

Language diversity in Switzerland: overcoming the *Röstigraben* in the 21st century

I. Switzerland and its official languages

In Switzerland we have four different official linguistic regions: a German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic area. Historically and culturally the four languages have shaped the respective regions.

If we look at the map, we see that 8 million people live in Switzerland, a country with the size of 41 000 square kilometres. On this map we can see the different language regions. The German speaking part constitutes the absolute majority with 65.6% of the population and a size of 73.3% of the country. The French-speaking part makes 22.8% of the population in an area of 23.4% of the territory of Switzerland. Italian is only spoken by 8.4% of the population, while area has the size of 6.1% of Switzerland. Rhaeto-Romanic is spoken in the Alps in the federal state of Graubünden. Only 0.6% of the Swiss speak Rhaeto-Romanic, in an area that makes 0.7% of Switzerland; probably even less with my Rhaeto-Romanic fiancée now living here in Tokyo!!

Apart from the local varieties, in some cantons (cantons are the administrative districts or regions), different languages coexist as the official languages spoken. For instance, in Bern, Freiburg and Valais French and German are both official languages, and the canton of Graubünden even has three official languages, namely German, Rhaeto-Romanic and Italian. This implies that the totality of public life takes place in several languages; from official documents to street names everything is written in different languages, public education is done bilingually, companies are made off multilinguistic teams etc.

One last thing about the languages spoken in Switzerland. In the table you can see the rise of people speaking another language than the official. Especially since the 90ies a growing number of today 21.1% of the Swiss population do not have an official language as their mother tongue.

II. At a federal level: Article 70

At governmental level, all four languages are equally treated. Under article 70 of the Constitution it is stated that all four languages are official languages. Members of the government can speak in any of the four languages and statements are translated into at least two other official languages.

The language situation is considered in the Swiss Constitution. The location of the governmental buildings is in the German speaking part, in Bern. The federal court is in the French-speaking part, Lausanne and the federal criminal court is in the Italian-speaking part, in Bellinzona.

The responsibility for an equal treatment of the languages is in the hands of the cantons. In their professional work the cantons have to take into consideration linguistic minorities and find a way for a harmonious coexistence. Moreover, they have to promote the exchange between the linguistic groups by funding language classes, showing respect to minority language in public events and translating official documents into the respective language. For extra efforts in order to support another language, the cantons get funding by the government.

III. Interchange between the linguistic areas

If you consider the size of Switzerland, you would think of an active exchange between the language areas. However, most Swiss citizens are not fluent in a second national language and only rarely cross the language barrier or visit other linguistic regions on a regular basis. Apart from the Rhaeto-Romanic-speaking people, one can say that people focus on their language region and have closer ties to neighbouring countries where the same language is used than with other language regions in Switzerland. An exception is the higher education sector. The chance that somebody pursues his or her studies in a language region different from his or her own is very high. A possible explanation for this is the concentration of universities and fields of studies in the German speaking part of Switzerland.

Cultural differences and tensions are especially well observable between the German and the French speaking parts. This is referred to as the so called Röstli ditch, or *Röstigraben* which persists between the two linguistic regions. *Röstigraben* is a humorous term describing the differences in mentality and political cleavage between the German and the French speaking parts. The term first appeared during World War I, when the neutral Swiss stood between the belligerent powers of the German Empire and the French Third Republic. Today, cultural and civic differences between these regions can still be observed. For instance, in elections and votings, the French-speaking part often is social and left wing, while people in the German-part vote for conservative and right wing parties and issues. In most ballots, one can see very clearly the cleft between the two regions.

IV. Education: *Lehrplan 21*

Since 1999, we have a new article in the Swiss constitution. It should support better and stronger relationship between the linguistic regions. As part of these efforts, the cantons started to develop a new school curriculum the so-called *Lehrplan 21*. In this new curriculum the focus was laid on how to learn

languages.

Most importantly, the significance of learning one other official language, rather than choosing English as the first language learned at school, has been emphasized. So-called early-French or early-German classes are implemented in primary schools from 3rd grade to sensitize children for a new language. Moreover, the cantons have to offer courses to learn at least two additional official languages.

Other efforts are focused on student exchange programs to other cantons. The importance of learning another language in a natural surrounding in combination with the experience of an other culture is seen as very important for school children as well as teachers. The canton Graubünden with three official languages would have the best starting position to offer an easy and good language exchange. In the new curricula, language is seen as a key function for more understanding, respect and tolerance of the different linguistic groups in Switzerland towards each other.

Apart from these policies, efforts have been intensified to improve students' ability in understanding and expressing themselves in their native language. This problem is especially substantial in the German-speaking part, where a so-called *Medial Diglossia* persists. Orally, people generally use Swiss German while only in written form they use standard, or "High", German. If one considers where and when High German is used, it becomes obvious that High German is seen as a language of distance and only used in education, formal situations and when talking to non Swiss Germans. As a result, as international examinations show, Swiss German speaking children reveal a shortcoming in High German language skills. In order to mitigate this tendency, the government has decided to implement High German already from Kindergarten to make it to a standard language. This way, the children should learn the expertise to speak High German already from five onwards to listen, understand and express themselves. Therefore, a consistent way of using one language from kindergarten until high school was established.