



LANGUAGES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN QUADRILINGUAL SWITZERLAND

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Foreign language learning in quadrilingual Switzerland is largely dependent on the linguist situation in the four different regions. Therefore the linguistic landscape of Switzerland is presented in the first section, especially with reference to the German and the Romansh-speaking parts. Section 2 gives an outline of foreign language learning in the compulsory educational system as it now presents itself after the implementation of the 1975 reform. In section 3 we find some reasons why the results of the improved structural and didactic-methodological approaches are far from promising, which led the Board of Educational Ministers to have an overall language concept developed, which is outlined in the final section. It is hoped that this new approach will turn Switzerland into a multilingual country of multilingual speakers.

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The problems I wish to address are the linguistic landscape of Switzerland on the one hand and language education in obligatory education on the other. In the first section I shall outline the language situation as it presents itself in the different linguistic areas, the German, the Romansh, the French and the Italian speaking parts of the country. These four regions are completely different with respect to their linguistic make-up, and especially the German and the Romansh speaking regions are quite unique in Europe. Therefore I shall outline these situations in greater detail than the ones of the French and Italian speaking parts, which are more like those in the neighbouring countries.

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In the second section I shall deal with foreign language learning in the educational system as it presents itself today, after the implementation of the recommendations of the national Board of Educational Ministers (BEM) of 1975. Although these changes were very important and set the ground for a new approach to foreign language learning in Switzerland, the results are not very promising. One of the reasons, to my opinion, is the situation the teachers and pupils are faced with when entering primary school and starting to learn to read and write. Especially in German-speaking Switzerland, this is strongly connected with learning a new language, or at least a new variety of the mother tongue. Therefore I shall outline the problems of primary school language education in the different parts of the country in section 3. The final section is dedicated to the overall language concept which was developed on behalf of the BEM (cf. EDK, 1998) and which should be implemented within the next few years. It is hoped that the new approaches with their didactic and methodological aspects, linked up with the necessary structural reforms will change Switzerland from a multilingual country of monolingual speakers into a multilingual country of multilingual speakers.

THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF SWITZERLAND

Switzerland is often referred to as a quadrilingual country, at least by those who know that there are four languages with official status. In the time of world-wide migration, we encounter, however, a multi-lingual situation. In the latest census, the total number of speakers of another than the four official languages was 8.9%. There are for example more than 1% of Turkish and Spanish speakers, which means that there are more native speakers of these languages than of Romansh, the official language with the fewest speakers. In each of the four language regions, there are primary schools where the percentage of pupils speaking the local language is very low, sometimes lower than 10%. It is obvious that the educational system also has to care for those children, and that such a multi-cultural situation has its effect on language learning in school. For the present purpose, however, I shall concentrate on the official languages, and give an account of their status and of the beliefs their speakers hold.

Swiss German

The 1990 nation-wide census showed that 63.6% (~4,265,000 inhabitants) of the Swiss population are native German speakers, out of which 96% are Swiss citizens. Having a closer look at these figures, we are already faced with a first major prob-

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lem. What does it mean to be a German speaker in Switzerland, and which form of German is considered to be the mother tongue? When filling in an official form in Switzerland, this has to be done in one of the official languages of the country, which also have the status of national languages (see below). It would be very contradictory, if the majority of the Swiss population opted for Swiss German as their mother tongue, i.e. claiming that they speak a language which is not officially recognised in Switzerland. Therefore, Swiss German is not even considered as one of the possible answers. Whether an inhabitant of Switzerland speaks Swiss German or another variety of German as his/her mother tongue does not show anywhere. Thus we do not know what the native language of the 170,000 non-Swiss German speakers really is. We can only infer that at least 4,095,000 Swiss grow up speaking Swiss German.

German-speaking Switzerland is quite different from Germany or Austria with respect to the status of dialect. It is one of the few countries in Western Europe in which the dialect shows much higher prestige than the "standard language", others being Norway (cf. Watts 1999: 67, note 1), Luxembourg (Keller, 1961: 31), and the Romansh-speaking part of Switzerland (see below). Dialect is used in nearly all facets of everyday life, not just as a subordinate form, but as the only possible form. Germans speaking Swiss would never dream of speaking in standard German to each other, regardless of context or situation. Standard German is only employed for writing and as the language of public lectures, sermons and tuition, including some programmes on radio and television. Thus, it is quite strange to have a concept of "standard language" if this is not the standard at all.

Swiss German (or *Schwyzertütsch*) is a somewhat artificial name for more than 30 different varieties of dialect spoken in Switzerland. Some of the features of these dialects are also found beyond the political frontiers in the neighbouring areas of Austria (Vorarlberg), Lichtenstein, France (Alsace), and Germany (Baden-Württemberg), where we would not speak of Swiss German, and where the prestige of the dialect is not as high as in Switzerland.

Most of the Swiss dialects are High Alemannic, with some Highest Alemannic dialects in the remote alpine valleys, the big exception being the dialect of the City of Basel and its surroundings, which is Low Alemannic. However, it is still considered to be Swiss German. The difference between all these Swiss German dialects is not such as to make them mutually unintelligible nor even as to make communication difficult. On the other hand, there is such a linguistic distance between

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any of the Swiss dialects and Standard German, which makes mutual comprehension very difficult if not impossible. Apart from considerable lexical and phonological differences, there are morphological differences with respect to verbs and nouns, and enormous syntactic ones. All Swiss dialects have just a two-tense system (present and present perfect) and some but not all of them show tendencies to follow French word order rather than the German one.

