

Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland: Overview and Recent Developments

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1. Introduction

Switzerland is often quoted as a success story for its handling of linguistic and cultural diversity. In this presentation, I will try to assess this success: to what extent is this reputation justified? What are the conditions that have resulted in this very particular way of dealing with diversity in a multilingual state? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the “Swiss model”?

Since time and space are too limited to engage in a full-fledged historical, political, socio-linguistic and economic assessment of Swiss quadrilingualism, let alone in a comparative discussion, I will eschew the usual presentation of demo- and sociolinguistic data in favour of a more interpretative approach, with the aim to provide the reader with an analytical, rather than descriptive perspective on Swiss multilingualism today. Much relevant detail will have to be omitted, meaning that this text will concentrate on what I consider to be the essential dimensions of the problem. However, additional information (including an array of relevant figures) can be found in the references listed at the end of this paper.

This paper is organised as follows. In Section 2, I review the historical foundations of Swiss multilingualism; the corresponding institutional arrangements are presented in Section 3; Section 4 is devoted to a discussion of the current challenges that Switzerland is confronted with in its handling of linguistic diversity.

2. The roots of Swiss multilingualism: an overview

Despite a small population of barely over 7 million, Switzerland has four national languages, namely German (declared as their “main language”, in the standard or dialectal form, by 63,6% of the resident population), French (19,2%), Italian (7,6%) and Romanche (0,6%), according to 1990 Federal Census returns. Accordingly, 9% of the resident population claims a non-national language as their main language, which is a very high percentage in international comparison.

A vast array of figures could be presented to give a fuller socio- and demolinguistic portrait of Switzerland. However, these can easily be retrieved from a variety of sources (e.g. Schläpfer, 1982; Département fédéral de l'intérieur, 1989; Lüdi, Werlen and Bianconi, 1997; Matthey and De Pietro, 1997), and I wish to stress other, possibly less known dimensions. More precisely, before discussing the institutional aspects which are a necessary part of any description of the Swiss language situation, it is interesting to discuss the history which has resulted in what is present-day Switzerland, because historical factors go a long way towards explaining the strengths and weaknesses of Swiss quadrilingualism.

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Brutally simplifying seven centuries of history (that is, starting out in 1291, which is regarded as the “beginning” of Swiss history through the alliance of three small communities in Alpine valleys), the growth of Switzerland to its current boundaries can be defined as one of slow accretion. The three original cantons were successively joined by others, whose main interest was to resist the imperialism of surrounding (and much more powerful) states, particularly Austria, subsequently Burgundy, Savoy and France. The official vision of Switzerland’s emergence, therefore, is one of peace-loving and fiercely independent small nations (the cantons) aggregating to preserve their freedom. Of course, this is an overly rosy representation: quarrelling between cantons was commonplace, power play was always present, and some cantons were, until admitted as full-fledged members of the Confederation, mere vassals of others. However, this is the core of what can be called the Swiss *myth*, in the sense of the sacralisation of selected elements of history into a widely held (and often earnestly believed) representation of national origins (on this question, see e.g. Froidevaux, 1997).

The creation and success of this myth can in large part be explained by historical circumstance. Let us first recall that Switzerland only emerged as a “modern” country after the end of the Napoleonic wars; its present boundaries were recognised at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and its first truly modern constitution dates back to 1848. However, in the early part of the 20th century, a country such as Switzerland was a suspicious oddity. First, it was a lone republic amidst reactionary monarchies; second, it was a multilingual country just at a time when another myth, that of the unitary nation-state, was holding sway as the most achieved and legitimate form of political structure. A clear one-to-one correspondence between state and nation on the one hand, and nation and language on the other hand, was widely considered to be in the order of things.

Hence, Switzerland had to legitimise its existence, including its unusual features such as multilingualism; the national myth was more or less consciously developed to this end. In practice, this meant that the supposedly destabilising quadrilingualism of the country had to be turned into an advantage and more precisely, construed into a worthy trait. What could be perceived as a fatal rift had to be asserted (and was actually proclaimed) as the essence of the Swiss nation: a *Willensnation* (“nation of the will”) defined precisely *by* its linguistic diversity, gaining its sense of national self and expressing its very soul through diversity, not in spite of it.

Some internal policy considerations also came into play. In 1848, a brief civil war between mostly catholic and rural cantons on one side, and mostly protestant and urban cantons on the other side was swiftly won by the latter; in order to assuage the fears of the former, it was important to acknowledge explicitly the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country. Hence, the 1848 Constitution mentions German, Italian and French as the three national languages on an equal footing.

