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Business Languages in Multi-Lingual Switzerland

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1. Introduction

According to the national census of the year 2000, there are 7.288.010 million¹ people living in the small alpine country Switzerland which has an area of only 16.000 square mile (41.285 km²; about 1/2 the size of the U.S. state of Maine). Switzerland has one of the highest GNP in the world and it is known as a neutral country that does not belong to the European Union. It has its own currency, the Swiss franc, which has been relatively stable for more than a century, since Switzerland was not involved in the First and Second World War and because of the country's long history of democracy. Despite its size, Switzerland is a multi-lingual agglomeration of peoples, cultures, institutions, and organizations.

2. History and Demographics

A. History

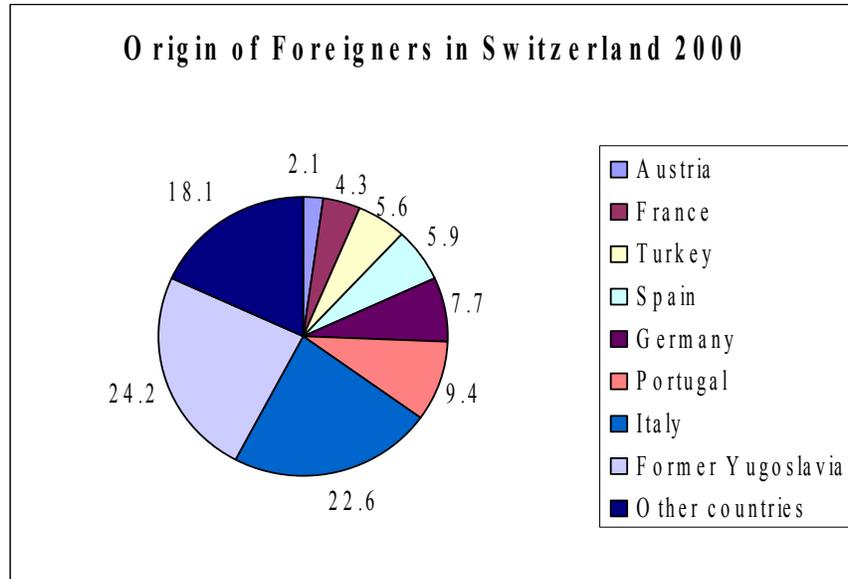
Switzerland was founded in the year 1291, when the four states situated around the Four Canton Lakes (*Vierwaldstädtersee*) – Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden and Nidwalden – united in a covenant of independency and freedom as they pledged mutual support against the threats of the Habsburg Empire. Over the next 500 years, twenty more cantons joined the Swiss Confederation resulting in the current 26 cantons (including 3 half cantons) of modern Switzerland.

B. The People and the Economy

In the 1st century B.C., the Celtic tribe of the Helvetians lived in the area of today's *Confoederatio Helvetica* (CH is an acronym for Switzerland) and it became a part of the Roman Empire. Over the next centuries, the Germanic Alemanni settled in the north, the Burgundians in the west, the Lombard tribe in the south, and the Rhaeto-Romans withdrew to the valleys of the Grisons giving rise to the quadro-lingual nation. Like other European countries, Switzerland was above all an agricultural state and the industrial revolution stratified the people according to their main source of income and the development of the economic sectors. Trade and handicrafts were regulated and strengthened by the guilds in the medieval and renaissance cities and throughout the following centuries. Due to the fact, that Switzerland has no significant natural resources, the service sector had an early, continuing importance. Banks, insurances, and tourism started to flourish already in the late 18th and 19th century. Modern transportation, first the rail road then the automobile and air traffic, helped to modernize Switzerland's infrastructure and more and more people moved from the mountain areas and from abroad to the growing cities in the flatter middle land. Overall, the multi-lingual Swiss people have enjoyed more than 700 years of democratic stability, peace, and prosperity. Swiss emigrants, on the other hand, have influenced many cultures and countries all over the world with a wealth of inventions, scientific, and artistic contributions as well as a plethora of services.

