

Ideals and reality in Swiss linguistic policy : using the Sunday china every day

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Using the Sunday china every

Are we Swiss really as good at languages as legend has it? Do we also enjoy learning our national languages? Or do we prefer to speak English with one another? Switzerland's linguistic and cultural assets are being irresponsibly squandered, according to our guest contributor.

It paints a pretty picture. And whenever we Swiss are abroad, we are constantly reminded how lucky we are to grow up in a country where the entire population is fluent in three or four languages! Polite as we are, we

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have no wish to disavow our hosts. We merely mumble an assent, feeling a little proud yet at the same time slightly guilty: because deep down we know that when it comes to a multilingual culture, Switzerland is not quite as perfect as it appears from the outside.

Of course Switzerland has four national languages, but most Swiss speak only one of them – somewhat reticently in the case of German-speaking Swiss, since the language they speak colloquially is not the national language. Beyond this, depending on their schooling, all Swiss can make themselves understood to some extent or other in a second national language.

Side-by-side but not shoulder-to-shoulder

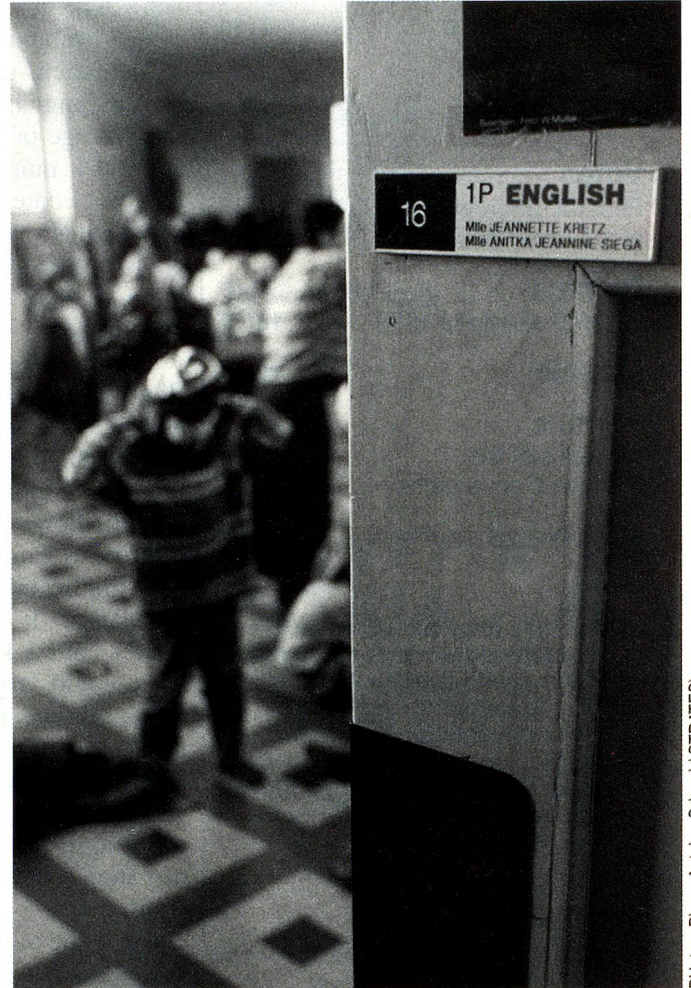
Very often, however, there is no need to do so. Most of the time the various linguistic communities in our country coexist in harmony, with only the occasional tensions arising following Sunday referendums. But they live side-by-side, not shoulder-to-shoulder; and if a young man from Zurich is sent to do his military service in Bière, or a young

woman from Geneva has to attend a seminar in Zurich, then the language of communication is English. So far, so bad.

Officially, however, things could not be better. Language is a matter close to the Swiss government's heart. Moreover, in March 1996 it was given a legal basis for the promotion of communication and cultural exchange between the different linguistic communities when the electorate voted in favour of the new language article in the Federal Constitution. Yet the lofty ideals so fondly and passionately cited by many politicians are continually being undermined in day-to-day Swiss life. Interest in other national languages is waning, especially in German-speaking Switzerland.

The popularity of English

School authorities, parents and children are instead turning more and more openly towards English. In a world that marches to the beat of commerce, English appears to be the only foreign language with market value. French and Italian-speaking Switzerland views this trend as the logical conclusion of a fatal development. The widespread use of dialect throughout German-speaking



The promotion of English at an early school age is causing heated debate...

