

Multilingualism – a governmental perspective

Abstract

Switzerland is a “Willensnation”, namely a nation born from a willingness to live together despite linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. The Swiss language situation is complex. The country has four language regions and national languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh). Of the twenty-six cantons, twenty-two are monolingual, three are bilingual (French/German) and one is trilingual (German/Italian/Romansh). So despite its multilingualism, the Swiss linguistic model is predominantly monolingual.

At the federal level, besides the *national* languages, the Swiss constitution refers to the *official* languages: they are German, French and Italian (as well as Romansh when communicating with persons who speak Romansh). Any person dealing with the federal authorities may do so in the official language of their own choice and receive a response in that language. Given this situation, Swiss public administration has to make substantial efforts in order to guarantee its plurilingualism, as well as to be representative of Switzerland’s microcosm.

To reach this goal, the Swiss government has chosen an Inter-Comprehension Strategy. Employees of the federal administration should be able to work in the official language of their choice and have the language skills required for multilingual communication. Thus, Swiss public administration should be “multilingually receptive”: an employee has to be able to understand his or her colleagues even if he or she does not speak their language fluently.

This paper has three parts: first, it provides an overview of Swiss language complexity and Swiss public policy; secondly, it presents a point of view regarding a policy-based approach to multilingualism; finally, it suggests ways to collaborate and to create an international network of public administrations or similar functions.

1. Overview

1.1 The four language regions and the main languages spoken in Switzerland

The national languages of Switzerland are German, French, Italian and Romansh. Swiss multilingualism is characterised by seventeen German speaking cantons, four French speaking cantons, one Italian speaking canton, three bilingual German/French cantons and a trilingual Romansh/German/Italian canton.

Figure 1 illustrates the four language regions. Data from 2014 reveals that 64.9% of the Swiss population are German speakers, 22.6% are French speakers, 8.3% are Italian speakers and 0.5% are Romansh speakers.

Thus, despite its multilingualism, the Swiss linguistic model is predominantly monolingual.

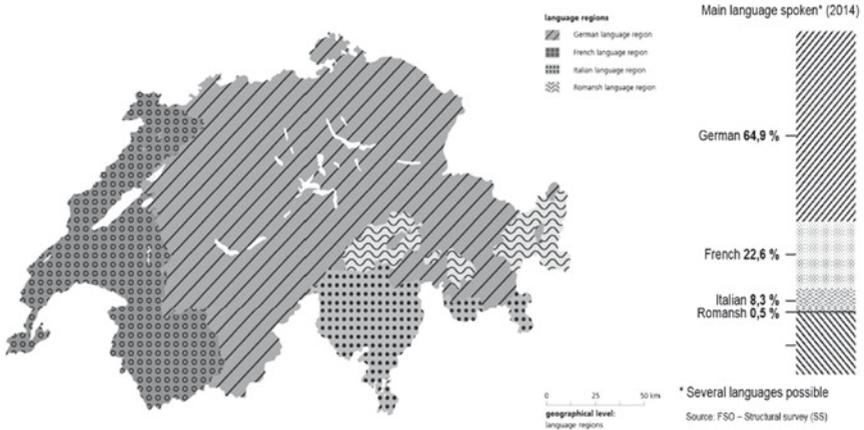


Fig. 1: Language regions in Switzerland

1.2 Swiss language policy

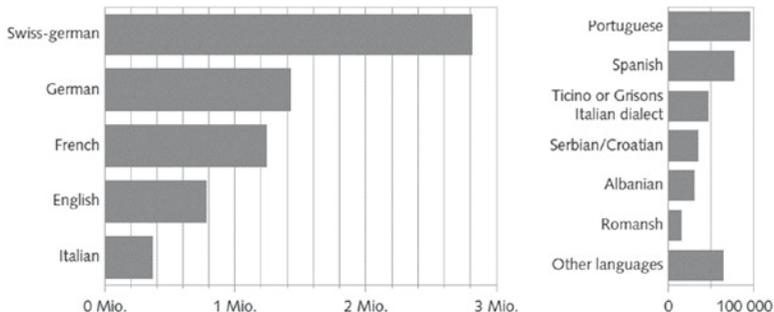
Because of this complexity, a governmental perspective has to ensure action across many areas to reinforce plurilingualism. Swiss language policy is accordingly based on five pillars and can be summarised as follows:

- **Develop** institutional plurilingualism, especially through:
 - translations of official documents,
 - procurement policy;
- **Promote** official languages (German/French/Italian) in public administration,
- **Encourage** comprehension and exchange between language communities,
- **Support** the bilingual cantons financially,
- **Protect and promote** the Italian and Romansh languages and cultures in the cantons of Ticino and Graubünden.

