https://asce-uok.edu.pk/journal
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56384/jes.v38i2.255

Multilingualism in Switzerland: An Overview

Muhammad Issa[*]
Muhammad Kamal[**]
Ansar Ali[***]

Abstract

Multilingualism claims centrality in the discourse community. Besides being an important aspect of linguistics, it has been a socio-political phenomenon. Developments in human history, particularly the growing concept of globalization, wars, treaties, invasions, colonialization, and migrations have ensured that most of the states in today's world are multilingual, multicultural, or sometimes even multinational in character. During the 18th and the 19th centuries, the rising wave of nation-states based on one language, one culture, and one religion, multilingualism was considered and treated as a curse and menace to the socio-political harmony of the state. Nonetheless, there were few states which showed firm faith in unity in diversity. They remained neutral to those developments and kept alive through preserving, protecting, and flourishing the feature of multilingualism in state policies. Switzerland is considered the spearhead and torchbearer in this march. The foundation of modern Switzerland was established in 1848 by the federal constitution declaring the state multilingual. Even before that, it was a multilingual state comprising French, German, Italian, and Romansch. Today, all the four major languages of the country enjoy the prestige of the national language with a qualified promise to provide equal opportunities for other minor languages. In this context, this present paper offers an overview of the emergence, evolution, and sustainability of

[*] Dr. Muhammad Issa is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan. Email: muhammad.issa@uobs.edu.pk. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4274-1838.

[**] Mr. Muhammad Kamal is a Lecturer at the Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan. Email: muhammad.kamal@uobs.edu.pk.

[***] Mr. Ansar Ali is a Lecturer at the Govt. Degree Boys College, Skardu, Gilgit-Baltistan and a Visiting Faculty at the Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan. Email: ansar.hussain@uobs.edu.pk.

multilingualism in Switzerland. The main argument is that "quardilingualism" and multilingualism in Switzerland are not merely due to the state policies but mainly because of the people's will to live in diversity and their mutual respect for individual idiosyncrasies.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Emergence, Evolution, Sustainability, Diversity

Introduction

Switzerland is a small, prosperous western European country. It is one of the most ancient countries with embedded modern democratic values that even the most developed and modern states find them difficult to uphold. Switzerland emerged as a state in 1291 as the result of a mutual agreement among the three states: Unterwalden, Schwyz, and Uri. Inspired and motivated by the mutual ties based on common interest and shared respect, many other contagious states kept joining this small confederation which finally evolved into a confederation of 24 states in 1815. Consequently, it expanded not only in terms of population and territorial size but it also became a confluence of varying ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. German, French, Italian, and Romansch became the languages of the inhabiting groups which characterized the state as multilingual.

Historical evolution of multilingualism

The history of Switzerland stretches back to the Stone Age. It was under the foothills of mountains extending into the Alps that provided a habitat for the first natives about 100,000 years ago. No physical evidence is available but archeological estimates based on the discoveries, particularly of the skulls of the Cave-bearers, enforce this view. Also, there is no concrete data about the language of those natives.[1]

The very preliminary recordings about Switzerland date back to the pre-Christian era. This indicates that even in pre-Christian times the land was not settled by a linguistically homogeneous population. It was home to peoples of various roots with different ethnicities and linguistic kinships. In the west and north, ever since the end of the Bronze Age, the Celtic people known as Helvetian had been dwelling there, who most probably spoke Lepontic, one of the ancient Celtic languages and descendants of the Indo-European family. Contiguous to them in the east were the Raetia, probably of Illyrian-

[1] E Bonjour, H.S Offler and G.R Potter, *A Short History of Switzerland* (London:Oxfords University Press, 1970), 21.