C. Immigrants

Artisans and journeymen from all over Europe, either driven by war or persecution settled in Switzerland bringing diverse cultures, a wealth of knowledge, and early manufacturing expertise to the picturesque hills and valleys, lake shore communities, and growing cities. The result was increasing trade and commerce with many countries and a constant flow of people coming into the country and also going abroad. Today, foreigners are 20% of the population, living in Switzerland, and over one million Swiss live abroad; two-thirds of them have dual nationalities. The European post-war economic boom starting in the late 50ties and increasing throughout the 60ties attracted thousands of so-called guest workers mainly from southern European countries, such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey etc. to Switzerland. The political uproars and wars of the last 20 years in developing countries brought many refugees from all over the world to a land of "milk and honey". The globalization of business and international organizations, as well as the exchange of knowledge, science, and research added thousands of foreign professionals to the Swiss labor force. The following chart shows that most immigrants in Switzerland come from the former Yugoslavia and Italy, followed by the people from many countries (see also table 1 on main languages).



Graph 1: Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

3. Multi-Lingual Society

A. National Languages

The national languages of Switzerland – German, French, and Italian – have been defined as equal languages by the Swiss Constitution since the 19th century and the ancient and rather esoteric Rhaeto-Romansh since 1938. In 1996, the Romansh language was lifted to the status of an official national language (*Amtssprache*). The distribution of the national languages spoken in Switzerland is as follows: 63.9% German, 19.5% French 6.6% Italian, 0.5% Rhaeto-Romansh² and 9.5% other languages.³

B. Diglossic Situation

The linguistic situation in German speaking Switzerland is unique in as far as there is a classic diglossic situation in this area. For oral communication, the German Swiss use their distinct regional dialects, commonly referred to as *Schwyzertütsch* (Swiss German), which highly differs grammatically, lexically, and phonetically from Standard High German. The latter is used for all written forms of communication (newspaper, literature, business and private correspondence etc). While other German dialects in Germany and Austria are predominantly spoken in the country side and by lesser educated people, all Swiss – whether university educated or manual laborers, male and female, young and old – generally speak their local dialect in all situations among themselves. The oral language in school, court, church, on radio and television is supposed to be High German as a rule to facilitate nation wide communication, yet an alarming high percentage of Swiss German is being used, thus causing a deficiency of proficiency of standard High German. The state and federal departments of education have recently released new guidelines for schools to promote and ensure standard High German competency.

C. Immigrant and Heritage Languages

According to the census of the year 2000, the distribution of languages (the main language or mother tongue) of the Swiss population is as follows:⁴

Rank	Main Language	Population	Rank	Main Language	Population
1	German	4.639.762	20	Swedish	5.560

2	French	1.484.411	21	Czech	5.444
3	Italian	470.961	22	Polish	5.206
4	Serbian/Croatian	103.350	23	Greek	4.792
5	Albanian	94.937	24	Vietnamese	4.226
6	Portuguese	89.527	25	Japanese	4.100
7	Spanish	76.750	26	Farsi	3.467
8	English	73.425	27	Rumanian	3.397
9	Turkish	44.532	28	Tagalog	3.019
10	Romansh	35.072	29	Danish	2.739
11	Tamil	21.816	30	Somali	2.661
12	Arabic	14.345	31	Finnish	2.628
13	Dutch	11.840	32	Slovakian	2.018
14	Russian	8.570	33	Slovenian	1.601
15	Chinese	8.279	34	Bulgarian	1.579
16	Thai	7.569	35	Urdu	1.407
17	Kurdish	7.531	36	Norwegian	1.361
18	Macedonian	6.415	37	Armenian	1.333
19	Hungarian	6.194	38	Korean	1.202

Table 1: Swiss population according to main languages: Census 2000. Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

The next table shows the distribution of the national and non-national languages in the different language areas:

Language Area	Population	Including Languages of another Language Area		Including other National Languages		Including Non-National Languages	
		absolute	in %	absolute	in %	absolute	in %
	Total						
Switzerland	7.288.010	6.208.918	85.2	422.553	5.8	656.539	9.0
German Area	5.221.135	4.519.601	86.6	245.621	4.7	455.913	8.7
French Area	1.720.365	1.404.482	81.6	137.507	8.0	178.376	10.4
Italian Area	320.247	266.730	83.3	32.287	10.1	21.230	6.6
Romansh Area	26.263	18.105	68.9	7.138	27.2	1.020	3.9

