

**Abstract: May 3, 2005, Markus Andres**

## **Towards a Well Balanced Language Portfolio for Multilingual Societies Embedded in a Global Economic Environment: Switzerland as a Case Study**

Switzerland (a country of 6.6 million inhabitants, about 20 % of them foreigners) is one of the few countries in the world that acknowledges four official languages on its particularly small territory (about 42 000 km<sup>2</sup>): German, French, Italian and Rumantsch (neglected in the following, as it is used by only about 80 000 speakers).

The fragility of the balance of the three major language areas (German, about 60 % of all inhabitants, French, about 32 %, Italian about 6 %) is reflected in the structures of political representation, administration, the media landscape etc. via a sophisticated framework of support and respect and finely tuned instruments of mutual understanding.

Consistent with minority laws each language area integrates at a certain level and to a certain degree the language(s) of the other areas of the country within its educational system, with a special emphasis in those cantons (i.e. provinces of the Swiss Confederation with a certain autonomy) already bilingual or adjacent to another linguistic area.

With the paramount importance of English as tool of communication in a globalized world, these checks and balances, grown over a large period of time, are being questioned and challenged by more and more people. Who should learn which language(s) (English, German, French, Italian) as a first, second, third foreign language at school, especially at the level of higher education, in which canton etc.?

In a project of research at the University of Applied Sciences Solothurn Northwestern Switzerland, dealing with the importance of foreign languages for business purposes in enterprises of all sizes and fields of activity, we designed a questionnaire in all three major languages of Switzerland (German, French, Italian) and received answers from more than 2400 companies.

A first set of questionnaires dealt with the reflections, necessities, problems and wishes of the management regarding foreign language competences of their staff, a second set of questionnaires focused on the employees' linguistic experiences concerning foreign languages in their daily work routines in contrast to the respective profits and frustrations of their own language education in Switzerland, with an emphasis on higher education.

The evaluation and analysis of these data yields most interesting insights into the fabric of a multilingual society and economy, facing the challenges of globalization.

I would like to talk about the yet unpublished results of this project at the occasion of the Helsinki Conference on Bi- and Multilingual Universities – Challenges and Future Prospects, and present suggestions to political and educational decisionmakers as well as to fellow researchers to bridge possible gaps between the rights of language minorities, national, historical, cultural and political balances and a more and more globalized world.

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Audio-visual requirements: OHP and beamer, compatible with PowerPoint software