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Aspects of Switzerland's language problems

# Harmonious co-existence: just a rumour

*Foreign visitors often express their astonishment over the fact that four widely differing "national" languages can co-exist in Switzerland with so little friction or tension. Their surprise is understandable, as one could cite many examples of countries where a diversity of language has been – and still is – capable of shaking national states to their very foundations.*

If one looks at the legal situation, the fact is that linguistic matters are only treated in our Constitution in a somewhat shabby fashion. (See the Box). When the Constitution was being drafted for the foundation of our Federal state in 1848, no article at all was at first provided for, and it was only at the insistence of the delegation from Vaud that such an article was deemed to be worthy enough to be included in the final version of the Constitution.

Is it thus true that ideal conditions exist in Switzerland, and that our country, as a free nation, has really succeeded in establishing unity in the linguistic and cultural field? Could the situation here serve as a model for other countries, or even for the whole of a united Europe?

Let us leave these questions unanswered for the moment, and stroll through the historical landscape of our country.

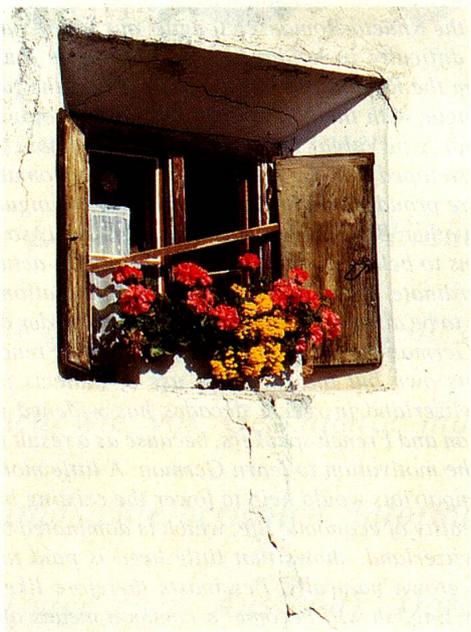
## Federalism

The federalistic character of our country's governmental structure is one of the factors contributing to the relative calm evidenced by the linguistic scene. The treatment of language problems – in the schools, in politics and administration, in the judicial system and many other segments of public life – has been left to the various cantonal authorities, who were thus able to guarantee a considerable degree of autonomy to their particular language groups. Thus the three "bilingual" cantons of Berne, Fribourg and the Valais, the Canton of the Grisons with its three languages, and the Italian-speaking Ticino were enabled to take special local factors into account by creating «tailor-made» regulations.

Cantonal independence for the individual canton had of course its limits, especially where the adoption of protective measures for safeguarding the continuing existence of threatened linguistic minorities would depend on national solidarity, or where language conflicts might arise to a supra-regional extent and call for a nationwide solution as happened not long ago with the foundation of the Canton of Jura.

## "Peaceful" co-existence

On the other hand, an extremely high degree of linguistic independence implies a minimum degree of mutual interest. "On s'entend bien, mais on se comprend mal" ("We get on all right, but we still don't understand one another"). This witty and telling phrase was illustrated recently in connection with the two Red Cross workers who were seized and held as hostages: they found that they could not communicate easily with one another, so



*Although no newspaper nor day-long radio service are existing... Photo: a house in the Engadin.*

to pass the time, the French-speaking official gave French language lessons to his German-speaking Swiss colleague!

The famous Swiss author and playwright Dürrenmatt has described the allegedly peaceful co-existence of diverse language groups in Switzerland as a "monstrous rumour", deploring thereby what he saw as the loss of the chance of developing an intensive and fruitful intellectual interchange of views. Attempts to overcome the language barriers

and to build linguistic and cultural bridges to bring the regions closer together are often scoffed at as being too artificial and not spontaneous, and one hears little praise for the well-meant desire to help the speakers of different languages to get to know one another better.

In the last few decades there have been increasing signs indicating that a smooth collaboration in connection with our various national languages can no longer be taken for granted. The crisis over the founding of the Canton of Jura, mentioned above, is still far from over.

