

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 2

Artikel: L'express da linguas = The breakneck language
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051800>

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L'express da linguas

The breakneck language

Languages are in constant flux, picking up new vocabulary along the way. Switzerland's minority language, Romansh, is evolving particularly rapidly. Sometimes overnight.

JÜRG STEINER

How does the vocabulary of a minority language spoken by relatively few people stay up to date? Can it evolve quickly enough? "Yes, it can," says linguist Daniel Telli. "But you need to help it along." He knows what he is talking about. Telli is head of language at Lia Rumantscha, an organisation that promotes the Romansh language and culture from its headquarters in Chur.

Chasa (house), fanestra (window), isch da lain (wooden door), balcun tort (bay window) – local words for this splendid house facade in Grisons. Contemporary, abstract concepts are a little trickier to convey in Romansh.

Photo: Keystone

Romansh is a minority language composed of various regional dialects and vernaculars. According to the Federal Statistical Office, 40,000 people say that it is the language of which they have the best command. Around 60,000 people speak it. "But it would be a fallacy to think that a language is less effective simply because relatively few people use it," says Telli. Just like German, French and English, Romansh is a language that covers the entire human condition – from the sexual to the major social, political, economic and scientific issues of today. If it didn't, it would probably not survive.

A language's ability to evolve is an important indicator of how future-proof it is. How do you create new words to reflect an ever-changing world? German, spoken as a native language by over 100 million people, relies on a number of authoritative sources in this regard. One of them is the Duden, the standard dictionary and pre-eminent language resource of the German language. Its latest edition, which was published in 2020, included 3,000 new words and expressions in addition to around 145,000 existing entries.

The Mannheim-based Leibniz Institute for the German Language (IDS) maintains an online vocabulary information system called OWID that includes a dictionary of neologisms, i.e. newly coined words and expressions. In the past ten years, OWID has taken on around 2,000 new words or new meanings for existing words. The IDS also has its eye on a few hundred potential new entries such as "netflixen", "Bodypositivity" and "1,5-Grad-Ziel" (1.5°C target), with a view to these terms possibly entering official German usage. Other major languages have a similar procedure.

The big dictionary

Lia Rumantscha in Chur, on the other hand, favours a more pragmatic and faster approach. Its key resource for updating Romansh vocabulary is the "Pledari Grond", or



“Crear pleds en rumantsch n’è betg in’activitat academica lunsch davent da la realitat. Igl è impurtant che nossas utilisadras e noss utilisaders possian sa participar directamain al Pledari Grond e gidar uschia ad actualisar la lingua. Quai rinforza il sentiment che la lingua appartegna a tuttas e tuts che la dovran.

Il rumantsch na duai betg daventar ina lingua artifiziala, mabain sto restar francà en il mintgadi modern che sa mida cuntuadomain.”

Did you understand that? If your Romansh is a little rusty, you can find the translation on page 31.

in English: the big dictionary. The “Pledari Grond” is an online dictionary covering Rumantsch Grischun (the standard written language) and the five Romansh dialects. Rumantsch Grischun currently accounts for just under 250,000 entries in the “Pledari Grond” – a copious body of vocabulary compared to the Duden, for example.

Telli and his team of linguists add new entries to the “Pledari Grond” practically every day, frequently based on outside input. On the “Pledari Grond” website, any user can enter the German equivalent of a missing Romansh word – and then suggest their own Romansh translation. Any one of Telli’s team who happens to be at the keyboard will then look at the suggested entry immediately. Telli: “Whoever is on duty on any given day should be ready for some surprising teasers.”

From granary to computer

Very often, the people who use the “Pledari Grond” are journalists who provide content in Romansh, says Telli. If they are unable to find a specific term, they will ask for advice. “They usually need an answer before their editorial deadline a few hours later. We can normally help them in time.”

Like the schoolyard, the media is an important environment for new vocabulary, because journalists are always trying to find simple expressions for new concepts, he says. The Covid crisis (“crisa da corona”) provided a particularly fertile ground for new terms – from “infecziun postvaccina” (breakthrough infection) to “obligatori da certificat” (mandatory Covid passports).

Despite the time pressure, Telli and his team aim to provide the best stand-alone yet logical solutions. The traditional Romansh word for a granary, “arcun”, is a great example, says Telli. This noun now has a second meaning: computer memory. The verb “arcunar” means saving a file.

Complex gender neutrality

For Telli, the work that they do at Lia Rumantscha is anything but highbrow. “It is important that users can play their part in evolving our language,” he says. “This reinforces the sense that Romansh belongs to everyone who uses it.” Romansh must never sink into oblivion as a twee artificial language, but should live and breathe to reflect the fast pace of our modern times. The “Pledari Grond” is a suitably agile interface and a crucial enabler, he adds.

Pragmatism is another key factor. For example, Romansh speakers are happy to appropriate English expressions if they have to, with terms like “googlar” (to Google) an integral part of their vocabulary.

Things become somewhat more complex with regard to gender neutrality. This is because, unlike, say, German, the masculine and the feminine have different plural articles: “ils”/“las”. Hence, Lia Rumantscha and other similar Romansh-oriented bodies limit gender-neutral usage to situations involving a diverse audience.

Link: pledarigrond.ch

Romansh

Since the Federal Constitution was amended in 1938, Romansh has been Switzerland’s fourth official language. It is composed of five regional dialects (Puter in Upper Engadine; Vallader in Lower Engadine and the Val Müstair; Sursilvan in the Surselva area of the Anterior Rhine Valley; Sutsilvan mainly in the Schams Valley; Surmiran in the Albula and Vaz/Obervaz area) as well as numerous local vernaculars. Besides dialects, Rumantsch Grischun is the unified written language, based mainly on three dialects: Sursilvan, Surmiran and Vallader. Teaching material is published in Rumantsch Grischun and in all of the dialects, because both Rumantsch Grischun and the dialects are regarded as languages of literacy and instruction. The “Pledari Grond” also provides dictionaries for the Surmiran, Sutsilvan, Sursilvan, Puter and Vallader dialects. All people who speak Romansh speak at least one other language – and that is German. (JS)



Daniel Telli and his team of linguists add new entries to the “Pledari Grond” Romansh online dictionary practically every day. Photo supplied