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Politicians accused of doublespeak on languages

Swiss politicians fail to recognize the value of multilingualism when the languages spoken are not the national tongues or English, a study found.

From the 1960s until the 1990s, discussions in parliament focused on ensuring equality among the official languages, German, French, Italian and Romansh, as well as dialogue between the language groups.

A turning point came in the second half of the 1990s, when English became part of the debate on languages. One question was whether it should be taught in schools as the first foreign language ahead of German, French or Italian.

At the same time, political parties realized that immigrants were staying. So they emphasized the importance of learning an official language as part of the integration process. This came at the expense of immigrants' mother tongues. Politicians ignored the fact that Switzerland had become a land of immigration with ten per cent of the population claiming a language other than German, French or Italian as their mother tongue.

Schoolchildren should be encouraged to retain their mother tongues. Pilot projects have been initiated across the country to encourage children to learn the local language as well as the one spoken by their parents. The command of that language is a precondition for learning other languages well. Fluency in languages other than the national languages or English should be recognised as an additional qualification.

In Switzerland a lot more people speak Croatian or Serbian than Romansh. Would it be a threat to Romansh if we gave more rights to migration languages, or would it perhaps have a positive effect if we generally agreed that Switzerland is a multilingual country and gave rights to minority languages?

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Magnolia tree offers help for bone disease

Bern researchers have found that molecules extracted from the magnolia grandiflora tree directly blocked harmful bone degrading cells that naturally occur in the body. It is the first time that a plant molecule has been identified that can inhibit the cells. The findings were published in the Chemistry & Biology journal. The team hope drugs for osteoporosis or arthritis can be developed as a result. The magnolia grandiflora tree is native to the south-eastern United States and northern Mexico.

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Spread of the Asian tiger mosquito feared

Reports, later refuted, that the virus-carrying Asian tiger mosquito had spread north in Switzerland have highlighted the threats posed by the insect. The mosquito is already firmly established in Ticino, in the south of the country, and authorities and experts have this summer stepped up their battle against it.

The Asian tiger mosquito, so called because of its white and black stripy appearance, originates in Southeast Asia. It is thought to have reached Ticino eight years ago via Italy. Factors influencing its spread are car boots, the trade in used tyres and the import of exotic plants. The highly invasive mosquito is known to be a vector of the viruses that cause the Dengue and chikungunya fevers, which are dangerous to humans, but it does not harbour malaria.

The Environment Office, along with the Federal Health Office, announced a Concept 2011 action plan to help cantons battle the Asian tiger mosquito. Long-term measures include destroying its breeding areas, as well as the larvae and the adult insects.

Doctors in Switzerland are already obliged to report any Dengue or chikungunya human infections. These cases can be checked against the location of mosquito populations to better target the control of the mosquito.

However, the control of the Asian tiger mosquito is quite challenging because the females lay their eggs in any kind of small water container. Several measures have to be taken together such as clearing any possible breeding sites and using insecticides. Experts and the authorities are especially keen to get a handle on the tiger mosquito following local human infections of dengue fever in neighbouring France and in Croatia last year.

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