ENGLISH AS A MUST?

A love-hate-*amour-has* affair

Step back and the picture is pretty black and white: One small country with four national languages, divided neatly (it is Switzerland after all) into four geographic areas. But start painting over that map with the country's fifth and decidedly unofficial language—English—and suddenly the lines blur and new layers of complexity emerge.

English is everywhere.

Take the tiny hamlet of Bougy-Villars, Switzerland. It is home to an active working population of just 178 people, according to a 2000 federal census. Fifty-eight of them regularly speak English on the job. About 30 minutes outside Zurich near the German border lies Eglisau, active population 1,597—almost a third speak English at work. Or Maienfeld, the real-life Alpine setting for the fictional Heidi character. Even in this remote mountain town, 188 of the 1,220 working residents speak English.

Similar numbers come back again and again from nearly every town in every canton and the conclusion is undeniable: English is a force to be reckoned with, and increasingly so.

From advertising to education, in politics and business, in public transport and cafes, the use of English in Switzerland is ever-present. It has caused ructions in educational policy, in public services and in private companies.

And while some want to elevate English to the status of an official language, others see it as a threat to the very fabric of Swissness.

The majority of Switzerland's inhabitants speak one of the many Swiss-German dialects. Together these "German speakers" account for 64 percent of the population. Twenty percent speak French, 6.5 percent Italian, half a percent Romansh and the remaining 9 percent speak a non-national language. English is mother tongue to only 1 percent of the country's population—way behind Serbian/Croatian, Albanian, Portuguese or Spanish. So why does it hold so much sway?

"It's most people's default second language," says Heather Murray, a lecturer in English at University of Zurich. "It's the second language of choice, not only for those who speak one of the Swiss languages, but also for immigrants from other language groups."

As you might expect in a country that boasts four national languages, three official languages, several bilingual cantons, but only one written language of its own (spoken by a mere 35,000 people), the situation with regard to language practice and policy is complex.

Consider the figures: Two out of three German-speaking Swiss have at least basic knowledge of English, as do over half of French-speakers and a third of Italian-speakers. In 1998, more than three times as many books were published in English in Switzerland than in Italian.

Of the 3.44 million people who live and work in Switzerland, a staggering 738,588—about 24 percent—speak English at work, up from 17 percent in 1990. In management and other liberal professions the figure rises to over 54 percent.

The picture is truly astonishing in the parts of the country where there is a high density of international companies and Anglophone residents, around Geneva, Basel and Zurich.

In the commune of Bogis-Bossey, near Geneva, only 15 percent of its population is Anglophone yet two of every three residents speak English at work. The stats in nearby Commugny and Founex are similar, at 58 and 52 percent respectively. Close to 44 percent of those who live in towns such as Walchwil in Zug or Bonstetten and Wettswil am Albis in the canton of Zurich use English in their professional lives.

Overall, one third of inhabitants in the regions of Geneva, Basel and Zurich speak English at work, so it's no surprise to learn that English is used for internal communications in large Swiss companies such as UBS, ABB, Novartis and Swiss Air.

Swiss English-language skills (Grin: 1999)

	Francophones	Germanophones	Italophones
Perfect	13%	16%	6%
Good	22%	30%	6%
Basic	17%	22%	18%
Total	52%	68%	30%

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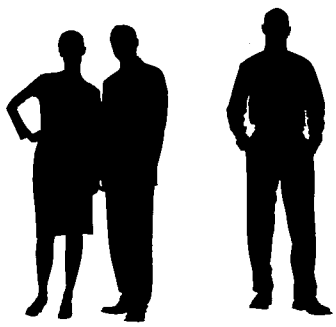
(Figures from the Federal Office of Statistics, Federal Census 2000.)



Percentage of active population who speak English at work.