## A language in the throes of its death struggle

Our Rhaeto-Romansh speaking compatriots are in the midst of a painful crisis. There has been a steady, and still ongoing, loss of territory for their language (also known of course as Romansh): during the past 100 years, almost half of the 120 communes have lost their linguistic majority. There has also been a marked erosion of the barely 40000 Rhaeto-Romansh population living in the Grisons. The absence of a linguistic and cultural hinterland, the internal fragmentation of the language itself in several regions, the unbalanced orientation of the economy towards the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the unsatisfactory legal and political status of the language group – these factors are some of the causes that one can diagnose. In addition, one must bear in mind that the Rhaeto-Romansh speakers have no daily newspaper nor a day-long radio service. The space accorded to Romansh in Swiss television is quite negligible. In such lamentable circumstances, one wonders how the Rhaeto-Romansh language has survived to the extent that it has done!

One justifiable hope is the increasing consciousness among the Romansh population of the value of their ancient language. Alongside of numerous cultural activities – some people maintain that every second person in that population, male or female, is a poet! – demands are being made for more consideration to be given to the Romansh language in



all sectors of public life. An attempt that holds out much promise is for the internal

**Revision of the language article in the Federal Constitution**

The Constitution deals in essence with the language question in its Article 116. This is worded thus (since 1938):

1. German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romansh are the national languages of Switzerland.
2. German, French and Italian are declared as «official» languages.

In 1985 Martin Bundi, a member of the Swiss Parliament from the Grisons had in a motion approved by both houses of Parliament asked for a better constitutional treatment of the Rhaeto-Romansh language. Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti then charged a working group, chaired by Peter Saladin of Berne, a legal expert on constitutional matters to effect a comprehensive clarification of the linguistic issues involved. In their final report the members of that working group presented the findings of their study, and proposed two variants – not materially different – for the wording of the new Article to be included in the Constitution, which should consequently contain the following new elements:

1. The fundamental right to freedom of language
2. The common responsibility of the Federation and the Cantons to:
  - preserve threatened linguistic minorities in their traditional linguistic areas;
  - promote understanding and facilities for communication between the various linguistic communities.

The circulation of this new draft to a number of interested parties resulted in a widespread approval of a Constitutional amendment on these lines, and the Federal Council will soon submit to Parliament a corresponding communication for its treatment. It will then be necessary to hold a popular referendum for finalising the matter: this is scheduled to take place in 1992.

The final report of the above-mentioned working group carries the title “Zustand und Zukunft der viersprachigen Schweiz” (“Condition and Future of four-language Switzerland”) and can be obtained in all four national languages free of charge from the EDMZ (Eidgenössische Druck-sachen- und Materialzentrale), CH-3003 Berne.

fragmentation of the language to be stopped, and for an all-Romansh standard language, *Rumantsch Grischun*, to be created by an amalgamation of the many variations.

**Increasing alienation and estrangement**

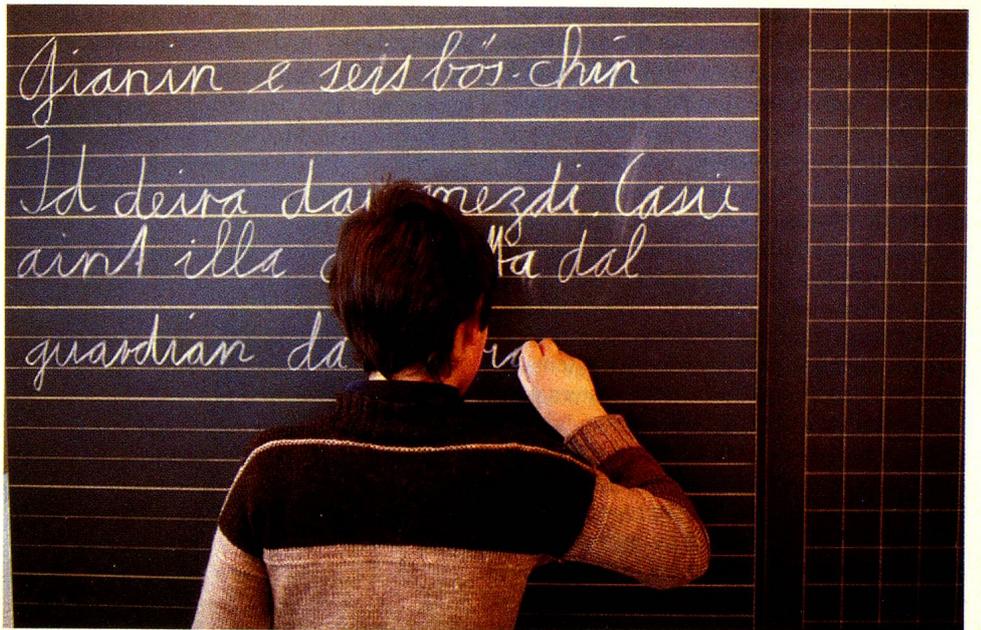
Of course there is no such barrier as the “Röstli Ditch” – delicious “Röstli” are consumed enthusiastically and in vast quantities on both sides of the Saane/Sarine river. Nevertheless, there is no denying that differences of mentality, and the emphasis placed on one’s own attitudes is more noticeable today than was the case in earlier decades.