Thus the label "Swiss German" is more a social than a linguistic one. It is the attitude of its speakers towards the dialect and towards Standard German that defines the concept. Each dialect shows its idiosyncrasies and there is a lot of joking, mocking and teasing going on among the speakers of the different variants. However, considering their Swiss dialect a distinguishing feature against non-Swiss German speakers shows again, that Swiss German is defined along social attitudes.

Although these dialects are quite old, they have never developed their own written forms, as was the case for the Romansh dialects (see below) and there is only a small amount of dialect literature. In view of the rise of the Nazi regime there were attempts to develop a writing system for Switzerland. The political system of the country, which is very federalistic, however, has made it virtually impossible to decide on one dialect as the basis for a Swiss German writing system. It is often claimed that the standard languages of Europe are 'synectochic dialects' (cf. Joseph 1987), i.e. they have developed from one dialect and have been given an official status which is valid for all other dialects as well. Therefore it is understandable that there is strong resistance against any other dialect than one's own being granted such a status. One solution would have been Dieth's *Schwyzertütschi Dialäktschrift* (1938) in which he suggested an orthographic system with which every dialect could be represented as such. As the different forms are mutually intelligible in their oral form, they would also be so in their written representation. Unfortunately for some and luckily for others, this system was never implemented and today it is hardly known, even to those who write in dialect. This is nowadays quite common among teenagers, who want to be free in expressing themselves after having been forced into the writing system of Standard German or Written German (*Schriftdeutsch*) as it is often called in Switzerland.

Standard German is often considered their first foreign language by native Swiss German speakers and they only use it when there is need for a foreign language, i.e. when they speak to Italian or French speaking compatriots or to foreigners who know Standard German but do not master any of the

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Swiss dialects, or (less and less frequently) in official debates. This attitude to Standard German or dialect respectively is constantly reproduced in the first years of school, where the standard version is nearly exclusively used for the purposes of writing and reading, thus helping to construct the two varieties of language having distinctly different social functions.

Romansh (Swiss Romansh, Rhaeto-Romance)

Romansh has been one of Switzerland's four national languages since 1938 and in a constitutional referendum held on 10 March, 1992 the Swiss people granted it the status of a partially official language of the Swiss confederation. What do we mean when we talk of a national language on the one hand and an official language on the other? To have official status, a language must fulfil certain functions. It must be able to be used in public debate, be it in parliament or in the media, and it must be able to be used as a written medium. To be a national language, it is recognised as the mother tongue and the language used in everyday life by native Swiss citizens. It is an important factor of national identity and it is by no means surprising that Romansh was granted national status just before World War II. In the thirties, however, there was no question of Romansh becoming an official language, as there was no standardised version of the language and the problem of which of the five varieties of Romansh spoken in Switzerland should be chosen seemed to be an unsolvable one. As for the first function there would have been no problem, as the different forms are mutually intelligible to a very large degree. With respect to writing the same is true, and each of the five varieties already had their writing system, but up to today the authorities believe that an official language has to be a standardised version with a strict set of rules operating on a limited set of elements. The present standardised version, called Rumantsch Grischun, was only developed in the 1980s (cf. Schmid 1982, 1989). As it has been put together from all five varieties, it is not felt to be the mother tongue by any of the language communities. The same, however, is true for all the speakers of one of the Swiss German dialects with respect to standard German. The situation would be completely different today, if the attempt of Eugen Dieth (1938) of the University of Zurich, who developed an orthography in which every Swiss dialect could be written, would have been put into practice (see above).

As there is an enormous amount of misconceptions about Romansh, even among linguists, let me give a short account of the language and the beliefs people have. Native speakers of one of the varieties of Romansh are of the opinion that

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their dialect is unique. You often hear them say that it is virtually impossible to understand a speaker of the other idioms. A closer look at the situation, however, proves the contrary. If you ask such a native speaker to give an account of the differences, he/she normally ends up with a view differences in pronunciation and a list of lexemes. The same people, however, claim, that it is quite easy for them to understand Romanian when they happen to hear it spoken in the news on television and they are proud that they have an advantage over the non-Romansh-speaking Swiss.

A dialect is often felt to be an important if not the most important feature for ethnic identity. Depending on the situation, the basis for such an identity may range from the local variety of the dialect which distinguishes the speakers from others to being a speaker of Romansh. Within the Engadin (the alpine valley of the river Inn) an inhabitant makes a clear distinction between Puter and Valader. As soon as he is in another Romansh-speaking part of the Grisons, he/she is proud to be a speaker of Ladin. In the rest of Switzerland he/she then insists on being a Romansh speaker, and the differences, which were claimed to pose insurmountable problems become inexistent. When being abroad, most Romansh speakers just feel to be Swiss, speaking one of the national languages, without going into much detail. What they might claim is that they speak a language unique to Switzerland, spoken by just some 65,000 Swiss citizens in the canton of Graubünden (Grisons). I have never heard them mention the more than ten times as many speakers of Romansh living in Italy. This may be a reason, but no excuse, that also linguists do not mention it. In David Crystal's *Encyclopaedia of Language* (1997: 37) Romansh only exists in Switzerland "spoken by fewer than 50,000" and Watts (1999: 73) claims that "the problem lies (...) in the lack of a hinterland beyond the borders of Switzerland."