BERN 21%

NE

VD

FR

GENEVA 31.7%

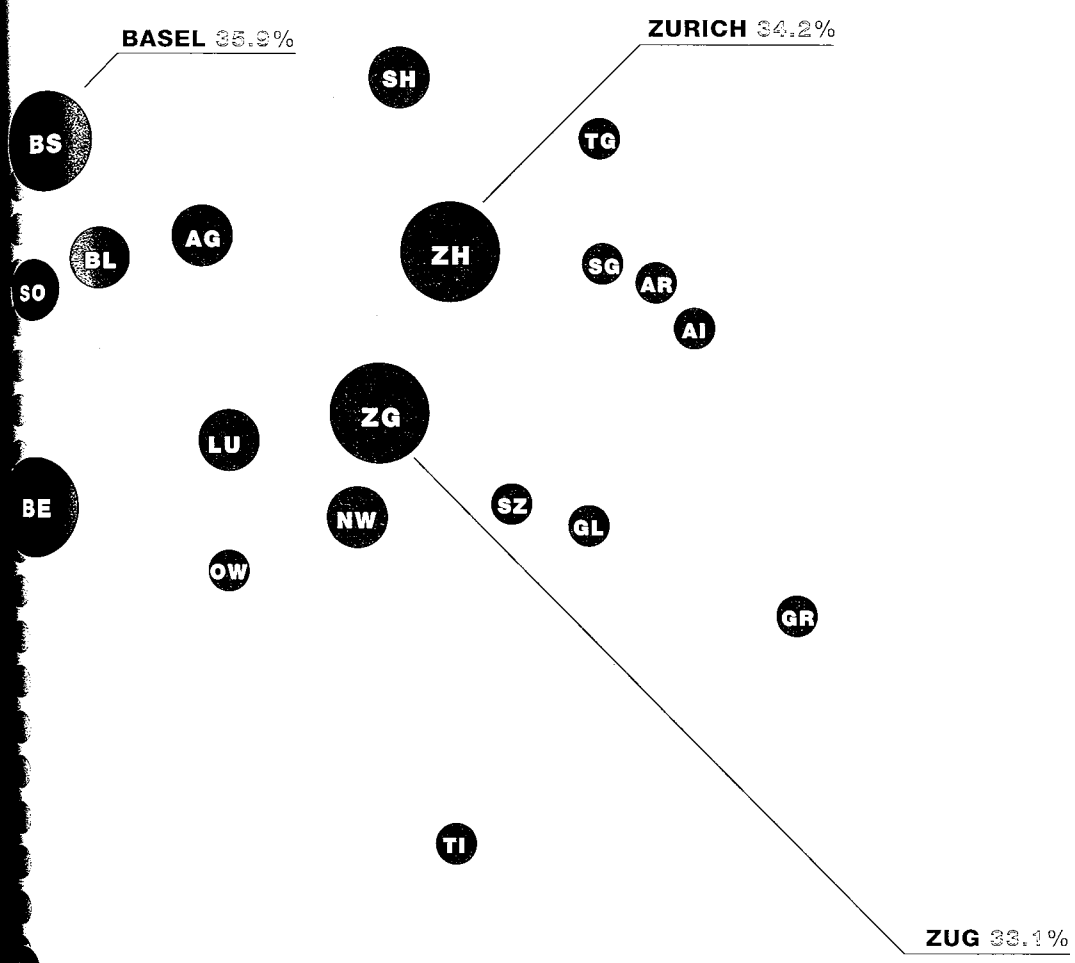
GE

FRANCOPHONE REGION
123,234
17.7%

GERMANOPHONE REGION

561,591

23.4%



ITALOPHONE REGION

14,123

11%

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An academic issue

English is gradually permeating Swiss universities as well. All now offer courses partially or wholly in English. This is most prevalent in natural sciences and economics, particularly at the postgraduate level. In other subjects too, doctorates are often written in English. As Yves Flückiger, vice-rector of the University of Geneva explained to Le Temps, doctoral students often choose English because they are aware of the importance of publishing in English for their future academic careers.

While there is officially a commitment to maintain undergraduate courses in local languages, English is slipping in more and more, and earlier and earlier.

Patrick Aebischer, president of EPFL in Lausanne, confirms that while French is the official language for the technology institute's undergraduate program, more than half the classes are taught in English—and English is the official language of the university's graduate school. With one of the most international student bodies in the world—110 nationalities are represented—and faculty to match, it almost has to be English, Aebischer explains. About a third of the faculty doesn't even speak French.

"This upsurge of English in universities is happening all over Europe," says Heather Murray. "Academic institutions need to compete to attract the best students."

Universities see their competitors as universities in Anglo-Saxon countries. "They almost have a monopoly on Nobel prizes," she points out. If a university wants to attract students from say, Asia or Latin America, it can expect them to learn one new language to study abroad, but not two—and English will prevail.

Profiting from English

The rise of English in the workplace and elsewhere is due in no small part to new technologies and globalization, both of which have been powerful vehicles in driving the spread of the language the world over. Deeply embedded in the world economy, Switzerland is all the more permeable to this trend.

But experts caution that the higher prevalence of English should not mask the importance of national languages in Switzerland. These are still most important for small and medium-sized businesses. And even in large international companies, Novartis or UBS for instance, local languages continue to be widely used. Staff can receive administrative communications, such as salary slips, in the local language of their choice. And a bank clerk in Lugano or Schwyz will have more need for Italian or German than for English.

A report published in 2005 analyzes the data collected in the 2000 census of languages used in Switzerland. The census included a range of questions designed to better understand the complex reality of language use in Switzerland. Residents were asked about the main language spoken, but also those spoken at home, with friends and family, at school and at work.

The 2005 report underlines that national languages are still extremely important, both within their respective regions and to a lesser extent in other regions. Georges Lüdi, a professor of linguistics at the University of Basel and one of the lead authors of the report, says Switzerland is becoming more plurilingual. "The trend is towards more English, yes. But it's not instead of national languages. It's in addition to." Its plurilingualism is one of the key features making Switzerland competitive abroad and attractive to investors.

