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<b>Autor:</b>	Decurtins, Alexi
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# Rhaeto-Romance, a test case for the fate of language and cultural minorities?

(Notes from Europe/European quarterly cultural review, January 1976, ed. by Stiftung F.V.S. Hamburg)

Referring to the Romansh problem see moreover the following studies:

- BENJAMIN S. BARBER: *The death of communal liberty. A history of freedom in a Swiss mountain canton.* Princeton University Press, 1974.
- ROBERT HENRY BILLIGMEIER: *A Crisis in Swiss Pluralism. The Romansh and their relations with the German- and Italian-Swiss in the perspective of a millennium.* Mouton Publishers, The Hague, Paris, New York, 1979.
- DOUGLAS BARTLETT GREGOR: *Romontsch. Language and Literature. The Sursilvan Raeto-Romance of Switzerland.* The Oleander Press and Douglas Bartlett Gregor, 1982.

## 16. Rhaeto-Romance, a test case for the fate of language and cultural minorities?

In his lecture, «The linguistic future of Europe», delivered in Hanover in 1952, Leo Weisgerber gave an impressive insight into the explosive situation obtaining among the minority languages. Looking into the future, he states that the actual problems in this sphere have still to be encountered. Europe, in his opinion, will have to get rid of its language imperialism before the latter causes its final destruction. Weisgerber demands that every possible effort should be made to appreciate the importance of the effect of the relationship and interrelationship between the mother tongue and society.

Here is the point of departure for a twofold outlook on this problem. On the one hand, an idealistic one which sees in language not merely one cultural asset amongst others, but so to speak only the tip of the iceberg, a phenomenon affecting man's deepest emotions; on the other hand, a more rational view which attempts to keep the argument free of emotional, nationalist and racial issues and thus achieves an unbiassed base from which to operate. It looks as if these two views meet in the middle, i.e. there where the knowledge begins to dawn that «the mutual penetration of language and society» is usually far more complicated than one imagines.

Today, wherever one looks inside Europe and beyond, one is confronted everywhere with burning and disquieting issues in relation to the highly differentiated situations of the minorities, whereby the emphasis on language becomes a widely recognized symbol for a range of other requests and demands. It is no longer romantic and nostalgic motives which raise these problems but rather stark reality. Catchwords such as the Basque Country, Bretons, Flemings, Friulians, Catalans, Corsicans, Piedmontes, the Bernese Jura should not be used to inflame passions but simply to make clear that pooh poohing and ignoring such problems is almost equivalent to self-deception.

Fundamentally this development is a normal and logical one viewed from the standpoint of modern man. A movement, triggered off by the scientific and technical advancements of our age and precipitated on to a global and standardized civilization, resorts ever more to counter-measures as a corrective. These go hand in hand with man's ever increasing awareness of his provenance and his entity. The dangers that lurk everywhere, overpopulation, the threat to the balance of Nature, the urbanization and the vandalization of the landscape and, not to forget, the results of the great intellectual move-

ments of the last few decades in psychology and sociology, all indicate that man is not content to let himself drift but is taking active counter-measures.

The least that one can say is that some of the European states since the French Revolution have not been particularly well disposed towards minorities. And the necessity for reconstruction after the disastrous results of the second world war has again relegated the question of the minorities to a marginal issue and in no way solved it.

In this context, a glance at the situation of Rhaeto-Romance, spoken by about 50,000 people in Switzerland, in particular in Canton Graubünden (Grisons), is not without significance. The year 1985 will mark the 2000th anniversary of the conquest of the Alpine lands by the Romans. After that date folk Latin spread all over Rhaetia and coalesced with the existing pre-Roman languages. As a result of this, there emerged during a long development process Romansh or Rhaeto-Romance. As early as the middle of the 6th century there followed a political, economic and thus also cultural expansion of Rhaetia in the direction of the Germanic or Alemannic-Bavarian territories. Hence the radical impregnation of the whole structure of Rhaeto-Romance with the German language. This resulted in a particular mental attitude of the people and in a language which may be described as a natural link and a bridge between German and Latin countries, between North and South.

When, in the late middle ages, the step had finally been taken from the feudal system to democracy in the form of self-governing communities and high courts, and later in the enlarged loose confederation of the three federations in Graubünden, the Romansh speakers had already irretrievably lost their natural cultural centre, the episcopal town of Chur, to the German speakers.

In view of this fact, it is almost a miracle that Rhaeto-Romance has been able to survive right up to the present day. But this miracle, like so many others, is not unconditioned. It is worth-while, in view of the claims of other minorities, to state in concise form some of the reasons for this.

**1)** The geographical situation and distribution of Rhaeto-Romance (and incidentally of most of the cultural and language minorities in the Alpine regions) over a mountainous area, its close ties until the first world war with a homogeneous peasant population have in the first instance saved it from major upheavals. The distinctive autonomy of the local communities, with the privileged position of the old established and with their reservations against all strangers, has also done its share towards preservation.

**2)** Nevertheless, without a more or less conscious fostering and guidance of the language since the reformation and counter-reformation, first vigorously taken in hand since the middle of the 19th century (in school, church and public life), Rhaeto-Romance would scarcely have had a chance of survival. This can be best judged by a comparison with the fate of Occitan. The efforts of the Provençals under Frédéric Mistral to elevate their language and culture began at about the same time as the language and cultural movement which is usually referred to as the «Rhaeto-Romance Renaissance». Between the «Félibres» (wise men) of Provence and the partisans for the Romansh language existed duly attested personal contacts. Unfortunately, the Provençals never succeeded in forcing through even a limited measure of instruction in Occitan in the schools. And this in spite of the fact that the requisite legislation for this measure, although very late, has existed since 1951.