The establishment of the Swiss national myth was a highly successful operation of social psychology, because the origins of the myth were, by and large, not just accepted, but actually forgotten. When no-one worries about the roots of a myth, it means that it has succeeded. Over the years, further embellishments were added to the national myth, such as orderliness, hard-work, cleanliness, precision, the humanitarian calling symbolised by the Red Cross, etc.; this provided important grounding for a very unusual institutional arrangement. Citizen’s attachment to the self-representation of Switzerland as a multilingual country found confirmation as recently as March 1996, when an overwhelming majority of voters accepted a

change to Art. 116 of the Federal Constitution, allowing the federal government to increase its support for Romanche and Italian language and culture, and to engage in measures with the specific aim of improving inter-group contacts and communication (Froidevaux, 1996).

Several important features have probably made the task of national myth building and maintenance easier. Three of them will be mentioned here.

First, French-speaking Switzerland has never, at any point of its history (bar a few years of Napoleonic rule with partial annexation) been part of France; the French-speaking Swiss (or *Suisses romands*, not to be confused with the *Romanche* group), are in no way descendants or cousins of the French; this is a point which bears repeating — particularly to Québécois audiences, which have a completely different historical link with France. Similarly, German-speaking Switzerland has never been part of Germany (whose unification dates back to 1871 only), and Italian-speaking Switzerland has never been part of Italy. As a consequence, any hint of centrifugal tendencies (or “rattachisme”, as in the Belgian case) can be dismissed as absurd.

Second, linguistic boundaries (a concept I will return to later) do not correspond with political intercantonal boundaries. Three cantons are bilingual (French and German) and one is trilingual (German, Romanche and Italian). This also helps to prevent rifts.

Thirdly — and this is also in contrast with some other cases of multilingual countries, linguistic boundaries do not, in the main, correspond to religious boundaries; for example both French- and German-speaking Switzerland are fairly evenly split between historically protestant and historically catholic cantons. Only the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino is quite homogeneously catholic, but even the very small Romanche-speaking areas, totalling less than 40,000 inhabitants, comprise communities of one or another religion in fairly comparable numbers.

From the preceding, it must be clear that the roots of the Swiss way of “managing” linguistic and cultural diversity are quite different from those of other multilingual countries, even within the western world (Grin, 1997b).

3. The institutional arrangement

The institutional arrangement through which linguistic diversity is managed officially reflects and maintains specific geolinguistic features. One of them, language boundaries, has just been mentioned. This constitutes a key aspect of the Swiss situation, and one which would deserve in-depth discussion (e.g. Rossinelli, 1989; Papaux, 1997); for the sake of brevity, however, I shall confine myself to recalling the essentials.

The existence of fairly sharp linguistic boundaries separating corresponding language region means that, with the exception of a limited number of municipalities, there is no official bilingualism at the local level. Switzerland may be quadrilingual, but to most intents and purposes, each point of its territory can be viewed as unilingual. Correspondingly, living in Switzerland means living entirely in German (with a diglossic pattern comprising standard German and the local Swiss-German dialect), in French or in Italian. The case of the much smaller Romanche-speaking areas, actually language islands almost entirely surrounded by German-speaking areas, is less clear-cut; a longstanding pattern of language attrition has resulted in a strong presence and visibility of German and Swiss-German dialect even in the core of the traditional “Romanche territory” (Furer, 1994).

The three language regions do not display the same degree of homogeneity; in particular, over 20% of the population in the linguistically more diverse French-language region claim a language other than French as first language; yet, in each language region, one sole language is designated as official. This reflects the interplay of three institutional principles that represent the pillars of diversity management (or diversity governance) in Switzerland. These three principles are *language territoriality*, *language freedom* and *subsidiarity*.

Territoriality is defined as an unwritten constitutional principle, inferred by the Federal Tribunal (Supreme Court) from *al.* 1 of art. 116 of the Federal Constitution. It states that it is incumbent upon the cantons, within their boundaries, to ensure the extent and homogeneity of their language territory. In other words, the stability of language boundaries is enshrined in federal jurisdiction. One direct result from this provision is that, for example, there is no right to French-language education in German-speaking Switzerland, and vice-versa. Cantons are of course free to be more lenient, and they usually are, but there is no right of citizens to be educated in another national language.

The *language freedom* principle is also recognised as an unwritten constitutional principle; in addition, it is recognised by the Federal Tribunal as a fundamental right in the sense that it is necessary for exercising other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression. Language freedom implies the right for residents to use any language of their choice in the private sphere, which includes the language of business and commerce. In some rare cases, the cantons have been recognised the competence to restrict this right, but generally have not done so.