Table 2: Swiss population distribution of national and non-national languages: Census 2000. Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

4. Business, Science, and International Relations

A. Primary Sector and Small Businesses

Today, the agricultural sector⁵ employs less than 5% of the population, yet it produces more than ever as in other western states accordingly. Small and middle sized businesses make up 99% of all registered companies and 75% of the work force or 2.6 million employees work for SME companies. Every tenth of the small businesses and every second of the middle size and larger companies export their goods. Although there was a trade deficit in 1998, the Swiss economy showed a surplus in 1999, which dwindled again in recent years. Switzerland is a founding member of the World Trade Organization and a member of EFTA. Unemployment rate is currently at 4.2% (February 2004).

B. Manufacturing

The largest manufacturing sector is the metal and engineering industry producing a wide range of machines and electro-technical devices amounting to 45% of all Swiss exports. The chemical and pharmaceutical industries are followed by the watch and textile industries. The latter shows an export rate of 80%. In connection with industries, it is worth mentioning that 60% of the needed energy comes from hydroelectric power. Switzerland's key trading partners are Germany, France, Italy, the U.S., and Great Britain. While Switzerland has a trade deficit with European countries (61.0% exports and 79.9% imports) the exports to the U.S. amount to double of the imports in 2001.⁶

C. Service Industry

71% of the working population in Switzerland is now employed in the service sector (2001). There are close to 400 banking institutes in 2771 locations⁷ and 230 insurance companies in Switzerland. The role of media and telecommunication become more and more important and tourism has always been paramount and still has growing stakes in the Swiss economy.

D. International Relations and Organizations

Switzerland's neutrality dates back to 1674 when it was first announced officially and later confirmed by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Because and/or despite of its neutrality, Switzerland plays a decisive role in international affairs as a mediator and collaborator, e.g. the United Nations, the European Union⁸, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Association, just to name a few. Swiss foreign policy allows the Swiss military to be deployed as peace-keeping units and the International Red Cross which has its headquarter in Geneva assists in world wide humanitarian efforts. A variety of Swiss agencies are further involved in human rights and welfare projects around the globe.

5. Language Usage at Home and at Work

A. Local Languages

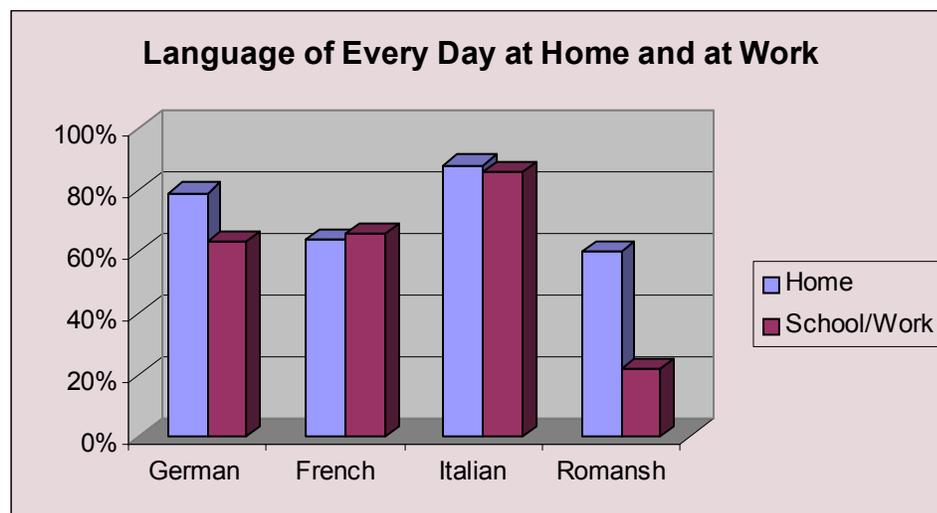
The four national languages of Switzerland are spoken and taught in school as the local language in slightly overlapping, yet distinct areas. Swiss German dialects are spoken in central and northeast Switzerland, French in the western part, Italian in the triangle area south of the Alps, and Romansh in five valleys within the canton of Grison. There are cities and cantons, e.g. Biel/Bienne, Wallis/Valais that have a German and French part. For the census of the year 1990, the term "mother tongue" (*Muttersprache*) was no longer used in questions about language use, but rather "main language" (*Hauptsprache*) in which people think and which they know best. A contrastive term was defined as the language used daily at home, in school, and at work (*Umgangssprache*) that can be better translated into "most applied and used language" or "language used daily" than just ordinary colloquial language. The National Office of Statistics in Switzerland published a comprehensive analysis about language usage in 1997⁹ based on the census 1990, which serves as the bases for this article that also looks at data from the census of the year 2000 to illustrate growth and change. A specific interest was, to shed light on the language use in professional settings and the usage of English and its relationship to the national languages.¹⁰