The French-speaking Romans are confronted with the sheer impossibility of combining their role of being in a clear minority (they amount to only one fifth of the total population) with that of playing the part of a partner with equal rights and of equal value. All comparisons turn out to their disadvantage: from their representation in the governmental administration and the army, and the overpowering strength of German Switzerland in

their Northern neighbour it proves an obstacle to the essential mutual understanding that ought to exist between the various Swiss language regions.

**The everyday language of the future?**

In the final report of the working party appointed by Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti (see Box) there is some reference to a possible scenario according to which the informal colloquial language spoken by Swiss men and women in the near future could conceivably be: English! Furthermore, for the younger generation of today there can be no doubt that if they can choose a first foreign language to study, it would be English in preference to another of our national languages. Finally, as most of us know, English has reached the status of a “lingua franca” for the electronic media and for many aspects of culture. This brings us to yet another dilemma: on the one hand, a knowledge of English is virtually a pre-requisite for understanding and communication in our modern world, but having to



... the consciousness among the Romansh population of the value of their language is increasing. Photo: the school of Sent. (Photo: Werner Catrina)

financial and economic matters, to the way they are over-ruled in electoral referendums and plebiscites. The Romans have learnt to live with these handicaps but a trend that is proving far more difficult to stomach is the extent to which the wave of dialect is spreading throughout the so-called German-speaking zone. Here again, they are in an almost insoluble dilemma: whereas the use of dialect for strengthening the identity of German-Swiss men and women contributes towards a clear-cut demarcation separating them from

cope with the study of English as well as with that of our national tongues could lead to an over-taxing of the capabilities of the average Swiss citizen.

**Switzerland and Europe**

The current political “weather” situation in Europe cannot fail to have consequences for the self-image of the linguistic groups and their feelings of national solidarity. Among all the Swiss language groups, but particularly in the case of the Romans and the Ticinese



one senses a growing affinity in the cultural, and to some extent in the economic sector, with their respective linguistic "hinterlands". "Siamo culturalmente Italiani e politicamente Svizzeri" ("Culturally we are Italian, but politically we are Swiss"). This trend seems likely to be reinforced in future in a Europe in which vital economic and political decisions will be taken at a supra-national level. In such circumstances the task of maintaining

Switzerland as a free and independent nation assumes new and highly topical dimensions. A look into the heart of the linguistic landscape of Switzerland shows that it has been fashioned over the centuries by a host of variegated, unique and immutable factors. The fact that our country has succeeded up to now in ensuring a reasonably smooth co-existence of differing linguistic groups is no cause for us to lay claim to its character as

a model for others to follow. What could perhaps serve as such a pattern will however be the manner in which we succeed in future in modernising and reinforcing the concept of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Switzerland to meet the new challenges. The answer lies not behind, but before us.

