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## “Early French” divides the nation

Switzerland is currently engaged in a row over the delicate issue of languages. Several German-speaking cantons no longer wish to teach French in their primary schools. The French-speaking Swiss see this as an attack on national unity.

MARC LETTAU

The lady on the local Biel bus speaks to her neighbour in German. Her neighbour replies eloquently in French. This does not detract from the two women's ability to understand one another. The lively conversation becomes a melange of German and French. Some sentences are even spoken half in German and half in French. This type of exchange is very much the norm in Biel. The two women represent a majority as 63 % of Biel's population speak two or more languages.

### Four languages – a multilingual society

But not everywhere is like Biel. The fact that Switzerland has four official languages does not mean that the country is teeming with quadrilingual polyglots. There are very few people who speak all four national languages – German, French, Italian and Romansh. However, in this linguistically divided nation, many people speak a different language at home to the one they use at their place of work or education. In everyday life, more people speak French than there are French-speaking Swiss and far more use Swiss German or High German

outside of the home than those whose mother tongue is German. The four national languages are gaining in stature as a result and are becoming bridges of understanding in an increasingly mobile society. Heavy with meaning, the Swiss Languages Act states that “the status of the four official languages should be strengthened as a fundamental characteristic of Switzerland” and “the inner unity of the nation should be consolidated” by fostering these languages. This stands to reason for most Swiss people. The more people who speak or at least understand more than just one national language, the better it is for the notion of Switzerland as a nation forged by the will of the people.

### Urgent action required

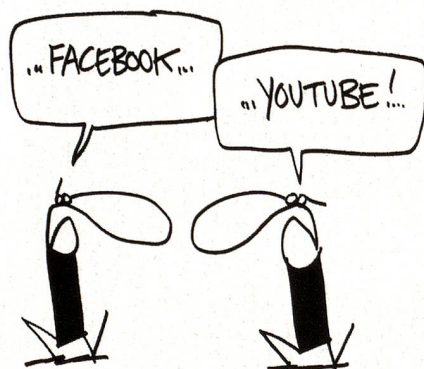
Urgent action is nonetheless now needed. French-speaking Switzerland is accusing German-speaking Switzerland of jeopardising linguistic harmony in the nation. “La guerre des langues est déclarée” – linguistic war has been declared – was the headline in the weekly magazine “l'Hébdô” in May. What has happened? The bone of contention is the early teaching of

the Cantonal Parliament in Thurgau decided to axe French as a primary school subject. Close on its heels, the Cantonal Parliament in Schaffhausen decided to follow suit. The government in Nidwalden then moved to abolish French teaching in primary education. Popular initiatives calling for an end to early French teaching have also been submitted in the cantons of Grisons and Lucerne. The cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Aargau decided to abandon early French in primary schools years ago. The list of those opting out could grow longer still as discussions are also being held in other cantons about restructuring language teaching. The arguments most frequently raised in the debate are that people overlook the fact that, strictly speaking, High German is the first foreign language that German-speaking Swiss children have to work hard to acquire, and that learning two foreign languages at the same time is ill-advised from an educational point of view.

### French versus English

Cantons opposing early French teaching at primary schools are not actually abolishing the teaching of French. It is instead being shifted to senior school level and thus shortened. This means that more and more children are learning a second national language significantly later and for a much shorter period of time. Genuine outrage has now been sparked in French-speaking Switzerland as the demotion of French is going hand in hand with enhanced status for English. English is already taught as the first foreign language in 14 Ger-

LES JEUNES  
PARLENT  
COURAMMENT  
L'ANGLAIS



These youngsters speak English fluently

French in primary schools. While German is taught as the first foreign language at primary school in all French-speaking cantons, an increasing number of German-speaking cantons are setting about getting rid of French in primary schools. In the course of the year,





The cover photo of the magazine "L'Hébo" from May shows the strength of feeling in French-speaking Switzerland over the language row

man-speaking cantons today.

"Early French" generally begins two years after the first English lessons in these cantons.