The third pillar of the Swiss arrangement is the principle of *subsidiarity*. It must be recalled that sovereignty rests with the cantons, which only delegate some areas of competence to the Confederation. By implication, as long as a given competence is not explicitly assigned to the federal government by the Constitution, it remains within the purview of cantons. This is the case, for example, with education (although some aspects of higher education are regulated at the federal level) and also with language policy. One direct result, of course, is that there is practically no federal-level language policy, contrary to what one can observe in Canada, whose federal authorities are constantly involved in it. Another important result is that if a competence belongs to the cantons, the administrative acts flowing from this competence will take place in the respective official language of each individual canton. In bilingual cantons, cantonal authorities will normally use one language *or* the other (but not both) for the local provision of services (such as education), following the linguistic boundary. In the case of the trilingual canton of Grischun/Graubünden/Grigioni, the choice of official language has been devolved from the cantonal to the communal authorities, and language policy is defined at the level of the smallest political unit.

In addition to the subsidiarity principle, Switzerland applies a particular system called *federalism of execution*. According to this system, cantons are in charge of carrying out certain duties of the federal government. This usually applies for those duties which require direct contact with the local public. For example, the collection of federal taxes is administered by cantonal authorities, with the same language regime that prevails for cantonal duties — that is, monolingually.

In short, the Swiss system is deeply territorial (although there currently is a drift towards a softer, or “differentiated”, application of territoriality), and also very localised. Whether this insistence on fairly strict territoriality is essential to the comparatively successful Swiss

experience could be a matter for lengthy discussion, and perhaps controversy which I will not enter here. In the last section of this paper, we shall address some of the challenges that the Swiss arrangement is currently confronted with.

4. Current challenges

The arrangement that has prevailed over the past 150 years (roughly, since the 1848 Constitution) is currently being questioned from a variety of perspectives, three of which seem to be receiving particular attention at this time. I shall briefly mention the first two and then focus on the third.

First, there is a concern that the Swiss way of dealing with diversity pays insufficient attention to the presence of immigrants from an increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural background. In particular, it is being argued by many that mother tongue education for migrant children should be extended and eventually become the norm, in order not to hamper the acquisition of cognitive skills and future educational prospects. If this type of language rights, however, is granted to young speakers of Albanian or Portuguese, it would become difficult to explain why speakers of *national* languages (but from another language region) should be denied the same. The debate is now going on, along with various experiments that generally include an extension of the range of languages used as a medium of instruction at pre-school and elementary school level (Brohy, 1996). This evolution is often presented as a progress for individual rights, and sometimes advocated on these grounds alone.

Second, the traditional arrangement is accused of having failed to live up to its promises. In particular, the inadequate visibility of Italian (Bianconi, 1994; Snozzi, 1996) and the continuing decline of Romanche (Furer, 1992) are sometimes blamed on the rigidity of territoriality. This can be a credible claim in the former case, particularly if a relaxation of territoriality would, among other results, facilitate Italian-medium education for Italian-speaking children (usually from families having migrated from Italy rather than from Italian-speaking Switzerland) in French- and German-speaking Switzerland. However, the notion that *less* territoriality would have better preserved Romanche is dubious at best; one could equally well argue that *more* territoriality would be required, or an *asymmetrical* application of territoriality giving systematic preference to a very threatened language.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the traditional way of dealing with linguistic diversity may be failing to adapt to deep-seated processes that are beyond the control of the Swiss as citizens — or of their government. *Prima facie*, the problem has to do with the perception that speakers of French rarely achieve sufficient competence in German to interact easily with German-speakers, while the latter, which had the reputation of earning, on average, respectable skills in French as a second language, no longer bother to do so. The extent to which these perceptions are true to fact or not is, in itself, a complex matter which has recently been investigated through a variety of research projects sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation; however, limitations of time and space prevent me from entering these considerations. There certainly *is* a problem, though not one that is beyond mending; in particular, the development of bilingual education, where a non-local national language could be used as the medium of instruction for certain subjects at elementary and lower secondary school (or even beyond), could go a long way towards raising average competence levels in national languages as second languages, and thereby contribute to harmonious inter-community relations and understanding (*Verständigung*).

However, deeper and broader trends seem to be at work here. While a much longer discussion would be warranted, it will probably suffice here to allude to “globalisation” — although this is admittedly a rather vague term which covers extremely different aspects of contemporary experience. At the price of much simplification, it can be said that in the eyes of large segments of the population, national languages are losing relevance by comparison with English. This means that for many, it is considered enough to learn English as their first (and perhaps only) foreign language and to disregard the acquisition of another national language (normally, German in French-speaking Switzerland and French in German-speaking Switzerland). Several opinion polls do suggest a drift in this direction, which is, abetted by recent decisions of some cantonal authorities.