Romansh (or Rhaeto-Romance) is a Romance language such as Catalan, French, Italian, Occitan, Portuguese, Romanian, Sardinian, Spanish and the now extinct Dalmatian. It refers to three language groups in different parts of the Alps, Dolomitian Ladin spoken by some 30,000 Italian citizens in Alto Adige, Friulian with about 700,000 speakers in the area around Udine, and roughly 65,000 Swiss citizens in the canton of Graubünden. Their common characteristics distinguish them quite clearly from the Italian dialects spoken in the north of Italy. The language dates back to 15 BC, when after the Roman conquest of the Alpine area called Rhaetia, Latin began to blend with the pre-Roman languages. What these languages were is yet unclear, as there are traces of languages as remote as Semitic. By the end of the 5th century Romansh was

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spoken in a very large area, stretching from the Danube to the Adriatic. With migration of German-speaking peoples from the north (5th to 10th century) and from the west (13th to 14th century) Rhaeto-Romance rapidly lost ground. This progress has never stopped and with improved means of transportation, mass-communication, industry, tourism, etc. it is to be feared, that Romansh-speaking population might be reduced even further.

According to the 1990 census 0.6% of the Swiss population are Romansh speakers, divided into five different idioms, as the regional variants are usually referred to: Sursilvan (43%), Sutsilvan (3%), Surmiran (8%), Puter (13%) and Valader (13%). In great contrast to the Swiss German dialects, each of the regional variants has developed its own writing system and each one has its literature. The local idiom is not only taught in school but it is also used as the medium of instruction. Thus it is not surprising that the standardised version Rumantsch Grischun has not yet been accepted as the official Romansh language. The five idioms themselves would have fulfilled the functions required of an official language, and a lot of native speakers of one of the varieties do not see a need for yet another variety.

Most of the daily broadcasting time of 10 hours (radio) and 45 minutes (television) is in one of the idioms and not in Rumantsch Grischun. It is much preferred to hear another idiom (which they supposedly don't understand) than to listen to the artificial standard variety. Though the four regional weekly newspapers are served by a special news agency in Rumantsch Grischun, three of them are written in one of the idioms.

It is thus not surprising that the local idioms do not stand in competition with the standard variety, i.e. with Rumantsch Grischun. However, there is great competition between Romansh and the Swiss German dialect of the Grisons, whereas standard German does not play any role in everyday life, apart from it being one of the media of instruction at certain stages of obligatory education. For a native speaker of Romansh it is virtually impossible to grow up monolingually, since the local German dialect is omnipresent.

French and Italian speaking Switzerland

The 20.1% Swiss citizens of French mother tongue show a completely different attitude towards dialect from that of the German or Romansh speaking Swiss. For them, the standard variety is believed to reflect a higher degree of education, learning, culture, sophistication than any dialect, which is seen as a subordinate, rural, backward, antiquated, poor form of French.

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They often believe that the French dialects are now extinct, though they can easily be found in the Savoy Alps or the remote areas in French speaking Switzerland.

In effect, the French-speaking Swiss have simply taken over the French language-ideological contempt for dialect. In that alternative ideology, a dialect is perceived to be a sign of rusticity, lack of education, backwardness, poverty, etc., whereas speaking standard French is associated with culture, sophistication, an openness towards Europe and the world, and, above all, the centralizing tendency of political organization within France. (Watts 1999: 32)

Due to this completely different attitude towards dialects, the situation for language acquisition and language learning is by no means comparable to the ones in the Swiss German or Romansh speaking part of Switzerland. Up to the time when they have to learn their first foreign language at school they are not faced with the need for another language nor with another variety of their mother tongue.

The same is partially true for the 4.5% Swiss citizens of Italian mother tongue. The percentage of native Italian speakers among the inhabitants of Switzerland is much higher (7.6%), due to the 260,000 Italian speaking guest workers, who live in all parts of the country. However, for the present purpose we only have to consider those who live in the southern part, in the Ticino, where Italian is the official cantonal language. Though there is still a large number of dialects in the rural areas, the commercial and cultural centres use a form of standardised Italian. The Ticinesi are more oriented towards Milano in Italy, not only commercially and culturally, but also with respect to higher education. Until recently there was no Italian speaking university in Switzerland and if they did not want to be educated in a foreign language in other parts of Switzerland, the students had to (and for a number of subjects still have to) go to Milano or to another Italian university. The attitude of the Italian speaking Swiss towards dialect is not as contemptuous as the one of the French speaking Swiss, but it is also not comparable to the ideology of the German speaking population.