Venetian abstraction. They were heir to the Rhaetian language, the language of Romance, which was probably related to Etruscan. While in the south the people were of Ligurian strain, the speakers of the Ligurian language, which was based on the Italian language.[2] Hence, even before the Swiss state took shape the territory was occupied by speakers of different languages. In 15 B.C., the Helvetian movement to Gaul with an ambition to expand their territory and find more space for a bigger population was checked by Julius Caesar: thereupon the region was incorporated into the Roman Empire. From there on the Romans imposed their way of life, introduced their customs, norms, and habits, and Latin was declared the official language in Helvetia. Thus, the Celtic population was partially Latinized through Latin colonization.[3]

The powerful great Roman empire though succeeded to superimpose itself but failed to wipe out the rest of the indigenous languages rendering Switzerland multilingual. It successfully resisted these massive linguistic assaults.[4]

The demise of Roman rule in the 5th century added more tincture to the linguistic kaleidoscope of Switzerland by giving way to two Germanic tribes, Burgundians and Alemannians. Thus, the German language joined the multilingual setting.[5] By origin, the Burgundians were Roman and the Alemannic were Germanic. The areas which bore the Roman customs and way of life for a longer period were called "Rhaetria Prima", which consequently resulted in the origin of the Rhaeto-Roman language. It is a basin and Rhaeto mix dialect which is spoken in the Eastern Alps area from Gotthard to Friuli.[6] These penetrations in the history of Switzerland have left permanent impressions on the linguistic, religious, and ethnic map of the country.

The French language made its entry into the territory of Switzerland with the joining of neighboring French-speaking cantons. This process happened

---

[2] Georg Thurer, *Free and Swiss: The Story of Switzerland*, translated by, R.P Hellerand E. Long (London: Oswald Wolff limited, 1970), 25.

[3] Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland* (London: Cambridge University Press,1976), 6.

[4] Alexander S. Wilner, The Swiss-ification of Ethnic Conflicts, (Ph.D., Halifax: Diss, Dalhousie University, 2009), 8.

[5] Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland* (London: Cambridge University Press,1976), 9.

[6] E Bonjour, H.S Offler and G.R Potter, *A Short History of Switzerland* (London:Oxfords University Press, 1970), 17.

during the 12th and 13th centuries. The country that was formally established in 1291 with three cantons became a state of 13 cantons by the end of the 16th century. The cantons that joined during this period were mainly French and German-speaking. Berne and Fribourg were the two cantons that spoke French along with the German language. The rest of the cantons were German-speaking. Thus, German became the language of the majority and was privileged as the only major language in Switzerland. The Italian language also made its entry into the state with the accession of Ticino in 1803 under the act of mediation.[7]

Thus, multilingualism in Switzerland emerged parallel with the emergence of the state. The pioneer states of Switzerland that laid the formal foundations of the country were homogeneous in terms of language, and they were German speakers. Until the French Revolution and consequent Napoleonic expeditions across the continent, German was the official language of the state. The emergence of the Helvetic republic upset the previous composition and arrangement of the state. The failure of the Helvetic Republic and the introduction of the act of mediation in 1803 by Napoleon paved way for the equality for all the ethno-linguistic factions.[8]

Switzerland contradicted the general trend of the nineteenth century, which saw national unification based on homogeneous language, culture, and religion as the only way of building a nation. The Swiss state sought unity in diversity. The years between 1829 and 1848 were decisive and vital when the country was experiencing an unprecedented civil war, but the cause was religious not linguistic. This war appeared as a blessing in disguise. It gave solutions to many previous and anticipated problems. Switzerland was upraised as an unevenly divided state with four ethnolinguistic groups by the mid of 19th century each corresponding to a different ethnic and linguistic descent with deep geo-historical roots. The deep theological differences also added to the already complex situation.

Multilingualism became a permanent feature of the country once all three major languages, except Romansch, were recognized as national languages in the federal constitution of 1848. The constitution of 1848 united the people of 24 cantons with different historical backgrounds and cultures into

---

7 Ibid.

8 Georg Thurer, *Free and Swiss: The Story of Switzerland*, translated by, R.P Hellerand E. Long (London: Oswald Wolff limited, 1970), 25.

four ethnolinguistic groups. The linguistic groups were spread throughout the significant units, but most of the Swiss cantons had an overwhelming majority of one linguistic group. Hence there were 15 German cantons, six French cantons, and one Italian speaking canton, as well as four multilingual cantons.[9]

Although the constitution of 1848 was the first federal constitution that empowered different ethnolinguistic groups, it was still not free of the grey areas and crevices that had to be addressed in the years to come. Thus, in order to mend those areas and emerging issues, the constitution of Switzerland underwent three major reforms and more than one hundred forty amendments. In every reform or amendment, the issue of multilingualism was not only carefully dealt with but also strengthened with the further inclusion of clauses in favor of the linguistic diversities of the state.