Romedi Arquient

Former officer for linguistic questions in the Federal Office for Culture

German Swiss and French Swiss

## One-sided Sympathy?

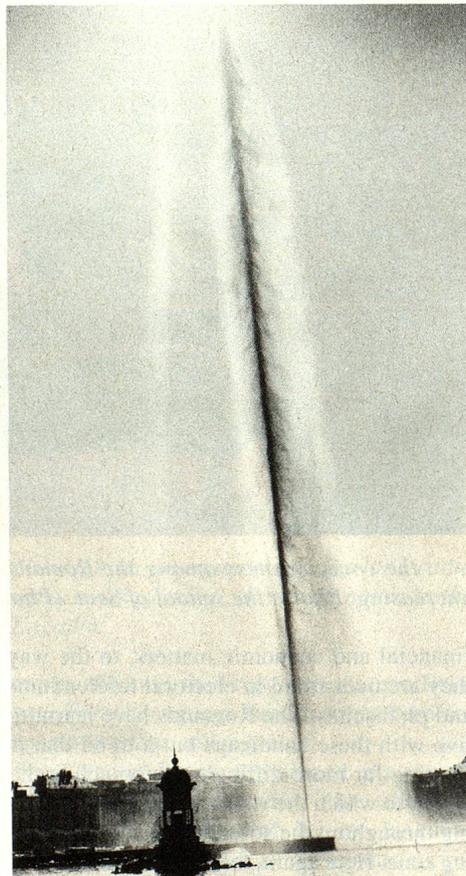
*When the train from Berne in the direction towards Lausanne emerges from the Chexbres tunnel, the passenger gets a superb view of the Lake of Geneva. A patch of bright blue water surrounded by majestic mountains offers a foretaste of the Mediterranean. The vine-clad slopes at the end of the tunnel are often referred to in jest as "Le Clos des Billets" ("The Vineyard of the Railway Tickets") as many a German Swiss, enchanted by the breath-taking landscape, is reputed to have thrown the return half of his ticket out of the window!*

The celebrated man of letters Aymon de Mestral wrote long ago that the distance from Zurich to Lausanne seems far shorter to a German Swiss than does the journey in the reverse direction to a "Romand", that is to say an individual from the French-speaking region of Western Switzerland that is often called "Romandie". Contemporary opinion polls have confirmed this view. Only one German Swiss out of six says that he (or she) feels "abroad" in Romandie, while one Romand in four feels that way in the German-speaking regions of Switzerland. And it seems that the Romands are more intensively conscious of linguistic tension than are their compatriots in the eastern part of Switzerland. 27% of the Romands – as compared with only 9% of German Swiss – sense the existence of a sort of moat or ditch forming a barrier between the two linguistic regions. Thus it seems that the people of the minority are more conscious of language problems than are those of the majority!

The affection of the members of one group for those of the other appears to be in inverse proportion to understanding of the language problems. The German Swiss have a great liking for the "Romands" but that sympathy is not always reciprocated. Journalist Roberto Bernhard has said: "It is significant that the French-speaking Swiss have lots of disparaging and abusive nicknames for the German Swiss, while the latter have none at all for the Romands!"

According to a study by the Zurich sociologists Fischer and Trier, the German Swiss see themselves as having such qualities as "strength, ruggedness, seriousness and diligence", and regard their French Swiss com-

patriots as being "relaxed, cheerful, jolly and likeable". The study shows the Romands as "not far short of their own ideal standard and model of perfection", but the



*The fountain in the bay of Geneva: symbol of the spiritual aspirations of this city-republic.*

German Swiss regards himself as the "typical Swiss", while the Romand confirms him in that view of himself. But the Romand regards himself as belonging first and foremost to the French Swiss domain, and only as a consequence thereof as a Swiss.

### Territorial and linguistic frontier

When returning to Switzerland from a foreign country, the traveller will sense, behind the greeting "Grüezi", "bonjour", "buon giorno" or "allegra" that he hears in Kloten, Cointrin, Chiasso or Scuol, the existence of a basic Swiss unity. The frontier guards and customs officials wear the same respective uniforms (alongside of a host of *local* uniforms!), the same chocolate is to be found all over the country, and the political institutions in the various cantons, although not identical, always follow a common basic pattern. But as soon as the linguistic barrier inside Switzerland is crossed, all sorts of differences at once become evident. The coffee has a different taste depending on how the beans are roasted, the cheese-maker in Romandie produces a form of Gruyere with *little* holes, while his counterpart in German Switzerland makes his Emmentaler with *big* holes – and of course, the favourite dishes differ too.

The passage from one linguistic region to the other gives rise not only to gastronomic contrasts, but also to problems of everyday speech and mentality. Each language has its own "architecture", its special quality and inborn laws, its possibilities of expression. Because of their country being one of many languages, the Swiss themselves – without necessarily being accomplished polyglot linguists – have to live with this multiplicity of tongues and to cope with the problems arising therefrom. And in this context, one should bear in mind that in 1991, the year in which the 700th anniversary of our country will be celebrated, a revision of the present wording of the article in the Federal con-