Research Article

Switzerland: Managing Multilingualism at the Societal Level

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Abstract

Switzerland is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Western Europe, in which four national languages coexist: German, French, Italian and Romansch. This paper demonstrates how Switzerland has been a successful case of managing a multilingual situation within a modern European state. There have been four main factors as to why Switzerland has managed to prevent conflict and achieve a stable linguistic situation; crosscutting religious and socioeconomic divisions, political recognition of language equality at the federal level, decentralised federalism and cantonal autonomy, and political accommodation and power sharing (Schmid, 2001).

However, even if Switzerland has achieved a great degree of linguistic cohesion and stability, some linguistic conflicts have arisen. The most critical period for Swiss linguistic unity was during the 20th century, in which different conflictive episodes between the German Swiss and the French Swiss occurred at a political level, with several cultural and linguistic consequences. Despite some political and linguistic tensions, Switzerland has a strong cultural tradition of moderating social and linguistic conflicts and promoting stability, and the Swiss population as a whole highly value tolerance and mediation.

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Introduction

In this article I will discuss how Switzerland has successfully managed multilingualism at the societal level. According to Hoffmann (1991, p. 157), "multilingualism comes about when speakers of different languages are brought together within the same political entity". In my discussion, I will look at the coexistence of German, French, Italian and Romansch within the political entity of Switzerland. Firstly, I will provide a brief introduction about the current sociolinguistic situation in Switzerland. Secondly, I will examine the history of the nation formation of Switzerland, in order to understand how the country came to have its current multilingual nature. Then, in the next section, I will discuss the reasons why Switzerland has been successful in managing multilingualism, as well as the linguistic conflicts and tensions that have existed in this nation.

Switzerland: A Multilingual Nation

Despite being a relatively small country (approximately 7.5 million inhabitants), Switzerland is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Western Europe, hosting four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansch. German is spoken by around 70% of the Swiss population, French by approximately 2%, Italian by less than 10% and Romansch by less than 1% of the population. The Swiss Confederation has twenty-three cantons. Since Switzerland follows the principle of territorial monolingualism, each canton is linguistically autonomous. Most cantons are monolingual (with sixteen German-speaking cantons and four French-speaking cantons), whilst a few cantons are bilingual German/French (Bern, Fribourg and Valais), the canton of Ticino is Italian-speaking and the canton Graubünden or Grisons is the only trilingual canton, in which Romansch, German and Italian are spoken (Hoffmann, 1991).

Therefore, by far, German is used in the largest geographical area and has the largest number of speakers. However, to make linguistic matters more complex, in Switzerland, German speakers use Swiss-German dialects in their everyday informal communication, which differ from city to city. Standard German, or "High German", is only used in the written and formal sphere. Therefore,

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within Switzerland exists a diglossic situation between High German and local Swiss German dialects (Russ, 1994).

According to Clyne (1995), Standard German is used in the National Parliament (together with French, Italian and Romansch), in secondary and higher education, within the media (written press, radio and television), formal church services (liturgy and sermons) and in worldwide fiction literature. Local Swiss German dialects are traditionally used in some cantonal parliaments, early primary education and some fiction literature. However, the use of dialects has increased in the past few years throughout the media. For instance, recently, local Swiss German dialects can be heard on the radio and TV in women's, children's and sports programmes, as well as during live interviews and talk and game shows. Further use of said dialect can be heard during weddings, informal evening church services, working groups and practical classes in secondary and higher education, and in some advertisements.

The Rise of Multilingualism in Switzerland: Historic Overview

Original Confederation of thirteen cantons

In 1291 the three mountain cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Underwalden formed a defensive alliance, which gradually increased in size until 1513 when it stood as a group of thirteen cantons. This confederation was primarily bound together as a system of military alliances, and so central institutions did not develop at the time. The Confederation was mainly German-speaking (only the canton of Fribourg had a significant French-speaking population) and German remained its only official language until 1798. German was the only official language since the birth of the Swiss state and for the consecutive five centuries thereafter, there is no history of linguistic conflict between language groups before the 19th century (Schmid, 2001).

From the 16th century onwards, the Confederation affiliated with French, Italian and Romansch speakers. However, these subject territories, which were associated as allies of the Confederation, did not obtain equality with the thirteen cantons of the original Confederation until much later. According to McRae (1983), it is important to highlight that respect for local autonomy and

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linguistic diversity was a crucial factor in attracting the allegiance of the French, Italian and Romansch-speaking subordinate areas.