Language Area	Main Language	Language used daily at Home	Language used daily at Work
German	85.7%	89.9%	95.3%
French	77.1%	87.8%	95.5%
Italian	83.1%	91.2%	97.7%
Romansh	73.3%	81.1%	71.2.%

Table 3: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 1990. (Lüdi, *Annexe 3*)

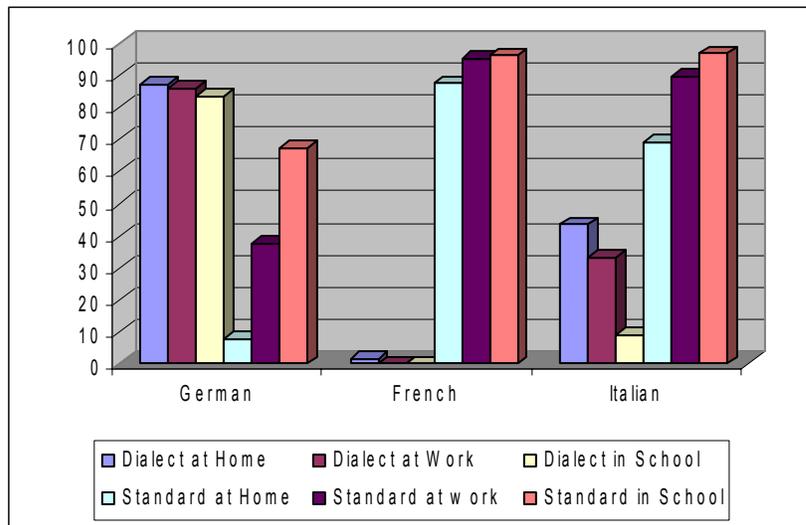
This table shows that the local language is predominately also used as the daily language (at home and work) in all language areas and that German is the most homogeneous language area. Yet, the difference between the amount of the local language and the language used every day in the French and Italian areas is rather high, which translates into the fact that many people use another language at home and/or at work.

A table showing the usage of the same language at home and at work as the local language shows that the Italian language is mostly used at home and at work and in school whereas Romansh is much more used at home than at work. Only 23.7% of the employees use Romansh at work. While German is used more at home than at work, French is slightly more used at work.



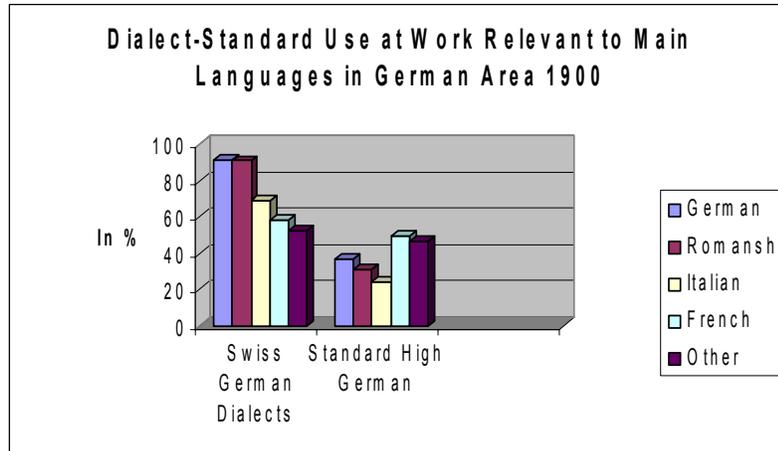
Graph 2: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 1990. (Lüdi, *Annexe 4*)

In the German speaking area, Swiss German is generally the most used language at home, in school, and at work. Only 7.9% speak High German at home. Even though the main language in school should be the standard High German, the Swiss German dialects are used about 40% in school. To counteract this so-called "*Mundart*" or dialect trend, the state and departments of education launched a large scale project to improve the use of High German in schools as already mentioned above. Dialects within the French language do not play a role (1.4%), but 43.4% speak Italian dialects at home, yet predominantly the standard Italian at work and in school.



