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Autor: Peter, Theodora
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Museum pays homage to Swiss multilingualism

Multilingualism is part of Switzerland's identity. Featuring interactive sound technology, the "Multilingual Switzerland" exhibition at the National Museum Zurich offers visitors a journey through the history of Switzerland's four language regions.

THEODORA PETER

German, French, Italian, Romansh – or English. Visitors first choose the audio language in which they want to be guided around the exhibition. On their headphones, they then catch the voices and sounds of a virtual railway station – conversations and sentence fragments in a variety of languages and dialects as they walk through the entrance hall.

Language standardisation

The "Multilingual Switzerland" exhibition at the National Museum Zurich offers an audio-visual insight into how Switzerland's national languages have evolved over the centuries. It shows how most of the regional patois in French-speaking Switzerland was suppressed by the end of the 17th century, a process influenced by the standardisation of language in neighbouring France. A grammar textbook from Geneva dating back to 1790 records how local words and phrases were eradicated from French language teaching. The Reformation and the printing press also led to the advent of a standard written language in German-speaking Switzerland, although dialects were less stigmatised. Indeed, the opposite was true from the 19th century onwards, with the first-ever dictionary of Swiss-German vernacular being published in 1881.

Like this milk carton from the 1970s, most food packaging in Switzerland continues to be multilingual. Labelling in more than one language has no longer been a statutory requirement in the EU since 2021.
Photo: Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, ZHdK

Dating back to 1917, this caricature from the satirical magazine "Nebelspalter" symbolises Switzerland split along the Franco-German language border. Languages were seen as a major point of difference even back then.
Illustration: Nebelspalter

In the 15th century, notaries in Italian-speaking Ticino discarded Latin and began writing in a lingua franca derived from the Lombard vernacular. Ultimately, it was the Tuscan Italian championed by Dante that established itself as the written and administrative language, and later as the spoken language through teaching in schools.

The Romansh language region used to stretch to the shores of Lake Constance but was quickly outmuscled by German. Romansh is now composed of five different dialects spread along the valleys of Grisons. Rumantsch Grischun evolved into the unified written language in the 1980s and has been used as the official form of Romansh since 2001.

The exhibition reminds visitors that Switzerland also has other languages that go back a long way. One of them is Yenish, which features on a wooden display. Furthermore, an embroidery sampler containing Hebrew lettering is proof that a form of Western Yiddish was spoken in the Surb Valley in Aargau until the last century.

"Multilingual Switzerland" also looks at today's polyglot Switzerland beyond the four national languages. Over 20 per cent of the Swiss population have a first language other than one of the official ones, while two thirds speak more than one language.

Visitors get to hear nine people who are able to communicate in more than one language – including Swiss writer Usama Al Shahmani, who is originally from Iraq: "For me, writing in German is a bit like 'arriving'." The exhibition website contains video recordings of all nine people talking – with subtitles in five languages.

Dialects of the past

Visitors to the "Multilingual Switzerland" exhibition at the National Museum can also listen to audio recordings of rare and extinct Swiss dialects. Here are three examples:

Gisèle Pannatier from Evolène explains how patois is spoken within her family (2001, Valais Media Library, Martigny): **revue.link/gisele**

Jacques Gruet's 1547 pamphlet, recited in patois by Oliver Frutiger (2023): **revue.link/jacques**

Don Francesco Alberti speaks in the Ticino dialect of Bedigliora (1939, phonogram archives of the University of Zurich): **revue.link/francesco**

Multilingual Switzerland.
National Museum Zurich.
Until 14 January 2024.
www.landesmuseum.ch/multilingual-switzerland