The preamble of the constitution of 1848 begins with an emphasis on "we the Swiss people and cantons"[10] providing a strong basis for a nation constructed on the principles of unity in diversity. This paved the way for multilingualism to flourish in Switzerland unchecked by any legal, political, social, or religious interference. Clauses No 16 of the constitution categorically declared German, French, and Italian as national languages along with the promise to protect the languages of other minorities. Since its inception, the arrangement has never been seriously questioned. Every canton was fully authorized to promote their local languages through the education system at communes and cantons by declaring them their cantonal official languages as well as making them the medium of printing and electronic press.[11]

1874 witnessed the first complete revision of the federal constitution of the country. But this was not motivated by any internal ethnic, religious, or linguistic conflicts or voices. Rather it was initiated by the fears reared by the giant neighboring states, France, Germany, Italy, and Austria by their expansionist motives. While revising the federal constitution, the clauses

---

[9] William E. Rappard*, Collective Security in Swiss Experience: 1291 – 1948* (UK:Bradford &Dickens, 1948), 4.

[10] https://www.parlament.ch/en/über-das-parlament/how-does-the-swiss-parliament-work/Rules-governing-parliamentary-procedures/federal-constitution.

[11] Ibid.

related to internal unity, harmony, and peace were not disturbed since they were functioning as desired by the engineers of the constitution. So, multilingualism in the country was retained and the opinion of the people was cherished.

The constitutional revision of 1999 was mainly intended to include Romansch Language, the language of only 50000 speakers, in the list of the national languages. With this development, the state declared "quadrilingualism" in the country. The objective of this change was not to change the existing political system of the country but to give the modern wording to the old constitution making it readable to the citizens of modern times. In 1987, the parliament had constituted a committee and had empowered it to renew the language of the constitution, which submitted the revised constitution to both the houses and to the Federal Council. Consequently, the revised constitution with a new language with no major change, except the introduction of "quadrilingualism", was presented to the parliament in 1999. It was passed in the same year and came into force in 2000.[12]

Today, Switzerland comprises 65% German speakers, 18% French, 12 % Italian, 1% Romansch, and 6% others.

Table: Linguistic, Ethnic and Religious Statistics of Switzerland

Ethnic Groups	Total Population	Languages	Speakers	Religions	Adherents
German	65%	Germany	65%	Catholics	47.6%
French	18%	French	18%	Protestants	44.3%
Italian	10%	Italian	12%	others	8.1%
Romansch	1%	Romansch	1%		
Others	6%	other	4%		

(Source taken from Federal Statistics office of Switzerland)[13]

Switzerland has been lucky enough to establish understanding about multilingualism among its citizens. The story of multilingualism would not have been successful if it was supported only by the constitution and not by the masses.

[12] Thomas Maissen, The 1848 Conflicts and their Significance in Swiss Historiography, in Butler, M. et al. (eds.), The Making of Modern Switzerland,1848–1998 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 10.

[13] https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home.html.

There are certain unique factors that define every state. Multiculturalism is an inherent ingredient and tendency of the whole philosophy, structure, and composition of the Swiss state. The historic co-existence of four languages and cultures persuaded the Helvetic Confederation long ago to integrate the principle of cultural multiplicity into its structure, its political and organizational system, and its cultural policy procedures. For this reason, Switzerland has always encouraged and supported moves and conventions that protect and back cultural diversity and cultural expressions. Resultantly, it has always sustained multilingualism through its social policies.

A nation's approach towards a certain phenomenon operates at two levels: the state and the public. At both these levels, the linguistic diversity in Switzerland has been warmly greeted by the people and the state. The evidence of this acceptance is that neither the state nor the public has grown hostile to multilingualism throughout the history of the nation. It reflects the political maturity of the masses and government institutions to carry on the unique combination of multilingualism so smoothly.