1.3 Languages at work and Swiss public administration as an employer

Languages usually spoken at work, 2013

In number of speakers



Employed persons, persons interviewed could indicate more than one language.

Source: FSO – Structural survey (SS)

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Fig. 2: Languages usually spoken at work in Switzerland

Figure 2 shows that many languages are spoken daily at work in Switzerland. Against expectations, the language spoken most frequently (66.2%) is a Swiss dialect of German (which itself consists of at least 22 dialects), followed by German in its official form (33.4%), then French (29.1%), English (18.2%) and Italian (8.7%). Romansh, the fourth national language, is spoken at work by 0.35% of the active working population.

This makes communication in Switzerland even more difficult. The German learned at school is the official version, not the dialect. Thus, the use of Swiss-German risks creating barriers to labour market entry and to comprehension between linguistic communities.

Swiss public administration therefore has to make substantial efforts to guarantee its plurilingualism due to the use of Swiss-German at work and in society and also to the fact that, despite its multilingualism, the Swiss linguistic model is predominantly monolingual.

In this sense, Swiss public administration needs to be a microcosm of Switzerland, establishing a balance between linguistic communities and official languages and acting as a mediator between different parties.

In numerical and cultural terms, Swiss public administration should ideally be representative of the Swiss population and the four languages regions as a whole. By this we mean developing and promoting plurilingualism in the public sector and ensuring that it is embedded in actions undertaken all over the country, in all fields of activity and at all institutional levels. Everyone involved is required to assume responsibility and take up this challenge.

2. The Swiss policy-based approach to multilingualism

2.1 The representation of linguistic communities in the Swiss federal administration

As already mentioned, at federal level the official and working languages are German, French and Italian, as well as Romansh when communicating with persons who speak Romansh.

	2008	2012	2013	2014
Total number of civil servants	34,293	34,559	35,259	35,853
German	72.6%	71.6%	71.4%	71.3%
French	20.4%	21.4%	21.5%	21.6%
Italian	6.7%	6.7%	6.8%	6.8%
Romansh	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%

Fig. 3: Distribution of civil servants by language, 2008-2014

These figures are based on information given by civil servants about the mother tongue which they declared when they joined public administration. Therefore, we do not know what other languages they speak and at what level.

The situation appears balanced (see paragraph 2.2 for targets), but in reality the figures vary widely between different departments, federal offices and top management. For example:

- Only 4.2% of employees in the National Office of Statistics are Italian speakers (the minimum target is 6.5%).
- Only 4.9% of employees in the office responsible for procurement procedure are French speakers (the minimum target is 21.5%).

Does that mean that Italian or French speakers are not interested in finance, in procurement or in taking part in important decisions? This is obviously not the case. If Swiss public administration wants to promote plurilingualism and to encourage minorities, it has to promote internally, combine training with career plans and put plurilingualism at the heart of the organisation.

These are the most important challenges that Swiss public administration is facing at this time.

2.2 The targets indicated by the 2014 Regulation (see the legal framework, www.plurilingua.admin.ch)

According to article 7 of the revised Regulation, which has been in force since October 2014, the representation of the various linguistic communities should aim to achieve the following targets:

German	68.5% - 70.5%
French:	21.5% - 23.5%
Italian:	6.5% - 8.5%
Romansh:	0.5% - 1.0%

These ranges, based on the 2010 Swiss Population Census, apply to the federal administration, the departments, the federal offices and their top managers. If we succeed in achieving these ranges, linguistic representation will be more balanced.

The 2008-2014 data relating to the mother tongue of the personnel of the Swiss confederation show that overall the objectives relating to representation of the linguistic communities have been reached in the federal administration.

However, further action is still needed. Major disparities between departments and between administrative units (federal offices) remain. With the exception of some administrative units, the Italian and Romansh speaking communities are particularly under-represented. Furthermore, the data shows that the representation of the various linguistic communities is not balanced within the upper salary levels (see details in the *Evaluation Report* of March 2015, www.plurilingua.admin.ch).