### Foreign language versus national language

The canton of Zurich set the ball rolling. It introduced "early English" into its primary schools in 1998. When taking the decision, the then Director of Education in Zurich, Ernst Buschor (CVP), expressed the view that the principle of giving French priority over English in schools was outdated. Buschor was keen on early English as

he saw it as the pivotal language in IT and business for the future. His decision put Switzerland on course for the language row today. It soon became apparent that the French-speaking Swiss saw Buschor's views as an affront. José Ribeaud, a publicist from French-speaking Switzerland, who has proven himself a knowledgeable diagnostician of the Swiss linguistic landscape with his book "Vier Sprachen, ein Zerfall" ("Swiss Review" 1/2014), became a harsh critic of the Zurich Director of Education. Remark on Buschor's English cam-

paign, Ribeaud still says today: "That was the worst signal that could have been sent out for Switzerland." He stopped short of accusing the German-speaking Swiss of hostility, referring instead to "a serious lack of consideration and respect that has previously been shown to the minority groups". But Buschor and Ribeaud are not talking about the same thing. Buschor is talking about the right to give appropriate weighting to the most important foreign language when structuring the curriculum. In contrast, Ribeaud is talking about the duty to award the necessary status to the most important *national languages*.

### Humiliating abandonment

The politicians responsible for education in German-speaking Switzerland were not short of arguments. They contend that early French teaching places too many demands on both pupils and teachers. It is essential that language teaching is primarily measured against results. What matters is whether young people can communicate in a second national language after completing mandatory education. That is the actual objective. From when and for how long the second national language is taught is of secondary importance, they say. However, these arguments have little currency in French-speaking Switzerland.



There, the conduct of their German-speaking compatriots is interpreted as a humiliating abandonment. French-speaking politicians from across the political spectrum are warning that a key link in the chain of Swiss solidarity is at risk of breaking. The Free Democrat former Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin jibes that German-speaking Switzerland is running the risk of marginalising itself: "What would Switzerland be without the French and Italian speakers? It would just be a province of Germany in some ways." Others outline the

decide on English as a language of communication, the previously inconceivable would happen – language would be reduced to its utilitarian significance. But language is imbued with cultural aspects: "It reflects the world of all those who speak it, their outlook on the world, their way of thinking and their traditions." French-speaking Swiss expect to be able to speak their own language and to be understood, argues Chassot. They want to be perceived as fully fledged, French-speaking Swiss citizens: "But they do not demand that

French is spoken to them. There is an agreement in the best Swiss tradition that everyone speaks their own language in multilingual environments."

#### Pressure from above

The cantons are responsible for school education in Switzerland, and intervention in the federal

alist structure is against Swiss principles. In late summer, the Federal Councillor Alain Berset (SP), from bilingual Fribourg, nevertheless felt compelled to make it clear that federal government was fully entitled to intervene if the nation's general interests were jeopardised. The school system is a key element of the Swiss federalist ideology. But federalism does not work without responsibility towards Switzerland as a whole: "Federalism does not mean that everyone simply does what they want in their own region irrespective of what this might mean for Switzerland," remarked Berset in an interview with the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung". After Berset, the National Council's Education Committee also stepped up the pressure. Its President, Na-

tional Councillor Matthias Aebischer (Berne, SP), said on the record at the beginning of October that it was no longer willing to look on "while one canton after the next abandoned early French teaching". At the same time, the committee deliberated over a proposal to oblige the cantons, by means of federal legislation, to teach a second national language in primary schools. With these mind games, the Education Committee essentially sought to put pressure on the cantonal Directors of Education. These met at the end of October in Basel and found themselves obliged to respond to the emotional turmoil. They put their foot down: the principle of teaching two languages at primary schools should not be altered. However, whether English or French was taught first should still be a matter for the cantons to decide.

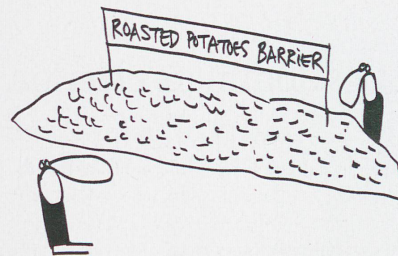
There was one snag, however, as their statement carried no authority. The Directors of Education cannot dictate to the cantons. They can only make recommendations. So, it is still open for debate whether Berset's concerns will be alleviated, Chassot's wishes met and the proposal of Aebischer's committee averted. Federal Councillor Berset therefore further increased the pressure after the meeting of the Directors of Education. He threatened that federal government would not hesitate to intervene if a canton definitively decided to get rid of French from the primary school curriculum over the coming months.

LES SUISSES  
ALLEMANDS  
APPRENNENT  
LE SUISSE  
ROMAND...



German-speaking Swiss show interest in the culture of French-speaking Switzerland ...

VIVE L'ANGLAIS!...



Long live English ...!

