

# The Swiss language phenomenon

by Suzette Sandoz,\* Pully VD



Suzette Sandoz. (Picture <https://blogs.letemps.ch/suzette-sandoz/>)

*(CH-S) The recent decision by the three cantons of Appenzell Ausser rhoden, Zurich and St. Gallen to postpone the start of French lessons from middle school (grades 4–6) to secondary school (grades 7–9) has triggered a wide range of reactions in French-*

*speaking Switzerland and in the federal capital of Bern. Disregard for a linguistic minority? A failed experiment with early multilingual teaching? A threat to national cohesion?*

*The “Swiss Standpoint” will be giving a voice to various opinions in the near future. We are currently starting with a statement from French-speaking Switzerland.*

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There is a great stir among the Swiss public: the canton of Zurich will only teach French from secondary school onwards. People are talking about a betrayal of the “federal agreement”. But what is this about?

According to Article 4 of the Federal Constitution, “German, French, Italian and Romansh are the national languages”. In which cantons is Romansh taught compulsorily in the spirit of “federalism”? In which cantons is Italian compulsory in the spirit of “federalism”?

Of course! French is the second most important national language. It may be the “language” spoken by the locals, the language of their hearts, but High German is not the language spoken by the locals in German-speaking Switzerland, it is not the language of their hearts; when the little German-speaking Swiss children start school, they first discover High German. It is almost a foreign language that they must learn, even though they speak Swiss German.

Certainly, the two Germanic languages have similarities, but High German is a written, constructed language, like French and Italian. In addition to the language they speak, young Swiss German pupils must therefore learn to “construct” another language, namely High German. Young Romans, on the other hand, speak quite naturally the language whose construction they can learn as soon as they start school.

French, German and Italian are international languages that provide access to a culture that goes beyond Swiss culture. They require a different approach than purely local languages such as Swiss German – and even Romansh. Hearing alone is not enough, and I would say that learning by ear alone carries the risk of betraying the culture. It is good if pupils already have a certain maturity to “enter” a language of international culture and learn not only the technique but also the spirit of that language. The best coexistence within the Swiss Confederation is ensured by understanding both the language and the spirit of the other ethnic groups. The problem is that Swiss German is not an international language and provides access to very locally limited cultures, which are important but very variant. Only a stay in a canton beyond the river Saane makes it possible to appreciate the richness of a local culture.

However, neither French, German nor Italian as such convey the soul of the canton whose official language they are. You also must have lived there. So, let’s give each canton the freedom to decide at what age its children are best able to acquire the knowledge that will enable them to learn one or two of the country’s “official languages”, and let’s look at this decision as nothing more than an educational and legitimate federalist endeavour.

## The special case of English

English was once a cultural language. It has become a commercial tool and a means of standardising thought. For purely “practical” and “economic” reasons, teaching English is preferred over teaching the national languages. You must

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be able to babble it from an early age. It has similarities with German and French and seems to be quite easy to learn for both German and French speakers. Natural laziness leads us to prefer what is immediately useful to what is more “altruistic” and cultural. This is a civilisational problem that goes far beyond the scope of intercantonal relations. The question arises: should schools

promote submission to consumerist fashions or openness to culture?

The debate on the harmonisation of the school system often seems to ignore this question.

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