Romansh – The Fourth Official Swiss Language

In 1938, Romansh was recognized as a national language of Switzerland. In Switzerland's mountainous east, roughly 60,000 people speak Romansh. By comparison, this segment equals only 0.9 percent of the Swiss population but despite its small footprint, the Romansh language offers tremendous cultural wealth for Switzerland.

The Swiss stereotypes of chocolate and watches do not apply in Romansh territory. Instead, the traditional capuns dish is more of a cultural bedrock as each family treasures their own variation. But the diversity does not stop there: you might be surprised to know that there are no less than five varieties of the Romansh language, referred to as *idioms*!

How Switzerland's topography influences language

Similar to how Swiss German has evolved into many different dialects, the natural barriers of the Grison Alps have created the different flavors of Romansh over time. Essentially, the five variations of Romansh can be found in the various valleys, and these dialects are reflected in education, literature and especially in the spoken language.

Attempts to consolidate the Romansh idioms into a **standard dialect** have failed so far. Ironically, however, the standard dialect of *Rumantsch Grischun* is the key to today's functioning of Grisons society. It is the dialect of choice when speakers of certain dialects try to communicate.

Liricas Analas might be the only contemporary, famous Romansh band. Their style is referred to as disco rap, which is a mix between hip hop, electronic music and 80's disco beats. They rap in the fourth language of Switzerland -

«Romansh» You can listen to them on youtube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRvM2KKDeGA

About the future of Romansh

Romansh is in imminent danger of extinction. Statistically speaking, this national language of Switzerland is going to be wiped off the map within just a few decades! But then again, Romansh was not supposed to see the latter half of the 20th century in the first place, but it defeated the odds and is still around today! The good news is that while Switzerland's population is steadily increasing, the segment of the population familiar with Romansh is at least keeping steady.

Today, there is a trend for the Romansh speaking population from the canton of Grisons to migrate elsewhere. In fact one third of Romansh speakers actually reside outside of Grisons! Deduct this number from the total and you end up with slightly more than 40,000 active users of Romansh.

Grisons, or *Graubünden* in German, happens to be the only officially sanctioned, trilingual state in which the Romansh language holds the official status. (Although close to 75 percent of the canton's inhabitants also speak Swiss German).

The Romansh language comes in seven dialects.

If the natural beauty was not enough, the official language Romansh is spoken in different dialects. Romansh is one of the **Romance languages**. At times, it can be attributed to being a corrupted version of Latin, the language spoken widely during the Roman Empire.

This minority language in Switzerland is further divided into seven dialects, depending on the valley:

• **Sursilvan** - This Romansh dialect is spoken in the Surselva district of the Vorderrhein valley. Close to 60 percent of the population of 21'347 speak *Sursilvan* as their principle language. The name of the district stems from the Romansh words *sur* and *selva*, which translate to "above the forest". This dialect is the most widely used among Romansh speakers.
• **Sutsilvan** - Well, you do not have to know Romansh to translate the meaning of this dialect. Derived from *sut* and *selva*, the name translates to "below

the forest". *Sutsilvan* is spoken by a minority of a little over 1'000 people in the Hinterrhein valley.
• **Surmiran** - Julia and Albula are some of the popular rivers that form the valleys, and the inhabitants there speak a Romansh dialect which translates to "above the wall".
• **Putèr** – This is a variety of Romansh specific to the Upper Engadine valley - the valley of the Inn River. The *Putèr* dialect is spoken by about 30 percent of the population in this part of Graubünden. The name is derived from the local word *put* (porridge) and describes the place of porridge eaters.
• **Vallader** - Common in the Lower Engadine valley, *Vallader* happens to be the second most commonly spoken variety of Romansh. 79 percent of the valley's population, or about 6,500 people, speak *Vallader.* The name stems from the word *val*, meaning valley.
• **Jauer** - This dialect is quite similar to *Vallader* and yet has enough differences to command a separate status. Derived from the personal pronoun *I, Jauer* is preferred by 1,600 or so people residing in the municipality of Val Müstair.
• **Tuatschin** - It is one of the less distinguished dialects within the Romansh family and is spoken in the regions of Tujetsch and the Val Medel. Attempts at standardizing Romansh have been unsuccessful.

Since the mid-19th century, many attempts have been made to create a unified language incorporating the essence of these different dialects. A first attempt was by Gion Antoni Bühler in 1867, which was followed by Leza Uffer in 1958. In both cases, the initiative to create a standard written language was ultimately unsuccessful.

In the last 80 years, Romansh has been a hit and miss story. As it stands, *Rumantsch Grischun* remains the official and administrative language in the Swiss Confederation and in the canton of Graubünden. It has had a checkered path and been challenged many times by speakers of the other dialects.

Learn more at http://www.newlyswissed.com/romansh-and-its-flavors-beyond-the-valleys-of-graubunden/