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Cover

English has long been present even in the sheltered world of the Swiss alps. But opinions differ widely on whether to regard the raising of English to the status of national language of communication as a sign of modern enlightenment or a blow to deep-rooted federalism. (Photo-montage: SG Design / STRATES)

IMPRESSUM

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« Sorry, but English is not the problem! Rather, it is the difficulty we have in embracing and cultivating diversity. Therein lies the rub; because diversity is the basis of our Swiss identity.

Admittedly the debate on English – whether it should be taught in school from the age of ten or even in kindergarten, and whether the first foreign language should be a national language or English – is important; but it must be viewed within a broader context that incorporates educational, instructional and linguistic aspects and addresses the issue of what we are and what we want to be.

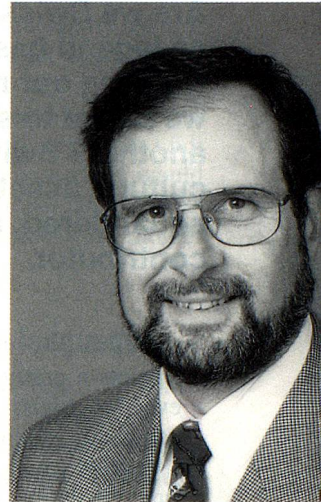
Some are of the opinion that English should be taught as early as possible because, as the dominant global language, it is essential in today's communications society. Others, however, fear that giving priority to English will have negative implications for our national languages. It is not a clear-cut matter, and I know lots of people who could argue for or against either faction. There is no escaping the fact that English is omnipresent. That being so, we have to live with it and integrate it; but not without trying our best to rectify the negative impact on our identity and our institutions.

Since the eighties much has been said about the Swiss malaise and the identity crisis of the Swiss nation. This inspired one contemporary to make the following pointed statement: "The Swiss get on so well with each other because they don't understand one another!" Communication or lack of communication is the key to the problem. Tired of promoting diversity, we have withdrawn into our own shells. The result is that, like an old married

couple who are so used to each other that they have nothing left to say, we are even beginning to wonder what is keeping us together. Have we forgotten that it is this very diversity that underpins our prosperity and that fostering such diversity is our trump card?

In terms of language we have other problems besides English – particularly with the Swiss-German dialects that are now more carefully cultivated than ever by our compatriots on the other side of the Saane. Once more it is not the dialects per se that pose the problem, but the fact that they act as an insulating barrier against High German. The culture of particularism is rife. Finally, everything that applies to English – an established language of communication that expands our horizons and allows us to understand each other – also applies to High German. When Swiss communicate, they do so in German (classical High German) or another national language. If the English language takes over, we would have nothing left to say to each other. And the aphorism would then become true: "The Swiss get on so well with each other because they don't understand each other!"

The debate on the English language is necessary. It acts as a stimulus, confronting us with our own problems and motivating us to overcome them. So let us uphold diversity rather than particularity!



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