Graph 3: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 1990. (Lüdi, *Annexe 4*)

The specific data about the relationship of Swiss German and Standard High German of employees of other languages shows the following distribution:



Graph 4: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 1990. (Lüdi, *Annexe 11*)

This table shows that Swiss Germans also used Swiss dialects predominantly at work. German and Romansh speakers behave similar, yet the Italian speakers use about three times more German dialects than High German. Lüdi concludes that this data represents the fact that many Italian guest workers are employed in construction and manual labor where dialects are mostly used as the work language. However, French and other speakers use only slightly more Swiss German Dialects than High German.

6. Business Languages

A. National Languages

As seen in graph 3, Swiss German dialects were mostly used by the Swiss Germans at work (85.9%) in 1990. Lüdi further reports that over 90% use Swiss German in traditionally agricultural and rural areas and blue collar workers use 10% more Swiss German than the white collar professions, yet about half of the employed population also used Standard High German in a

professional setting in urban areas and tourist centers. In the German speaking area, 19% of the employees regularly use French and 13% use Italian.

B. English as Main Language and at Work

The population who indicated English as their main language in 1990 was distributed in the four national language areas as follows:

Language Area	Population	in %	English	in %
German	4.948.194	72.0	32.134	52.9
French	1. 604.372	13.3	27.038	44.5
Italian	294.804	4.3	1.560	2,6
Romansh	26.317	0.4	54	.0.1
Total	6.873.687	100.0	60.786	100.0

Table 4: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 1990. (Lüdi, *Annexe 9*)¹¹

Slightly over half of the people indicating that English is their main language, lived in the German part and 44.5% in the French part of Switzerland in 1990.

Today, 31% of the anglophone population is concentrated in the Lake Geneva area, 12% in the vicinity of Basle, and 9% surrounding the city of Zurich.

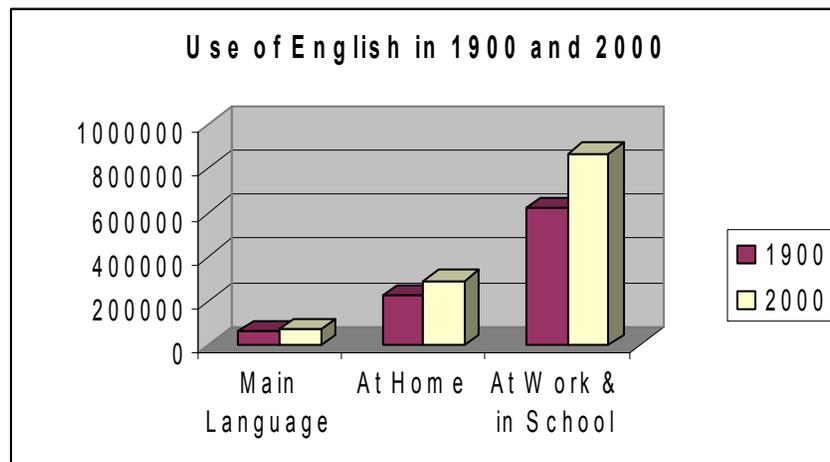
According to a 1999 study published on a British web-site,¹² "two out of three German-speaking Swiss and one out of two French-speaking Swiss speak English" and they indicate that they speak English best besides their mother tongue. A comparison between the data of the census 1990 and the census 2000 shows that the population that uses English as the main language has

increased by 12.636, or 0.92%. However, the use of English at the work place and in school has increased by about 28% over the decade from 1990 to 2000.