2.3 The Inter-Comprehension Strategy (see the Legal Framework, www.plurilingua.admin.ch)

In order to guarantee Swiss plurilingualism, as well as to ensure national cohesion and to achieve the goal of a federal administration which represents Switzerland in terms of its microcosm, the Swiss government has chosen the Inter-Comprehension Strategy.

Firstly, citizens may contact federal authorities in any one of the four national languages and receive a response in their own language.

Secondly, employees of the federal administration must be able to work in the official language of their choice and have the language skills required for multilingual communication. For example, senior managers must have a good working knowledge of at least one second official language and passive knowledge of a third official language.

Thus, Swiss public administration should be “multilingually receptive”; an employee has to be able to understand his or her colleagues, even if he or she does not speak their language fluently.

3. Framework for implementation and challenges

3.1 Overview of aims

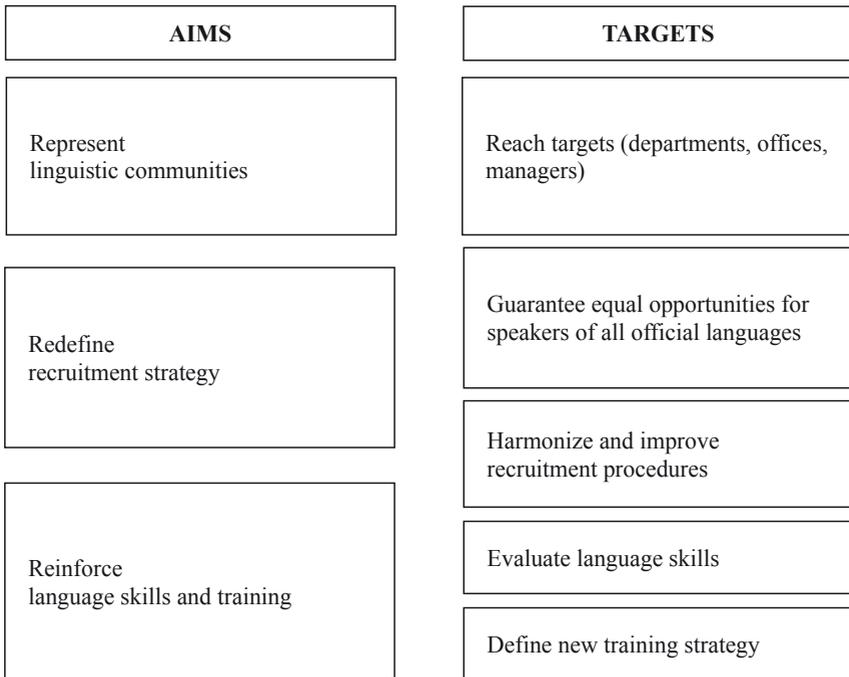


Fig. 4: Overview of aims

This chart shows the relationship between the various steps in the process of implementation. The focus is on developing a more transparent information system in order to:

- evaluate the aims and objectives of the revised regulation;
- monitor implementation;
- define the overall future strategy.

To achieve this, all the different elements of language policy which contribute to achieving a plurilingual public administration need to be included.

Implementing the key points allows us

- firstly, to establish a clear set of priorities;
- secondly, to transform recommendations into practical steps.

Thanks to this work, we can develop a system where plurilingualism becomes a common thread linking the implementation of various policies.

3.2 The challenges of implementation

To achieve our objectives, we all need to motivate and convince others. Governing by decree is not an option.

The trade-off between ideals and reality and the coherence between internal and external strategies have to be guaranteed.

Priorities, aims and objectives need to be turned into effective, efficient and concrete actions and results by building bridges between linguistic regions, external national organisations and the Swiss federal administration.

In summary, this work is underpinned by outlining the benefits and working together. By outlining the benefits, we mean that the new linguistic requirements of the Swiss Confederation as an employer help us to:

- show the benefits and advantages of linguistic skills;
- understand their economic value;
- reinforce national cohesion.

To reinforce the impact of our internal roles and processes we also need to be active at the international level by:

- sharing good practice;
- creating a dedicated network of public administration and organisations with similar functions;
- bringing together policy makers and researchers in a specific network.

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

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The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>