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Swiss seek multilingual equilibrium

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As a nation uniting speakers of four tongues, Switzerland is acutely aware of the link between language and identity, which is why it is taking the growing role of English very seriously, reports **Jessica Dacey**

The Sarine river running through the medieval Swiss town of Fribourg acts as a language border between its inhabitants, with German speakers living on the east bank and French on the west. Fribourg (Freiburg in German) is one of several towns that straddle Switzerland's language divide. It is officially bilingual and as such its river also goes by its German name, the Saane.

Switzerland's multilingual heritage sets it apart in Europe, with the four national languages – German, French, Italian and the little-spoken Romansch – contributing to about 10% of the country's gross domestic product, according to a 2008 study.

English has entered the mix over the last two decades. Its influence has been spread by the numerous international firms headquartered in tax-friendly Swiss municipalities, its increasing use in academia and its general acceptance as an additional language in wider communication.

"Over the last 20 years English has made quite a lot of inroads in Switzerland," said Daniel Stotz, an English-teacher trainer in Zurich and researcher into the role of language and Swiss identity.

"In most cases now English is used in wider communication among non-native speakers. Quite a lot of Swiss adults have experienced the fact that English has become a company language. Sometimes it was forced upon them as well. I think some of this interest and perhaps pressure has trickled down to family life.

"It is connected a lot to young people's life chances. There is a perception that English is important, that it allows you to get better jobs. It has a highly symbolic value as well," Stotz said.

In a ruling last year, the government decided that the most important Swiss laws should be translated into English in response to growing demand for translation of legislation.

Strong demand for English lessons in schools has also undermined the priority given to national languages in the curriculum. Switzerland's 26 cantons have agreed to introduce measures over the next few years whereby English will be taught in all primary schools alongside a second national language. Eight and nine-year-olds are already learning it as their first foreign language – ahead of another national language – in 10 cantons.

Swiss multilingualism has been the subject of a four-year research programme by the National Science Foundation that aims to understand the role of language and help the government to map out "a new equilibrium", according to Walter Haas, president of the steering committee.

The programme is currently compiling a final report from 26 research projects, which is due for review by government at the end of 2009. The findings show English has a place in Swiss culture, although not necessarily a dominant one.

In one Bern University study, Swiss people viewed English as the most useful foreign language, although most opted to use one of the other national languages when first trying to communicate with someone from a different part of the country.

Another study by the University of Teacher Education found that early English teaching later helped German-speaking pupils to learn French, while a third project by lawyers proposed making English a semi-official language in order to attract more foreign professionals to the country.

Another contributor, University of Geneva economics professor François Grin, calculated that Switzerland's multilingual heritage gave it a competitive advantage worth \$42bn – a tenth of GDP.

"If society is going to invest money anywhere, investing in foreign languages, which in Switzerland means essentially one other national language and English, the rate of return is simply fantastic. By and large, we find that multilingualism is a very well paying asset," Grin said.

Past research by Grin also pinpointed that English was more valued in German-speaking parts of Switzerland. As German is the majority language spoken by 63% of the population, it was more advantageous for Swiss Germans to know English than French or Italian.

It was different in French-speaking regions. The 1997 study established that while English added 18% to salaries in German-speaking regions, it equated to a 10% pay difference in French areas, compared to 14% increases with German or Italian as a second language. Between 1990 and 2000 the use of English increased in the workplace by about 28% and overall use rose in line with other languages, according to census reports.

According to Grin, this shows that multilingualism is expanding as a whole. "English is a very frequently used language but it is not replacing national languages. It plays a supplementary and complementary role," he said.

One area where English is gaining prominence is within academia. Switzerland backs the 1999 Bologna Declaration, which aims to create a European space for higher education, and the Rectors' Conference of Swiss Universities has in the past acknowledged English as the "language of academia". It supports offering more courses in English as the best way of attracting foreign students.

Grin says use of English in academia has grown significantly, but as an advocate for linguistic diversity, he warns that the dominance of any one language in intellectual circles risks "eroding creativity".

"I believe we are better off with diversity than without, and that it is important to develop language policies that are conducive to the maintenance of diversity. This means if a hegemonic language becomes too overbearing, you have to keep this in check.

"Switzerland defines itself not despite its multilingualism, but as a product of its multilingualism. It's a very deeply rooted cultural value. Without multilingualism, [there is] no Switzerland," he said.

It is a view shared by the cross-cantonal educational authority, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Education Directors. "In a multilingual state, the coordination and development of language teaching is particularly important," a spokeswoman said.

"Therefore the notion of a 'lingua franca' will not be limited to English, but rather to an ensemble of languages used within a real context in order to achieve a linguistic exchange."

She said under Swiss linguistic strategy English had and would continue to have "an important status as an international language".

But, she added, it is still only part of a bigger picture in which Switzerland shares goals set by the Council of Europe to prioritise multilingualism by ensuring a range of languages, including English, are taught.

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