Distribution	English as Main Language	English at Home	English at Work and in School
Total	73.425	291.883	872.183
Swiss	23.267	202.598	713.981
Foreigners	50.058	89.285	158.202
Total Male	35.694	141.774	512.161
Swiss	8.460	95.745	414.709
Foreigners	27.234	46.029	97.452
Total Female	37.731	150.109	360.022
Swiss	14.907	106.853	299.272
Foreigners	22.824	43.256	60.750

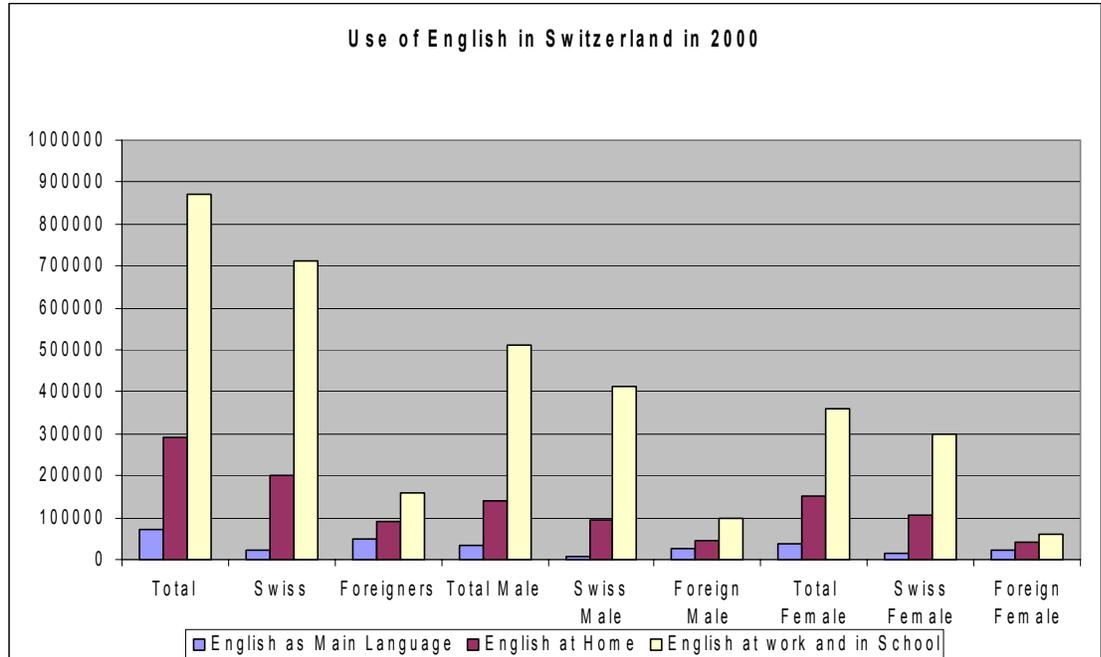
Table 5: National Office of Statistics: Census 2000.

The comparison of the use of English in 1990 and 2000 shows the following growth:



Graph 5: Source for 1990: Lüdi, and for 2000: Swiss Federal Office of Statistics.

The next graph shows the distribution of the population who indicate English as their main language, the use of English at home, and at work and in school.



Graph 6: Source: National Office of Statistics: Census 2000.

Graph 6 and table 5 show the increased importance of the English language in Switzerland, especially at work and in school. 12% of the people living in Switzerland use English at work or in school. Already in 1993, Bally Management AG, the famous Swiss shoe manufacturer adopted English, like many other export companies, as their main business language. 80% of their employees must know foreign languages.¹³ English is now not only the official language in international departments at all major Swiss banks and companies, English is also used for internal daily communication. A bank employee¹⁴ in Zurich states that she and her colleagues use 70% English, 25% German, and 5% French in their daily work, which is symptomatic for the industry and the area. Documents at large Swiss banks are composed in five language versions (German, French, Italian, English, and Spanish).¹⁵

According to *swissinfo*, Switzerland's Online news and information platform,¹⁶ English becomes the fourth language of the Swiss government regarding the translations of documents which are already issued in the national languages, including documents of the defense ministry, particularly "related to arms purchases" and "since Switzerland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), and began sending troops to assist in peacekeeping duties abroad."¹⁷ Urs Duermeller of the University of Berne states that English has become, and indeed is an "ideal," *lingua franca* in Switzerland. "There is no doubt that English now belongs to the language repertoire of the Swiss people and to the language repertoire of the nation."¹⁸ Every company defines its own business language for the various business situations and communication goals. Sulzer, the largest employer in German-speaking Winterthur, and ABB, another large corporation, use English for business meetings and international correspondence, yet among themselves the Swiss Germans prefer *Schwyzertütsch*.