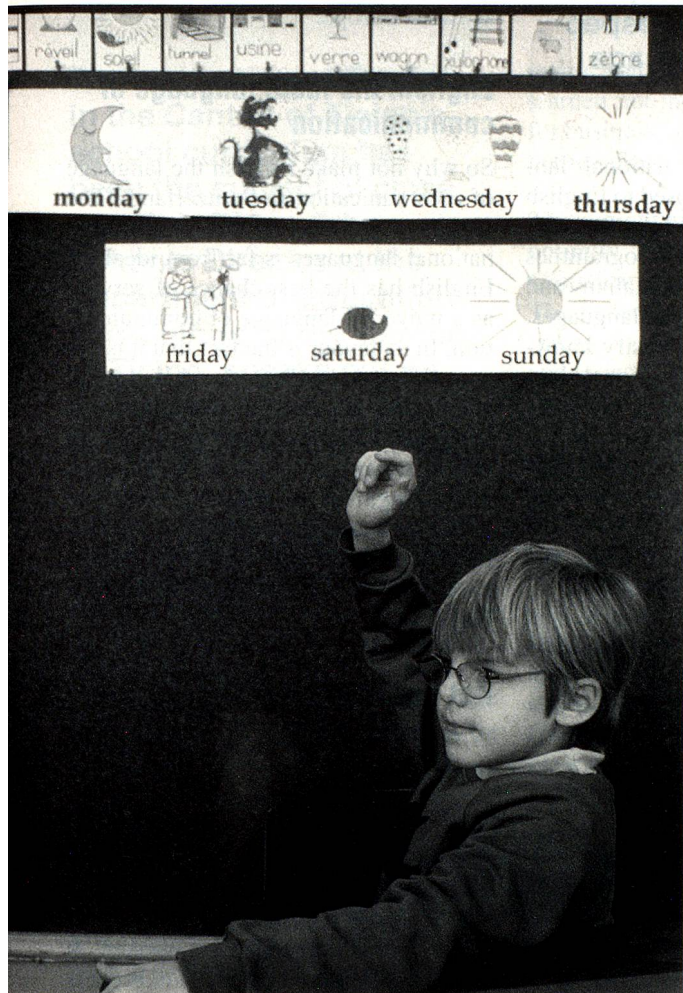
Switzerland is regarded by French-Swiss and Italian-Swiss as a sign of aversion to contact. They feel disadvantaged because they learn the official High German in school yet are unable to communicate when in Berne and Zurich.

“There are four languages in Switzerland,” jokes publicist José Ribeaud, long-standing Zurich correspondent for French-Swiss television, “but only two are really of any use: Züridütsch and English.” Most Swiss show a propensity to trample the twin values of solidarity and unity firmly under foot and distance themselves from their European neighbours.

Will this lead to a break-up of Switzerland? Concerns have been voiced at

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day



... and reinforces the political impact of such campaigns.

the political level, as a result of which the Federal Council has commissioned legislative projects to promote understanding and co-operation between the linguistic communities.

The sovereignty of the cantons

A start has been made, but progress is proving slower than planned. Small wonder: there is no lack of fine words and noble intentions, but how can you impose from on high a desire to co-exist? Nor is the situation made easier by the fact that education and training comes under the remit of the cantons.

In Zurich, for instance, Director of Education Ernst Buschor has launched a "Schools Project 21" which proposes

more cautiously formulated, were published by a group of experts in a general language concept entitled the Lüdi Report. Commissioned by the Conference of Directors of Education (Erziehungsdirektorenkonferenz, EDK) in response to Zurich's plans, the concept aims to evaluate and co-ordinate the teaching of foreign languages in Switzerland.

Multilingual instruction

According to the panel of experts headed by Basle professor of Romance languages George Lüdi, the sooner children learn another language the better. The best and most natural way to do this is to expose them without cere-

mony to a second language, by using it as the language of instruction for part of their school studies. By introducing various forms of second-language instruction (immersion), says the Lüdi Commission, every Swiss child would acquire two other national languages as well as English besides its mother tongue.

to flaunt the hitherto sacred rule that all Swiss must learn a national language as their first foreign language. In Buschor's Zurich, English will be taught to children from their very first school-year, and French only five years later. Various central Swiss cantons appear to be delighted with the idea, and shrug off the storms of protest from French and Italian-speaking Switzerland.

But let's be honest. Judging from the way foreign languages are usually taught nowadays, it can hardly be assumed that Switzerland's cohesiveness has anything to do with a knowledge of other national languages. Up to now Switzerland's linguistic and cultural assets have been irresponsibly squandered in schools. The same conclusions, albeit

mony to a second language, by using it as the language of instruction for part of their school studies. By introducing various forms of second-language instruction (immersion), says the Lüdi Commission, every Swiss child would acquire two other national languages as well as English besides its mother tongue.

Right idea, wrong language

Zurich's "Schools Project 21", which envisages the early introduction of English as part of this strategy, clearly has the right idea. But the language is wrong because, as the EDK confirms, schools are obliged to contribute to communication and understanding between Switzerland's linguistic regions.

Back in 1984 the European Parliament declared that linguistic diversity was to be equated with cultural richness and as such must be promoted. Every schoolchild in Europe should therefore be able to communicate in two other European languages besides his or her mother tongue.

The hurdle of perfectionism

The objective is being taken seriously. Immersion classes are being held in Germany and France, in Italy's Aosta valley, in the UK, Belgium, Spain and Portugal. Switzerland is lagging behind. Added to this, the impact of the Lüdi Report is still uncertain. Initial efforts at bilingual and multilingual instruction have been successfully made in the Valais, Bienne, Fribourg and the Engadine. Nevertheless they stumbled over a number of political and organisational hurdles, as well as a certain element of Swiss perfectionism i.e. an elite preconception of multilingualism.

Perfection is not the objective. Peter Bichsel once remarked that we tend to treat other languages like the Sunday china, bringing them out only rarely on special occasions. Instead, we should enjoy using them every day. Better to break a few pieces now and again than to keep them hidden away, gathering dust. ■