In this section I have tried to show that the status of the local language and the attitude of the speakers towards their mother-tongue is quite different, depending on the linguistic area of the country. For Romansh speaker there is a practical need for a second language at a very early stage. For the Swiss German speakers this need arises when starting to read and write, that is if we consider Standard German to be a foreign language. They might start acquiring another form of Ger-

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man through the media at an earlier stage, which certainly influences their patterns of language acquisition and language learning, but for which there is no real need. In the French and Italian speaking parts of Switzerland, the dialects have much lower prestige so that a form of the standard variety is acquired as the first language. For the purposes of everyday life, no other language is required and the children are faced with the task of learning a foreign language at a much later stage.

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has had a long tradition in foreign language learning in school as well as in the private sector. It has always been considered a necessity to be able to communicate with the compatriots of the other language regions and more recently the knowledge of international languages has become a prerequisite for success in the world of science, commerce and culture if Switzerland does not want to become an isolated island in Europe and in the world. This may have led to the fact that the Swiss are often confronted with the myth that every citizen is at least bilingual and that languages are no problem. Depending on the definition of bilingualism this assumption is really but a myth. The majority of the Swiss are not able to communicate freely in a foreign language, though they might have some passive knowledge. The question is how the language learning tradition and the relatively low level of second language competence go together. The majority of the Swiss learnt (or should have learnt) their languages quite some time ago, when language teaching was rather poor and started at a very late stage. I, for myself, was only offered my first foreign language course in eighth grade at the age of fourteen, after having to start with Latin first, which had a strong effect on the way we were taught French. Had I left school after the then compulsory eight years, I would have ended up with one year of French, i.e. one year of French grammar without any practice in the use of the language.

It is a curiosity of Switzerland that every canton has its own school system and is more or less free to choose which languages they offer and at what stage. Up to the seventies this was normally done in secondary school and the language offered was a second national language, mostly French for the German and Italian speakers and German for the French speaking population. The federalistic educational system also means that secondary school does not start at the same age in the different cantons. This fact caused enormous difficulties for school children whose families moved from one canton to the other, especially with respect to foreign languages. The increase in inland migration in the late sixties was one of the

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factors which led some cantonal authorities to start pilot-projects in selected schools in which they started to teach the first foreign language in grade four or five. Others, and probably more important factors were the guidelines of the Council of Europe and new results from research in linguistics, psycholinguistics and psychology, as well as positive reports from countries where languages are taught at an earlier stage.

To start these projects, and later to implement them for all the pupils was by no means easy. In nearly every canton there were opponents who asked for a referendum against foreign languages in primary school, which is a very time-consuming process. Surprisingly, however, there was no single referendum in which the people voted against the government's intention.

Initiated by the teachers' union the Board of Educational Ministers (BEM) set up a study group for the nation-wide co-ordination of foreign language teaching in compulsory education. This was the beginning of a fundamental reform in the Swiss educational system. Though it was only concerned with foreign language teaching, it was the beginning of a better co-ordination of the 26 different school systems, which is still in progress.

On 30 October 1975, the BEM recommended to the cantons a structural reform as well as a reform concerning subject matter and methodology. With respect to structural changes they recommended that tuition in the second national language should start no later than in the fifth, preferable in the fourth grade, that the goals, the subject matters, the study plans, as well as the course books should be co-ordinated up to the end of compulsory education. The additional lessons should not burden the children with more work, i.e. other subjects had to be reduced. As second language tuition should be offered by the primary school teacher him/herself, this asked for extra teacher training, and furthermore, there was a need to develop new course material. Most, but not all of these structural changes have been put into practice by now and the teachers can now work along the methodological guidelines which had been developed by the study group and recommended by the BEM.

The reform concerning subject matter and methodology had an enormous effect on foreign language learning, not only for primary school and secondary school I, the compulsory nine years of education, but also for secondary school II (college level) and tertiary education. In the following paragraphs I shall outline the major changes, as they were recommended by the BEM and have been implemented by the cantonal authorities.

Didactic and methodological aspects

The objectives are essentially based on skills rather than on knowledge. The main objectives are no longer the teaching of the knowledge of the formal system of the foreign language, but rather the development of skills that enable the pupils to communicate with speakers of the other language. The students should learn to listen and understand, to read and understand, to speak, and to write. They should acquire certain strategies and attitudes that allow them to make the best use of what they already know. To this purpose the most important element is the attitude towards the foreign language and its users. The pupils must be made aware that language lessons are not just a drag but that they will enable them to get to know other cultures, to meet people from other parts of Switzerland and from abroad. The best means to reach this positive attitude are contacts with speakers of the other language. These can be facilitated by class exchanges, mutual visits, school camps, and sports competitions in other linguistic regions, but also by establishing pen friend relationships or e-mail contacts.

Communicative skills are essential on the oral as well as the written level, but they are only part of the communicative competence. The pupils should be made aware that they are able to and thus should wish and dare to communicate with the limited material they have at their disposal. It is their own responsibility to take part in the linguistic exchange. This is quite different to the 'traditional' class room situations, where students were asked to translate lexemes from one language to the other, to fill in written exercises with only one correct solution, to re-enact set dialogues, to repeat difficult sentences, to read aloud unseen passages, to play games, to learn songs by heart and sing them, or even to translate whole passages into the foreign language. There are still schools in Switzerland where this task is the only one tested in the final exam, which enables them to enter university. As these schools are not part of compulsory education they have not yet been affected by the reform, but it is to be hoped that they will have to re-think their methodology at one stage.

