individual, but seems to be a feature of the policy as a whole. There is no single national language, but four languages with equal status. German has a clearly dominant position.

There are some challenges. At school it is strongly recommended that one of four national languages is one's first foreign language (e.g. French or Italian in German-speaking cantons). However, since the 1990s national languages at school are replaced with English. English is the first foreign

language taught in German-speaking cantons. French-speaking pupils are reluctant to study German as in German-speaking part a dialect is used in everyday life (including TV and radio), rather than Standard German.

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