

## Languages in Switzerland



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There are four language areas:

- Deutsch (German) (~60 %) is subdivided in a number of dialects. These are a fundamental part of the identity. In daily life NOBODY speaks proper German. Politicians in their speeches, except in Parliament, must be careful not to create a „german-like impression“. Efforts to teach proper German as from Kindergarten create apprehension amongst many people who feel we are being „germanized“.
- Bündnerromanisch (Rumantsch of the Grisons) (~0.5 %) is subdivided in 3 groups. Years of struggle resulted in the creation of a uniform Bündnerromanisch. It is, however, not being used in daily life, people continue to use their local language.
- Französisch (French) (~20 %): Dialects are important also in French speaking Switzerland, but to a lesser extent than in the German speaking part.
- Italienisch (Italian) (~7 %) with a variety of dialects

Other languages spoken are Tamil, Kosovar, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbian, English etc. Due to the afflux of a large number of foreign labor and of refugees the number of persons speaking hardly any of the official languages is estimated to be several hundred thousand. In the Canton of Zurich interpreters for well over 100 languages are being employed by jurisdiction, police and welfare to deal with foreigners.

Riding in the tramway in the 1960s and 1970s, I made it a sport to identify the languages, today it is a doomed failure. Zurich has become a shoot of the biblical Babylon.

## Languages on the political level

4 **National** languages, see above.

3 **Official** languages on the **federal** level: German, French, Italian

Cantons and Municipalities determine their own official language(s).

3 levels, reflecting the political setup of the country:

**1. Confederation:** Federal Government, Jurisdiction, Administration:

Any business can be conducted in any of the 3 official languages.

Persons speaking only Bündnerromanisch (Rumantsch of the Grisons) are entitled to have their matters attended to in that language.

**2. Cantons:** Cantonal Government, Jurisdiction, administration:

Matters are attended to only in the official language(s) of the Canton.

In Grisons-Graubünden „Bündnerromanisch“ is an official language.

**3. Municipalities:**

Matters are attended to only in the official language(s) of the Municipality.

In purely German, or French, or Italian speaking Cantons that language is also the official language of the Municipalities.

The languages play an important role also in politics. Complaints about underrepresentation are being voiced at regular intervals, especially when new members of the Federal Government, high officials, judges and top brass of state companies (e.g. Railways, Post) have to be elected/appointed. French and Italian speaking Switzerland, “Latin Switzerland” as it calls itself, is adamantly insisting on being represented fairly, an undisputed request.

## English the fifth national language?

Some 30 years ago I was amazed at hearing a staff speaking in English to a customer in Ticino! I had always believed that Swiss people could somehow understand one another in one of the official languages. I should have known better. When serving my 4-month recruit training in an Italian speaking unit in 1953, I was the only one mastering German, French and Italian, none of the senior officers had a satisfactory command of them, most only limited knowledge of a second language. Due to this I was engaged as an interpreter, a pleasant break from the recruit drill. Even more surprised was I a few weeks ago, when

the Defense Ministry made it public that the command of the official languages by senior officers is inadequate, no progress within 50 years!

It is not the immigrants who elevated English to the prominent place. In the 1990s State companies like Railways, Post, Telephone and many private enterprises thought it proper to use English in advertising, product naming, organization etc. Meanwhile this trend has engulfed the whole country. Using English dispenses from finding terms in the national languages, allegedly an important saving and promoting a uniform appearance all over the country. Adverts are amalgams of local language and English or English-like coined new words, the crazier the better, language yet one more prey to the throwaway society. The allegedly conservative, tradition-minded Swiss are neglecting an important element of their culture, aping is now a proof of progressiveness! We speak German, French and Italian, but since we are neither Germans, nor French, nor Italians, English is chosen as the *lingua franca*. When I asked the Mayor of Zurich why he had renamed the personnel department into "HR", why he assumed that everybody would know what this acronym means, what the benefits of this renaming would be and how the change would warrant the cost, his ill tempered reply was "I wish to show that we are a modern town". I will be indebted to him forever for not having sued me for *lèse-majesté*.

## Relationship language-religion

Up to the end of WW II there was **no** direct link between language and religion. Some German speaking cantons were predominantly protestant, e.g. Zurich, Bern and Appenzell Ausser-Rhoden, others were catholic, e.g. central cantons, Appenzell Inner-Roden, whilst the French speaking cantons were by majority protestant. Italian speaking Ticino was catholic, Italian speaking Grisons mainly protestant. With the massive influx of foreign labour, after WW II, first Italians, afterwards Spaniards, Portuguese etc, the percentages of the two main religions changed gradually. Up to then by majority protestant Switzerland became by majority a catholic country.

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**Internet:** all July 2009

**Languages:**

<http://www.mehrwissen.info/www/mehrwissen/maininfo.nsf/index3!OpenForm&continent=Europe&country=Schweiz&citychar=A&id=&end.html>

<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/en/index/themen/01/05.html>

## Religions:

<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/en/index/themen/01/05/blank/key/religionen.html>

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non multa  
sed multum

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