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Ticino's fears on the insidious degradation of their mother tongue

"Learning national languages strengthens national identity"

The promotion of English in the Canton of Ticino's school curriculum has been the subject of close scrutiny. Diego Erba, Schools Director at the Department of Education and Culture of the Canton of Ticino, speaks out on the status of the Italian language in Switzerland.

Is the teaching of Italian endangered outside the Canton of Ticino?

We are currently seeing a continual weakening of the Italian language. This is mainly attributable to the fact that other cantons are increasingly marginalising the instruction of Italian in schools.

Is there a risk that young people from different regions of Switzerland will communicate in English?

The risk is there. We still believe that for a multicultural country like ours, English is the easy option when it comes to communicating with each other.

So you are against English?

I don't think we should fight English; it's even necessary for young Swiss to learn English. What we are against is the learning of English at the expense of national languages, and Italian in particular.

Why?

A multilingual country like Switzerland must above all promote a mutual knowledge of its diverse cultures. And one of the main ways of getting to know a culture is to learn its language.

Why should French and German-speaking Swiss favour Italian over English?

English exercises a strong attraction that we certainly cannot compete with merely by arguing in favour of Italian

instruction. A language should be learned not merely because it is useful for business, although this is one way of getting closer to a culture.

The equality of national languages is actually enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

The Federal Constitution rightly places Italian on the same footing as German and French and also accords Romansh a certain value. By promoting the learning of national languages in school, we also strengthen our national identity and our patriotic sense of unity. If we lower our standards in this politically important area, we might as well ask what is keeping us together.

Might in Switzerland's case the non-observance of minority languages undermine federalism?

Certainly. Federalism is based nowadays on the principle of respecting cultures and minorities.

The population voted overwhelmingly in favour of the language article of the constitution, governing the protection of minority languages.

Exactly. To some extent this is a paradox. On the one hand the people feel committed to federalism and want to conserve Swiss multilingualism. On the other hand this viewpoint is not manifested in reality. There are cantons where young people who express the wish to learn Italian are asked to travel from one corner of the canton to another, or even change cantons in order to attend Italian lessons.

What is the Ticino in favour of?

We vehemently urge other cantons to offer Italian – not out of sympathy but because this underpins federalism. We want to see Italian being accorded full-value status – particularly during the mandatory school years but also later – and not just as an alternative to English.

Does your criticism apply to the Lüdi Report?

Precisely. This report aimed to link



Diego Erba at Castello San Michele in Bellinzona. (Photo: New Turrìta)

Swiss-German and Swiss-French reality and enshrine what to my mind is an untenable concept in a constitutional article whereby German would be taught as the second language in French-speaking cantons and French in German-speaking cantons.

Why are you against this?

According to the constitution it is no longer possible to create a linguistic hierarchy. Every canton is free to choose which language may be offered. Over and above this, the report severely underplays the importance of Italian instruction by degrading it almost to the level of an immigrants' language, which I regard as a slight. After all, and with all due respect to their cultures, there is still a big difference between Albanian, Serbo-Croat and Portuguese on the one hand and the constitutionally defined national language of Italian on the other.

Interview: Dario Ballanti ■