7. Foreign Language Training

A. Schools

There are basically 26 different school systems in Switzerland (26 federal cantons). Last year, the canton of Zurich decided to make English – no longer French – the first foreign language in the school curriculum. In the canton of Berne, 99% of eighth graders are enrolled in English classes. Other cantons are in the process of following the trend and starting early in elementary

school or even kindergarten to teach English as the first L2, although the Commission for Public Education still favors the national languages.¹⁹ This means of course that the teacher training has to be adjusted accordingly. Secondary and vocational schools continue to teach foreign languages, but a clear shift in favor of English can be observed. Duermueller reports that English at Swiss universities differs from discipline to discipline, yet English is clearly the language of science and research.

B. Professional Training

Companies that have adopted English as their corporate language generally offer free intensive language training to their employees. They not only have on-site foreign language classes, but in addition they finance study abroad training. Furthermore, they also provide local language training for immigrants and international employees.

C. Continuing Educations

The business with the English language flourishes in Switzerland. Even proficient speakers of English continue to be enrolled in English language, literature, and cultural courses at many language institutes and public *Volkshochschulen* (university courses for continuing education of the public).

The Internet, telecommunication, advertisement, the entertainment industry, film, music etc. all use English as the prime language source and English

words and phrases become more and more mixed with Swiss German and the other national language, especially among the young generation who soon will do business in English globally and locally.

¹ At the end of 2002, the population grew by 0.8% to 7.3 million. *Swiss Review*. No. 6, December 2003.

² Romansh Online: <http://www.rumantsch.ch/>

³ *Statistical Data on Switzerland 2002*. Swiss Federal Statistical Office (Bundesamt für Statistik.) <http://www.statistik.admin.ch/> . For English summary: http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber00/imf.htm

⁴ *Statistical Data on Switzerland 2002*. Bundesamt für Statistik. http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber00/vz/cc/dvz-cc-spr-02.htm

⁵ There are 67.400 working farms in Switzerland according to the largest agricultural report of 2003. *Swiss Review*. No. 6, December 2003.

⁶ Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Electronic Newsletter, 3.12.2004.

⁷ *Die Schweiz in ihrer Vielfalt*. Bern: Kummerly+Frey, 2003/2004: 73.

⁸ Swiss people voted against a membership in the EU in 1986.

⁹ Lüdi, Georges, Iwar Werlen, and Rita Franceschini et. al. *Die Sprachlandschaft der Schweizerischen Eidgenössischen Volkszählung 1990. Anhang 1*. Bern: Bundesamt für Statistik, 1997.

http://www.romsem.unibas.ch/sprachenkonzept/Annexe_1.html

¹⁰ ---. http://www.romsem.unibas.ch/sprachenkonzept/Annexe_1.html

¹¹ ---. http://www.romsem.unibas.ch/sprachenkonzept/Annexe_1.html

¹² <http://www.isyours.com/s/paises/uk/language.html> *English Language in Switzerland*.

¹³ "Das Business spricht englisch." *Woche* 34/95: 20.

¹⁴ E-mail to the author from Verena Staeheli, AGI-Kooperation, March 17, 2004.

¹⁵ "Das Business spricht englisch." *Woche* 34/95: 21.

¹⁶ <http://www.swissinfo.org> March 9, 2004.

¹⁷ <http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/Swissinfo.html?siteSect=41&sid=1056513>

¹⁸ Duermueller, Urs. *English in Switzerland: From Foreign Language to Lingua Franca?*

<http://duermueller.tripod.com/ECH.html>

---. *Changing Patterns of Multilingualism. From quadrilingual to multilingual Switzerland*. Zurich: Prohelvetia, 1997.

¹⁹ Lüdi, Georges et. al. *Which languages should be studied in Switzerland during obligatory school?* Bern: 1998. <http://www.romsem.unibas.ch/sprachenkonzept/ConceptE.html>