In the new framework there is much more weight put on oral performance, i.e. the main stress is no longer on writing. In my opinion, this is the requirement for change that is most difficult to fulfil, as the teacher now has to evaluate the pupils' performance in a field he is not used to. Before the reform the final reports were just based on the written performance and the oral contribution was only considered if the teacher was undecided whether to round the mean up or down. Obviously this new method of assessments influences the

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way of teaching. The pupils are not yet used to the fact that they are assessed for something they have not been explicitly taught, that they have in black and white and that they can learn at home. Until recently there have been no guidelines for the teachers on how to scale communicative competence. Schneider and North (1999) developed a system of communicative parameters as part of National Research Programme 33, and although it is geared to the meeting point between obligatory education and further education, it can be applied to lower levels as well. However, with respect to the teaching of oral competence and its evaluation there is still a lot to be done in teacher training courses.

There is also more stress on listening and reading comprehension than before. I was quite surprised when a pupil told me a few months ago, after having done extremely well in a listening comprehension exercise, that if you want to talk a lot you must first learn to listen. She has realised how important this skill is and has developed the right attitude. This is not always the case with language students, though. They hear the languages used in pop songs and films all day long, but when they are asked what they have been listening to, there is not much they remember. Although they are able to understand far more than they can express themselves, they first have to learn that listening as well as reading is part of the communicative competence.

The students should also be made aware of the different aspects of oral and written language and that these follow different rules. Spoken language is not just an acoustic form of the written language, an attitude which held up to the seventies, but it has its idiosyncrasies. Although the correct usage is one of the objectives of language learning, the spoken form is a means to try out the language material that has already been acquired. The pupils should not be afraid of making mistakes or of being silenced by the teacher's pedantic corrections, but they should learn from their mistakes and improve progressively.

The reformed approach with its shift of weight towards the oral, communicative competence was often criticised by people who thought that there was no room for grammar anymore. This is not the case at all and grammar still has its importance. However, it does not appear as the first and most important element anymore and it is not studied for its own purpose. Its function is one of service to communication and its elements are discussed when there is need for it, thus facilitating a progressive approach to the understanding of the underlying system.

Apart from these didactic and methodological aspects, other changes with respect to the subject matter had to be con-

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sidered. Above all there was a strong need for new teaching material to be developed, which was realised in quite a short time in all the linguistic regions of Switzerland. It would have been a chance to co-ordinate the new course books across the borders of the cantons, however this was only achieved partially. Though all the new material took the above mentioned recommendations into consideration, a smooth change from one educational system to the other is still not guaranteed. All the books had to be tested over a lengthy period of time and some of them passed the test, while others have already been abolished in some cantons, which made the permeability even worse.

The best material is not good enough if the teachers have not been trained to use it and to apply the new methods. There have been great efforts in training, for the new generation of teachers as well as for the existing ones and the results have been very promising. However, the training was restricted to the primary school teachers, whereas those teaching on secondary level 1 and 2 had no extra tuition. This leaves the authorities with the yet unsolved problem that on the secondary level pupils have to be taught by people unfamiliar with the new methods and the different competences that have been acquired in primary school.

These difficulties asked for an overall concept of language learning in Switzerland, not just one for the primary school. This was the next step in the reform of language teaching. The general concept, which will be illustrated in the next section, was presented to the cantonal education authorities in 1998. However, it will surely take another decade till it is put into practice.

Structural reform

Based on the didactic and methodological aspects there were a lot of structural changes to be carried out before the new methods could be applied. First of all it was a lengthy political process, hindered by numerous referenda, to allow the schools to start the first foreign language in grade 4 or 5, a process which took up to twenty years in certain cantons. One of the major objections was that the pupils should not be loaded with more work, i.e. that the timetables should not be enlarged, which of course meant a reduction of other subjects. This has not yet been successfully solved as the teachers themselves still believe that the syllabus is overloaded and that the pupils are overtaxed. One of the results of this is that the achievements in the second language should not be considered a criterion for any selection procedures whatsoever, a position of language tuition in primary school which might well be counter-productive.

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A further aspect which asks for structural reforms is the claim that every pupil should learn at least one foreign language in the course of his education, even those in the lowest streams. This of course leads again to similar problems outlined above for the general primary school level and the time has not yet come for those changes.

First results of the reformed approach

In spite of all the efforts that had been made to improve the structural and methodological framework for second language teaching and learning the results did not turn out to be very promising. After two years of tuition in the first foreign language in primary school the competence of the pupils was rather poor and a great many teachers of the secondary school level deplored the fact that the pupils they had to deal with were not much more than false beginners and that they would be better off if they could start with real beginners. This attitude is partially the result of the secondary school teachers not being trained in the new approach to language teaching on the one hand. On the other hand the low competence also shows that the methods suggested might not be the best for Swiss schools.

Another factor that should not be forgotten, however, are the expectations that especially researchers have with respect to second language teaching and learning in a multilingual country. Although they always point out that Switzerland is a multilingual country of essentially monolingual language users, they expect the educational system to produce bilingual or even multilingual speakers. The present education system cannot achieve this, but to be fair, one should not forget that the competence in foreign languages of those Swiss students who attended school to the age of nineteen is much higher than the competence of the students of the same age in the neighbouring countries.