In spite of all the anger, education politicians from all parties hope that federal government does not ultimately have to intervene. The rationale behind this is that if federal government were to tighten up the legal basis, a referendum could be called against this in German-speaking Switzerland. If a referendum were held, Switzerland would have to decide on Swiss linguistic harmony at the ballot box, and when a nation votes on linguistic issues the outcome is rarely an easing of tension. Nobody currently wants a national referendum for fear of the risks. The bilingual Fribourg National Councillor François Steiert (SP), himself a campaigner for the second national language in primary education, suspects that a referendum on the issue of languages "would confirm the disintegration of Switzerland into linguistic regions, put national unity in jeopardy and trigger turmoil on an unimaginable scale".

#### The "Swiss German" campaign

A change of scene. Another dispute over languages is currently being ad-

dressed in preschools in Aargau. Only dialect has been spoken here since the beginning of the new school year. Previous plans to introduce youngsters to High German at preschool have been shelved. "Standard German", as High German or written German is called in Switzerland, can no longer be used as a medium of instruction because the electorate in Aargau approved an initiative by the Swiss Democrats (SD) in May, against the will of the government, which prescribes the use of dialect as the teaching language in preschools. In 2011, voters in the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Zurich supported enhancing the status of dialect in preschools. In the canton of Zug, the SVP recently launched an initiative stipulating the use of "Swiss German" at preschool level and in some subjects at primary school level.

It is not clear why German-speaking Switzerland is now engaging in a seemingly peculiar dispute over the German language in addition to the row over languages with French-speaking Switzerland. Observers suspect that there is a desire for dialect that is difficult to justify rationally and it is most likely an expression of "a search for a sense of homeland" in an increasingly globalised world. It is just that the cantons which explicitly require dialect instead of German are not making it easy for themselves. What is dialect? Do the teachers who have emigrated from Germany to Aargau now have to learn to speak High Alemannic with an Aargau accent? Does the lo-

#### Straight up – languages five and six

Besides its official national languages, Switzerland also recognises two other languages. Yéniche (see "Swiss Review" 2/2014) has been granted the status of a "non-territorial" language and is also promoted accordingly. The second minority "non-territorial" language in Switzerland is Yiddish. This linguistic minority is actually growing and entirely without state support. However, the actual, original Swiss Yiddish, Surtal or Endingen Yiddish, has died out. Some expressions have nevertheless entered colloquial Swiss German, such as the term "Stuss" meaning "nonsense". [www.bilinguisme.ch](http://www.bilinguisme.ch)

cal Valais German of a preschool teacher from Visp, who stands in front of a class in Aarau, also count as dialect despite the fact that children in Aargau would barely understand this vernacular? And how will the canton deal with the fact that there is no Aargau German in the proper sense for historical reasons?

Some French-speaking Swiss are amused by the language policy tensions within German-speaking Switzerland. But for critics like José Ribeaud this, too, is a matter of serious concern. In his view, the German-speaking Swiss are jeopardising linguistic harmony in two ways. They are firstly discarding French. Then, by neglecting High German, they are snubbing all the French-speaking Swiss who have diligently learned to speak it but do not understand "Swiss German" as a result.

#### The counterpoint of Ticino

However, in the midst of this row, Switzerland is also entitled to marvel at itself. While German and French-speaking Swiss are arguing over from when and how youngsters are to be taught a second national language, in Ticino they are asking school pupils to learn three national languages in their curriculum – Italian, French and German. Nine-year-olds learn the language of Voltaire. Four years later, German becomes a mandatory subject. Learning three national languages at the same time: "Ce n'est pas la mer à boire", it's hardly asking too much, is the message from Ticino. The people of Ticino are not more linguistically gifted than the rest of the Swiss. It is just that they understand, as a small minority language group, they would become voiceless within the nation without knowledge of other national languages.



...I don't feel at home anymore ...

nightmarish scenario that young German-speaking Swiss might one day have to speak English to communicate with their French-speaking compatriots. The identity-shaping impact of the national languages would be lost.

#### Linguistic knowledge fosters respect

Switzerland's most senior custodian of languages, the bilingual Isabelle Chassot, also focuses on identity in her reflections. Without linguistic harmony, Switzerland would lose a great deal, remarked the head of the Federal Office of Culture and former education politician during the debate this summer: "It would lose everything that makes up this nation's identity today: respect for minorities, understanding of diversity, the search for compromise and the importance of equilibrium." If Switzerland were to