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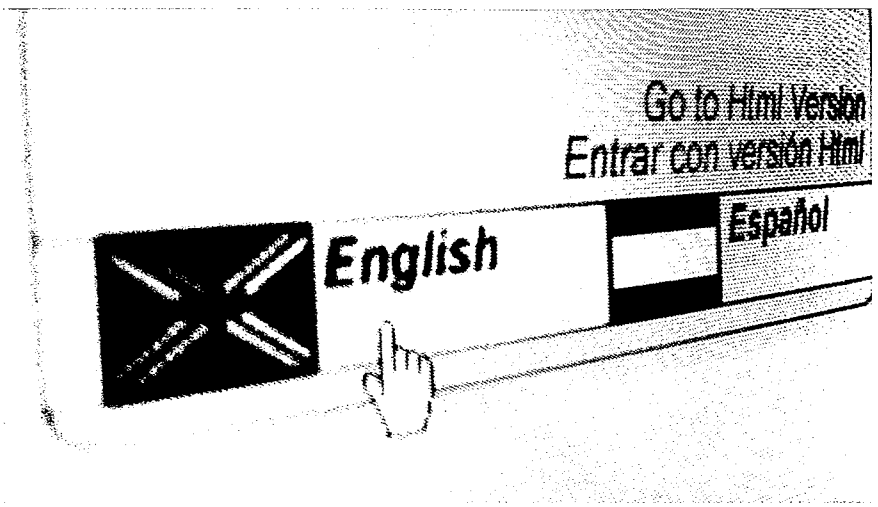
For individuals also, knowing more than one language can bring instant rewards: A Swiss-German who speaks fluent French will earn 15 percent more than his colleague who has no French but the same qualifications and professional experience otherwise. The same study, with a representative sample of more than 2,000 people around the country, showed that the salary of a French-speaker who is fluent in German will be on average 23 percent higher than a colleague who can't work in German.

And the rewards for English are even higher—throughout Switzerland, English-speakers will earn on average 24 percent more than those who do not master the language.



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Myths and Rösti

Language both defines and divides Switzerland. Nationals often cite the Swiss myth with pride. This concept is somewhat elusive but most agree Switzerland was founded on a community of interests between cantons who, while uniting against common enemies, remain fiercely independent and do not seek to harmonize their traditions or ways of life. "Switzerland is built not despite but on the basis of our multi-culturality and multilingual culture," explains François Grin, a professor of economics at Geneva University's School of Translation and Interpretation.

The Swiss myth includes the idea that all national languages should be preserved and encouraged. "The supposedly destabilizing quadrilingualism of the country had to be turned into an advantage. What could be perceived as a fatal rift had to be asserted as the essence of the Swiss nation," Grin explains.

At the same time, one of Switzerland's defining characteristics lies in the differences between language groups. The word *Röstigraben*, the potato dish regarded as the typical Swiss-German meal used as a term for division, has been in common use for decades to describe any—real or imagined—differences between Swiss Germans and their French-speaking compatriots.

On the German side of the *Röstigraben*, English has progressed faster than in other parts of Switzerland. English is more easily accepted among German-speaking Swiss than in Swiss Romande. Migros spokesperson, Martina Bosshard describes how Migros hesitated a couple years ago to introduce the word "Sale" to replace the French term "Action" for discounted items in its stores in French-speaking regions, but went ahead with "Sale" in German-speaking areas where "people are more used to English. There is less debate about the use of English words in daily life."

And as German speakers became more attracted to English, they have turned away from French. The real shock to French-speakers came a few years ago when the canton of Zurich introduced English as the first foreign language taught in schools, instead of French which had hitherto enjoyed top standing. But the trend continued and now the majority of German-speaking cantons teach primary school children English first, while German remains the first foreign language taught in the French and Italian parts of the country. Swiss law requires that a national language be taught to at least the same level as English, but the change will likely strengthen English-speaking in Switzerland further.

Currently English-speakers in Switzerland tend to have a high level of education so, as Heather Murray points out, "learning English from an early age is a big switch. It means that even people who have gone through the basic school system will be able to manage in English." And experts concur that motivation decreases after learning a first foreign language. "Pupils might lose motivation to learn another language if they start with English," says Georges Lüdi.

A lingua franca?

The growing importance of English, within and outside Switzerland, has led some to propose it be given an official role. Last month parliamentarian Felix Gutzwiller formally suggested that English be elevated to an official language.

Others scoff at the idea. Grin fears putting emphasis on a non-national language will make it harder for Swiss to understand each other across the language barriers. He emphasizes that a lot of hard work must go into maintaining the Swiss myth and that promoting English could undermine it. "If we want this country to hold together, we need the glue that is the Swiss myth," he says.

There appears to be little support for Gutzwiller's proposal among politicians either. "It has no chance," says Josiane Aubert, a Socialist parliamentarian for Vaud. Georges Lüdi agrees that "the demand for favoring English in Switzerland comes more from the worlds of economics and science than politics."

Good news for Anglophones?

While most newly-arrived Anglophones in Geneva set out to learn the language, many find that the daily reality does not help them reach their objective. With English so prevalent in the workplace and so many English speakers in the area, exposure to French in day-to-day life can be limited.

Faizel Ismail, head of South Africa's delegation to the World Trade Organization, sums it up: "If it were more difficult to get by without English, I would be forced to learn French. But in the five years since I arrived here, there has been an increase in the number of people I am in contact with, like taxi drivers, shop staff or waiters in restaurants, who speak English."

Caroline Dommen