Since the end of the 80s, based on the results that had been achieved in Canada, researchers in Switzerland have been arguing for different immersion schemes, i.e. for bilingual education. So far, however, not very much has been done, especially not in the public sector of education. Thinking of the resistance against an earlier start of foreign languages in primary schools and of the numerous referenda asked for by the people, one might imagine that the implementation of immersion schemes will not be easy. Even if there was no resistance the problem still remains as where to get the teachers from. As mentioned above, there are not many bilingual speakers in the monolingual areas, which means that the teachers would have to be recruited in other parts of the country. This

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would be a very difficult undertaking as in-land migration across the language boarder is not very common.

A major factor that influences language teaching and learning in Switzerland is the linguistic situation presented above, esp. the one in the German-speaking part, whose language does not exist in a written form. In the next section I shall outline the advantages and disadvantages such a situation has with respect to language teaching in general.

PRIMARY SCHOOL LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

At the beginning of primary school education the pupils are faced with two quite different tasks. First of all they have to learn to read and write, which in itself is very demanding. As they have no command of a language that has its own writing system, they also have to learn a new language, or at least a new variety of their mother tongue. This form of German is called *Schriftdeutsch*, i. e. "German for writing" or "written German" and is a form of standard German. A lot of the German-speaking Swiss consider this their first foreign language, a language that has to be learnt. However, this is not quite true, as they have been faced with similar forms of German through television or radio since early childhood and that they have some command of such forms especially with respect to pronunciation through partial immersion by the media. If Werlen et al. (1997:248) state that

In relation to the constructive process of teaching and learning the language as a subject in the school curriculum we have observed in the first two grades of primary school that any oral knowledge of Standard German that might have been acquired through 'TV-language' is substituted by Swiss Standard German, which is oriented toward the teacher and practice of reading.

they might be right with respect to TV-German but they are totally wrong with respect to Standard German. The TV-language the children are immersed into is not Standard German. To the same degree that Swiss television and especially Swiss radio make extensive use of the dialect this is done on German television. What the children hear is a mixture of different German dialects and sociolects, as they watch children's programmes, shows and soap operas. They normally do not watch political debates, instructional programmes or the news, where Standard German might be used.

In the process of learning to read and write the pupils also learn the standard written system of *Hochdeutsch* (High

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German'), the reference system that had been developed in the time of reformation with the spreading of Luther's bible and the politically conditioned orthographical norm implemented after the foundation of the German Reich in 1871. However, this is exactly the same task that German pupils are faced with and struggle with. In Switzerland, as well as e.g. in Bavaria this is mostly done by means of the local dialect, at least in the first two grades of primary school. The form of Standard German as a written medium which the Swiss learn is, with a small number of idiosyncrasies, the same as the one used in Germany and at the end of compulsory schooling the written competence of Swiss students is by no means lower than the one of their peers in Germany. They do not *write* Swiss Standard German, as is often claimed by researchers. Their pronunciation, however, is typically Swiss and it is justified to say that the Swiss *speak* Swiss Standard German. This specific pronunciation has a long political tradition and is still a requirement for radio and tv speakers. In the brochure *Deutsch sprechen am Radio* (Burri et al., 1993) they are reminded that they work for a Swiss radio station and that even in areas where Standard German (i.e. the news) is used, the respective pronunciation should be used.

Although German is considered a foreign language by a lot of Swiss-German speakers, it has not got the same status of a foreign language as for instance French, Italian, or English. It is primarily a written medium for daily use within Switzerland and only in second place a medium for oral communication. Thus it is not surprising that they rather use English than German when talking to someone who does not understand dialect.

The situation in German-speaking Switzerland has advantages as well as disadvantages. The main advantage is that the pupils are faced with foreign language learning at a very early stage in their lives. Through the lessons in which they learn Standard German they can develop second language learning strategies which they can later make use of when they start with their first foreign language. These acquired techniques and strategies enable them to learn a foreign language in a far more efficient way than would be possible if they had to acquire the techniques at a much later stage, together with the new language. However, the methods they learn are those for a written foreign language. This was compatible with the way foreign languages were taught up to the seventies but they have now proved to be a stumbling stone for the new approaches, where oral communication is favoured.

To an outsider it might seem that German-speaking Switzerland is the ideal setting for immersion programmes, i.e. immersion into "Hochdeutsch" (High German). If High German

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were used in all frames education, not just in the activity of teaching and learning, but also in the activities of organisation, metacommunication, and surrogate parents (cf. Watts 1998), the children would become bilingual Swiss German – German speakers. However, this would only be the case if the teacher spoke High German. As mentioned above this is not the case as the majority of Swiss primary school teachers have gone through the system where Swiss Standard German was spoken. It would mean to get teachers from Germany and apart from the fact that this is politically and economically not feasible, the question would remain as to what German dialects these teachers should speak. If the Swiss situation with respect to High German was one of immersion, this method of foreign language teaching or language acquisition would not face such hostility from a part of the population.