**3)** The lack of a cultural centre, mentioned above, and indeed of any coordinating forces, led to the development of different written languages corresponding more or less to the political structure of the three federations. Of these variants, two play a decisive role today: Sursilvan in the Rhine area (Bündner Oberland/Surselva, Mittelbünden and Oberhalbstein/Surmeir) and Engadine (Ladin) in the form of Lower Engadine (Vallader) in the Upper and Lower Engadine, in the Münster valley and in Bergün. What for the outsider who does not know the background is difficult to understand is, in the case of minority languages, a not unusual phenomenon. In the literary forms which, in contrast to the village dialects, we call idioms, the step from the regional vernacular to the written language is a short one. This is helped by the fact that the Romansh speakers (Ladins, Sursilvans, Surmirans) feel themselves at home in these idioms. A linguistic approximation (avischinaziun) of the idioms, and today since 1981 in fact by a new forged common forme of Romansh, called «Rumantsch Grischun», is desirable and is being encouraged but not coerced. This can most easily be achieved by the creation of new words and through the mass media, press, radio and television.

**4)** In spite of its remoteness in the Alps and its scission into dialects and idioms, Rhaeto-Romance has remained an outward looking and permeable language. The Alpine passes, service in foreign armies, the high rate of emigration, and, in more recent times, traffic and the tourist trade have ensured that the language has remained, by and large, a modern and differentiated medium.

**5)** The early advent of the language and cultural movement, with the Società Retorumantscha and its Dicziunari Rumantsch Gri-

schun as a scientific institute and with the Ligia Romontscha (the roof organization of the Romansh speakers) as a centre for the requirements of the practical promotion of language and culture, has led, with the approval of Canton and Confederation, to coordinated efforts. This movement has called to life forces which have resulted in remarkable cultural achievements, for which it would be difficult to find a parallel in such a small area.

**6)** The to date reasonably successful campaign for the preservation and promotion of Rhaeto-Romance was only possible because it was able to develop in a relaxed political and cultural climate. Not only Switzerland, which with its four languages and cultures is anyway a nation *sui generis*, but also trilingual Graubünden must, for better or for worse, come to some form of internal compromise if it wishes to survive as a political entity.

The linguistic Magna Charta of Graubünden, which guarantees equal rights to the languages German, Italian and the two forms of Romansh, Sursilvan and Engadine, dates from 1794. And even during the era of Napoleon's enforced Helvetian Republic, these principles were wisely adhered to. Since then continuous efforts have been made to ensure the preservation of the language, some of which have met with success. One of the most significant, if not the most important, was the recognition of Rhaeto-Romance as the fourth official language of the country in the year 1938, on the eve of the outbreak of war in Europe.

It must, however, be admitted that today Rhaeto-Romance finds itself confronted with problems which are anything but easy and result from the fundamental change in socio-economic conditions compared with earlier times. The demands of industry and commerce, the mass media, the educational structure, particularly that of the vocational schools, secondary schools and universities, the attraction of the urbanized areas of central Switzerland, all these contribute to the weakening and disintegration of the Romansh heartland zones. But the Romansh speakers who live in these heartland zones will also in future have to withstand even greater pressures in order to maintain their language.

The preservation of Rhaeto-Romance raises the question of the carrying capacity of the speakers of this language. On the one hand it is essential that everywhere where rudiments of the language exist, these should be cultivated as far as possible, and at every level. On the other hand, the integration of the Rhaeto-Romans into the community of the German Swiss, with whom they are linked for better

or for worse, must be set on foot without their having to suffer too many hardships and disadvantages in the process.

The Rhaeto-Roman on an average copes with several languages, but the extent of his knowledge in the respective languages can vary considerably. In his native Romansh with a regional local function and colouring, in German-Swiss in his dealings with German-Swiss, and at least, on a receptive level, listening to the radio or watching television, and finally on the level of the written language, be it Romance or German, as soon as he reads or writes.

Everyone realizes that the Romansh elementary school has a very difficult task in keeping Romansh as the language of instruction until the fourth, third or second class (depending on the local language spoken). Under continuous pressure from above to give preference to German as the language of instruction, even the best intentions to further Romansh have often to take second place. The resultant starvation of the original native culture is manifested in its general negative development.

In this situation it is difficult to convince the Rhaeto-Roman of the advantages which his «otherness», his pluri-lingualism bring him: easier access to the new Latin languages as well as to German, a knowledge of several and highly differentiated cultures and thereby a greater intellectual flexibility and a greater breadth of horizon, all reasons which, however, presuppose a maturity not easily achieved on a wide scale among the population concerned.

Herein lies, amongst other factors, the actual problem for the protection of minority languages. Where does the limit of the individual speaker's carrying capacity lie? How must measures for preservation and promotion be framed, coordinated, politically justified and implemented in order that the whole can become effective?

There is reason to hope that better results will be achieved both as a result of long years of experience as well as of investigations geared to actual practice. One thing is certain, if the Rhaeto-Romans, as Uriel Weinreich put it in 1953, «like the Italian-Swiss, practise their language with the utmost devotion and loyalty without thereby pursuing any nationalistic aims or striving after political independence», then this can be attributed in no small measure to the circumstances, which although not absolutely ideal, do allow them reasonable freedom of movement and opportunity for selfdevelopment. This, if nothing more, is a lesson in humanity and politics which could well be treated with respect and copied everywhere where minorities are subjected to oppression and discrimination.