The institutional arrangements for the sustainability of multilingualism

Switzerland is called 'Willensnation', the product of a national will.[14] Switzerland despite accommodating linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversities has prospered in building a nation that is united in multiplicity. Neither this unity has developed overnight nor did it happen inexplicably. It took many centuries to attain this point. Multiculturalism is a blessing in disguise, which evolves over a period of time. This pretext seems befitting in the context of Switzerland. It succeeded in establishing institutions that helped to maintain diversity in the country.

The establishment of language boundaries is a key aspect of the Swiss constitution and one which owed much in-depth discussion. Switzerland is quadrilingual but, essentially, each constituent of its territory can be viewed as unilingual. Living in Switzerland means living entirely in Germany, France, and Italy. The case of much smaller Romansch speaking areas is less clear cut. The language attrition of Romansch has resulted due to the strong presence of Germans in the core of traditional Romansch territory. In three

[14] F. Grin, Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland-Overview and Recent Developments, 1999.

regions, a sole dominant language has been designated as official.[15]
An unwritten constitutional principle that immensely supports linguistic multiplicity in Switzerland is territoriality.[16] The Federal Tribunal inferred this institution from article 116 of the federal constitution. Thereupon, it has been declared the responsibility of the cantons to uphold homogeneity of language within their territories. This further justified the medium of education in cantons in their respective official language. Although the cantons have freedom, the citizens do not have the right to be educated French in a German-speaking canton.

Language freedom is another unwritten constitutional principle. It implies the right for residents to use any language of their choice in their private life.[17]

The third most important institutional arrangement made by the state is the principle of subsidiarity. It states that sovereignty rests in the hand of cantons, which only delegates some areas of power to the federation. In case of no explicitly mentioned powers, it remains within the jurisdiction of the cantons. The same is the case with the education and language policies. In bilingual cantons, the authorities usually use one language or other for local purposes following the linguistic boundaries. But, in the case of trilingual cantons such as Grischun/Grigioni, the choice of the official language has been devolved from cantonal to communal authorities. This means that the language policy is defined at the lowest political unit.[18]

In addition to the above-mentioned institutional arrangements, there is another particular system called “federalism of execution”. Under this arrangement, the cantons are each in charge to execute some of the federal duties, especially in the areas where the closest contact with the public is required.

---

[15] Wolf Linder, "Building a Multicultural Society by Political Integration," in Swiss Democracy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 35.

[16] Ibid.

[17] François Grin, “Swiss multilingualism and its relevance for Canada”, Policy Options/Options politiques, (1997)18, 19-24.

[18] F. Grin, Language policy developments in Switzerland: Needs, opportunities and priorities for the next few years. *Revue Suisse de science politique*, *3*(4), (1997), 108-113.

Current Challenges

These institutional arrangements have been made since 1848 with the adaptation of the federal constitution. But recently there are some questions raised from different perspectives.

The first question is related to the increasing number of immigrants in the country who are from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As the state has confirmed the mother tongue as a medium of instruction for their own citizen, it remains to be seen whether the state will make similar arrangements for the children of immigrants. This debate is now going on in different quarters.

Secondly, the declining condition of Romansch and inadequate visibility of Italian question the traditional arrangements.

Thirdly, the problem which is beyond the control of Swiss citizens and the state is the linguistic inability of the French speakers to speak German, which has been a ladder to greater material prosperity. There is a need to teach a language, at least, at the elementary and lower school levels. So, the authorities will have to raise the average language proficiency levels of its citizenry.

Thus, an overview of multilingualism in Switzerland shows that it emerged as a result of the evolution of the state. This phenomenon of multilingualism deepened as the state expanded from three cantons to twenty-six cantons. The nation's will to live in diversity welcomed all kinds of diversity be it religious, ethnic, or linguistic. This consciousness of multiplicity remained an integral part from the constitution to the social policies of the state. The constitution of the state provided not only legal protection to all four major languages but it also established constitutional institutions in the form of principles such as language boundaries, territoriality, and subsidiarity, which play a pivotal role in the sustainability of multilingualism in Switzerland.

- B L A N K -