Language education in other parts of the country

The situation in the German-speaking part of Switzerland is unique. In the three other linguistic areas, the first writing system the children have to learn is always the one of their mother tongue, even in the Grisons. They are only faced with another language at a later stage, i.e. in grades four and five. The big advantage for the inhabitants of the Grisons is that at a very early stage they are immersed into their regional dialect of Swiss German and that they unconsciously get used to acquiring (rather than learning) another language. Most of them are bilingual Romansch – Swiss German speakers. For them, Standard German (and more recently Rumantsch Grischun) have a similar status than Standard German has for the German-speaking Swiss.

Apart from the bilingual communities close to the French-German language barrier,¹ the situation in the French and Italian-speaking areas is one similar to France and Italy, where the first foreign language is learnt in school and not even by all the pupils. For them it is no prerequisite to know a foreign language in order to survive in modern society.

In view of the partial failure of the reformed structural as well as methodological approaches to language learning the Board of Education Ministers commissioned a study group in 1997, whose task it was to develop an overall language concept (EDK, 1998), which I shall outline in the final section.

THE OVERALL LANGUAGE CONCEPT

¹ There are no bilingual Italian-French or Italian-German communities due to the geographical situation.

It is not the objective of language teaching in compulsory school education to guarantee proficiency in the different languages but to give an impetus for further improvement of each individual's language competence. The pupils should acquire basic knowledge which can immediately be put to use and which they can develop autonomically for their personal needs. The

main objective is therefore to guarantee a competence in language learning, a competence which every school leaver should have to enable him to improve his competence in a specific language or to learn a new language when required to do so.

The knowledge of foreign languages has become a key competence in modern society with immediate financial consequences. Grin (1999) shows that competence of a foreign language averages a higher income of 10.23% for French speaking Swiss knowing English up to 18.08% difference for German speakers knowing English. But even with respect to the national languages, there are enormous differences in income of for instance 14.07% for German speakers knowing French, or 13.82% for French speakers with competence in German. Apart from economical reasons, there are of course other reasons for wanting to know another language, such as an understanding of other cultures, world-wide communication, tourism, etc., all of them requiring the learning competence acquired in school.

Based on the results of the research group the BEM made the following recommendation with respect to which and how many languages should be taught, the objectives of foreign language tuition, the chronological order of the languages and at what age the respective tuition should start, methods and evaluation as well as the consequences for teacher training and the development of teaching material.

In the remainder of this section I shall outline the fifteen principles recommended to the cantonal authorities. The first four are binding, principles 5 to 12 recommend possible means and ways to fulfil them, whereas 13 to 15 deal with the consequences.

1. Every pupil learns, apart from the local national language at least one more national language and English; they must be given the opportunity to learn a further national language or another foreign language.

Local national language for the German-speaking Swiss is Standard German, but the dialect and an awareness of its position in the linguistic landscape of Switzerland has to be taken into account as well. For the pupils in the Grisons the national language still is their local idiom (Valader, Putèr, etc.) and not Rumantsch Grischun. Whether this might ever change is not sure. The option of English instead of another national language is not allowed, however, the order in which the languages are introduced is free. The most popular among the non-national languages are Spanish and Russian at present, but any other language could be considered if the political or social situation asks for it.

2. The cantons guarantee the transparency and the coherence of foreign language learning nation-wide in agreeing on binding objectives which have to be attained by the end of compulsory education.

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The following diagram shows the levels that have to be reached, according to the reference frame of the European Community (cf. Council of Europe, 1996). As the respective descriptors had been developed for foreign languages and had to be adjusted for the first national language, in multi-cultural Switzerland with a lot of non-native speakers of the local national language the original descriptors are a valuable instrument, though.



FIGURE 1
 Levels of nation-wide language learning that have to be reached according to the reference frame of the European Community

3. *In the German-speaking area French is in principle the second national language, in the French-speaking part it is German. The Ticino and the Grisons have to take the specific situation into account.*

This principle is strongly recommended, but it does not force the canton Uri, which has always had Italian as the first foreign language, to change its priorities.

4. *The cantons respect and promote the languages present in their school population and integrate them into their curricula.*

Due to international migration there are a lot of children growing up bilingually whose first language is not the local national language. As a sound knowledge of one's mother tongue is very important for the learning of other languages, these different mother tongues have to be promoted. Apart from the function of identity a language has for its speakers, the respectful treatment of minority languages gives them more prestige.

5. *The pupils are faced with other languages as early as in kindergarten. In the second grade of primary school the latest, they start learning another language than their local national language. The second foreign language starts in fifth grade, the third in seventh grade the latest.*

This is quite a change with respect to the 1975 recommendations, where instruction of the first foreign language did not start before fourth or fifth grade. Linguistic research has shown that the earlier a child starts to be multilingual the better, and that the children are not overtaxed. They can well distinguish between different languages used by different speakers and they employ them without mixing them. The main aim of early language immersion is to wake the awareness of and interest in other forms of communication.

6. The cantons decide on the order of the foreign languages they offer in accordance with inter-cantonal agreements. Independent of this order they still have to reach the objectives (outlined in principle 2 above).

The canton of Zürich has just started with pilot projects at different schools where English will be introduced (together with computing) in the first year of primary school. Though there was some objection at first, more and more communities want to become part of this trial phase. It seems that the majority has now realised how important it is to start foreign languages as early as possible.