In particular, the canton of Zurich (arguably the single most important canton in the country and its economic powerhouse) decided, in December 1997, to increase the share of English in the compulsory school syllabus, while reducing the share of French. This measure, generally supported by the local public, has caused some turmoil in official circles, both in the governments of other cantons and in the “CDIP” (the permanent conference of cantonal ministers of education). This has prompted the latter to commission a report (Lüdi *et al.*, 1998), tabled in July 1998 and currently under discussion, to re-examine in depth the motivations and processes of second language instruction throughout Switzerland. In many ways, the report could do little else than to ratify Zurich’s choices, by acknowledging the pull of English as an international language; yet it insists that for a variety of reasons (not only national cohesion, but also economic advantage) national languages must retain a priority as second languages in the education systems of the respective cantons. This priority, no longer defined in terms of syllabus endowments, is defined in terms of resulting language proficiency — which of course begs the question of how these results are to be achieved and monitored, if they are seen as wholly independent of syllabus endowments, and if these endowments are allowed to prioritise English.

All this might be seen as a mere variant of a fairly unoriginal problem: the spread of English as a “global” (as opposed to merely “international”) language posing a threat to the linguistic and cultural character of societies which were heretofore operating wholly in other languages — be it important vehicular languages or small minority languages. The inroads that English is making into the linguistic dimensions of everyday life is a matter for concern in many, perhaps most non-anglophone countries. However, in the particular context of Switzerland, it carries with it some implications that can have particularly deleterious effects, which I will now turn to.

To be sure, many Swiss citizens consider that English could be the most efficient way to solve communication problems between distinct language communities, particularly the German-speaking group on one side, and the “latin” minorities on the other side. Independently of the fact that this would significantly damage the credibility of the traditional Swiss model, its worrisome aspect (in my view) is that it implies a de-legitimisation of Switzerland’s national languages — or, more specifically, a de-legitimisation of the languages of *other* communities in the country. De-legitimisation of the language may be a forerunner of the de-legitimisation of the communities who speak these languages. This is serious enough as such; however, it seems to be associated with (and possibly accelerated by) an emerging socio-economic rift which carries major risks.

I have pointed earlier to the fact that language boundaries do not correspond to political or religious boundaries; in the same way, they have generally remained free of any economic connotations. In other words, the French- and the German-speaking regions of Switzerland

both include relatively affluent as well as relatively less well-off cantons; the agricultural, industrial and service sectors are represented in a balanced way within these two main language regions (although admittedly less so in the smaller Italian-speaking part of the country, namely Ticino and the “Grigioni italiano”). Hence, no clear association could be made between a particular language and socio-economic prosperity, whether in macro- or in micro-economic terms.

Unfortunately, this independence of economic dimensions from linguistic dimensions seems to be eroding, and perilous patterns of association may be emerging. On the micro-economic level, there is a tendential concentration of economic decision making-power in German-speaking Switzerland, with a leading position of Zurich; the recent surge in unemployment rates in the first half of the nineties was much more pronounced in French-speaking Switzerland (with unemployment affecting up to 8% of the active population in some French-speaking cantons like Geneva, while it remained well below 2% in some German-speaking cantons like Appenzell, and below 5% in Zurich). On the micro-economic level, the statistical treatment of data gathered in 1994/95 on earnings and language reveal patterns of association between one’s mother tongue and one’s income, *controlling for age, experience, education, second language skills and gender* (Grin and Sfreddo, 1998). To the extent that the economic fabric of the three main language regions remains comparable, these discrepancies can only be interpreted as forms of language-based discrimination, which work against native speakers of Italian and in favour of native speakers of German or Swiss-German dialect — the position of native French-speakers being somewhere in between and usually not statistically different from that of native German-speaking residents.

This rift (which certainly warrants closer inspection and, if confirmed to be true, corrective measures) can be interpreted in two different (but equally unsettling) ways. One is that of an “economisation” of linguistic and cultural differences, in the sense that these differences translate into unequal access to socio-economic success. The other is that of an “ethnicisation” of socio-economic inequality, which would no longer manifest itself along the usual lines of education, socio-economic background, occupation, or more generally, social class, but along linguistic, cultural or quasi-ethnic lines. Either way, this can only be deeply divisive and would not bode well for the long-term cohesion of the country (Grin, 1997a).

On balance, therefore, Switzerland represents an undeniable historical success in the management of linguistic diversity. This success has been achieved in the past through the development, embellishment and maintenance of a national myth that has gained wide currency and acceptance in the population. At present and for the years to come, it is becoming clear that the national myth will no longer be sufficient, because it does not address new problems which reflect broad trends such as “globalisation” and because it provides no way to deal with emerging socio-economic rifts. In the face of these challenges, the low-key approach to language policy maintained so far by the federal government and administration is no longer sufficient (Grin, 1993) and a shift to a more active policy is becoming a clear necessity (Cathomas, 1997; Grin, 1998).

To the extent that Switzerland is often held up as an example of peaceful coexistence between different language communities, the Swiss experience has a validity and a value which arguably exceeds its national boundaries. It is therefore incumbent on the Swiss, for their own sake and as a contribution to others, to design and implement the policy measures required for the renewal and continuation of a unique experience with diversity in society.

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