7. To secure the link between the different school levels within the canton, they have to set up binding objectives for each language for the end of primary school with respect to listening comprehension, reading comprehension, communicative competence, oral production of connected speech and written production.

In most cantons primary schools are comprehensive, whereas secondary 1 is streamed into up to four different streams. It is a necessary prerequisite that the different schools know exactly what the level of their potential students is, or at least what it should be.

8. Tuition in all the languages contained in the curriculum has to be didactically co-ordinated.

9. Different forms of bi- or multilingual tuition have to be promoted, tested and assessed.

This is a strong credo for different immersion schemes and it is to be hoped that they will be implemented on a large scale. So far, these methods have only been considered in a few schools, mostly in the private sector or in bilingual areas, especially in the Grisons. However, the problem of finding competent teachers who can teach their subject in another language still remains, especially due to the fact that cross-linguistic inland migration is not much favoured among the Swiss.

10. All the pupils should have the opportunity to be part of language exchange schemes, which are integrated in the other language-pedagogical activities.

11. *In accordance with methodological diversification alternative language learning and teaching methods should be used, promoted and developed.*

What these methods are is deliberately left open. The best method is useless if the teacher or the learners object to it. The partners have to feel at ease with what they are doing and should not be forced into a methodological cage. The term alternative is very relative and can even mean traditional for someone who has never been faced with other methods.

12. *The cantons have to guarantee transparency between language learning processes inside and outside the educational system, for instance by means of the European Language Portfolio.*

The European language portfolio (cf. Schneider and North, 1999) is still very new and it will take some time to get used to it. However, when establishing the descriptors with about 300 teachers, who had never worked within this framework at all, it proved that there is great agreement on how to assess the performance of the pupils and that applying these methods will not pose any problems.

The remaining three principles deal with the consequences that overall concept has with respect to teacher training. As mentioned above, each canton has supreme authority over its educational system as well as over teacher training. Therefore it is not self-evident that the efforts are co-ordinated and that co-operation is a necessary prerequisite.

13. *The cantons, co-operating on an inter-cantonal level, facilitate the realisation of the recommendations mentioned above by adjusting basic and further teacher training to the new conditions.*

14. *The cantons integrate stays in other linguistic areas into their teacher training programmes.*

15. *The cantons, co-operating on an inter-cantonal level, facilitate the common objectives by developing new material and establishing regional resource centres.*

The realisation of the overall language concept is in its initial phase and it is too early to see any results. The spontaneous reaction of some of the cantonal educational ministries, however, shows that it can be hoped that it will not take as long as it took with the realisation of the 1975 recommendations, some of which have not yet been implemented in some areas. Whether the new approach to language learning and language teaching will change the linguistic landscape of Switzerland fundamentally is not to be foreseen. We can only state that without these efforts, Switzerland would never

change from a multilingual country of monolingual speakers into a multilingual country of multilingual speakers.

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Jezici i učenje jezika u četverojezičnoj Švicarskoj

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Učenje stranih jezika u četverojezičnoj Švicarskoj uglavnom ovisi o jezičnom stanju u četiri različite regije. Stoga se u prvom dijelu rada prikazuje jezični krajolik Švicarske, s posebnim osvrtom na područja u kojima se govori njemačkim i retoromanskim jezikom. U drugom je dijelu pregled učenja stranih jezika u obvezatnom izobrazbenom sustavu, onakvog kakvo je danas, nakon provođenja reforme 1975. godine. U trećem dijelu mogu se naći razlozi zbog kojih unaprijeđeni strukturni i didaktičko-metodološki pristupi ne obećavaju mnogo, što je i navelo Odbor ministara izobrazbe da predlože izradu sveopće jezične koncepcije koja je prikazana u posljednjem odjeljku. Autor se nada da će novi pristup pretvoriti Švicarsku u višejezičnu zemlju višejezičnih govornika.

Viersprachigkeit und Sprachunterricht in der Schweiz

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Der Fremdsprachenunterricht in der viersprachigen Schweiz ist in größtem Maße von der in der jeweiligen Region gesprochenen Sprache abhängig. Daher präsentiert der erste Teil der Arbeit die spezifische schweizerische Sprachlandschaft mit den vier verschiedenen Regionen, wobei die besondere Aufmerksamkeit des Autors jenen Gebieten gilt, in denen Deutsch und Rätoromanisch gesprochen werden. Im zweiten Teil der Arbeit erhält der Leser eine Übersicht über den Fremdsprachenunterricht innerhalb der pflichtmäßigen Schulausbildung, wie er heute nach der Schulreform aus dem Jahre 1975 in Kraft ist. Im dritten Teil werden Gründe angeführt, die erklären, warum auch verbesserte strukturelle und didaktisch-methodologische Ansätze keinen großen Erfolg versprechen. Dies wiederum veranlasste die Schweizerische Konferenz der kantonalen Erziehungsdirektoren, eine allgemeine Konzeption des Sprachunterrichts an den Schulen vorzuschlagen; diese wird im letzten Abschnitt der Arbeit auch dargelegt. Der Verfasser äußert zum Schluss die Hoffnung, dass dieser Neuanatz dazu beitragen wird, die Schweiz in ein mehrsprachiges Land mehrsprachiger Bewohner zu verwandeln.