French invasion and the creation of the Helvetic Republic

In 1798 the French army invaded Switzerland, and the original Confederation of thirteen cantons was abolished by the French and was replaced by the Helvetic Republic. Despite opposition from the Swiss, the French established a system of centralisation and authoritarian executive power, transforming Switzerland into a modern state. As Schmid (2001) states, the constitution of 1798 abolished the old feudal privileges and established equality for the individuals and territories. The French and Italian districts were raised to the status of cantons with equal rights, forming the foundations of multilingual Switzerland.

However, the Swiss citizens revolted against centralisation and uniformity of the state, instead wanting their local autonomy back. In 1803, thanks to Napoleon's intervention and mediation, each canton was restored to its own government and a new constitution was passed. In the 1803 constitution, the linguistic equality of 1789 was maintained and more cantons were added, totalling nineteen (Schmid, 2001). As Schmid (2001, p. 126) contends, it is ironic that "a foreign power was instrumental in producing a multilingual Switzerland with secured boundaries and a sense of identity separate from its invader".

Modern Switzerland

In 1848, a new constitution was passed which, in its basic aspects, remains as the constitution of Switzerland today. It recognised the multilingual nature of the country by declaring that German, French and Italian were the national languages of Switzerland (McRae, 1983). In 1938, article 116 of the constitution was amended to include Romansch as the fourth national language in Switzerland. And some years later in 1996, a new language article for the Swiss constitution was approved by referendum.

This new article was important for two reasons. Firstly, it recognised Romansch as an official language, which meant that from that moment on, Romansch speakers could use their language when communicating with the federal government (although, Romansch was not recognised as

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having official status in the parliamentary, administrative and judicial spheres of the federal government). And secondly, the new article proposed federal measures to protect and promote the weaker language communities in Switzerland: the Italian-speaking communities of the Ticino canton and the Romansch-speaking communities of the Grisons canton (McRae, 1983).

Linguistic Peace: Managing Conflict in Multilingual Switzerland

So far, I have considered the evolution of Switzerland into a multilingual state. In this section, I will discuss how Switzerland has managed to achieve a stable linguistic situation. According to Schmid (2001), there are four major explanations for accommodating conflict in multilingual Switzerland: crosscutting religious and socioeconomic divisions, political recognition of language equality at the federal level, decentralised federalism and cantonal autonomy, and political accommodation and power sharing.

Crosscutting religious and socioeconomic divisions

In Switzerland, religious and socioeconomic divisions crosscut linguistic borders. In other words, there is not a single correlation between one specific language group and a single religion. For instance, Protestants and Catholics can be found in both French and German linguistic groups. It is only the Italian speakers that are predominately Catholic. Furthermore, the economic wealth is equally distributed between the two major language groups, French and German Switzerland. Such reasoning has contributed to the stability, cohesion and linguistic harmony within the Swiss state (Schmid, 2001).

Political recognition of language equality at the federal level

Another element behind the success of multilingualism in Switzerland is the fact that the federal government, through its constitution, formally recognises language equality between the different linguistic groups and ensures the adequate political and social participation of linguistic minorities. Furthermore, the federal government make provisions for investing public money in favour of the linguistic minorities. For example, in 1992, Radio Television della Svizzera received 25% of the entire budget for public radio and television. However, according to McRae (1983), despite these

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provisions, Italian and Romansch speakers suffer some practical disadvantages in both the public and governmental spheres.

Decentralised federalism and cantonal autonomy

On the cantonal level, the *principle of territoriality* is applied, which has been crucial in maintaining language stability in Switzerland. The principle of territoriality consists of the fact that each territory or canton has the right to protect and defend its own linguistic character and to ensure its survival. This right is called linguistic sovereignty: the canton has the right to regulate all cantonal affairs in relation to language. So, the canton determines the official cantonal language, which is the medium of instruction in the public schools. As well, cantonal laws are only written in the official cantonal language, and the cantonal authorities have no legal obligation to deal with citizens in a language different from the cantonal one. As a consequence of the principle of territoriality, linguistic autonomy is guaranteed and this has contributed to a reduction in language conflict (Schmid, 2001).

On the federal level, the *principle of personality* is applied, which regulates relations between the individual and the federal government. The principle of personality consists of the fact that when dealing with citizens and the cantonal authorities, the federal government must adapt to their language or languages, within the limits of the four national languages (McRae, 1983).

Political accommodation and power sharing

Political accommodation and power sharing refers to the adequate and proportionate representation that different linguistic groups receive at the federal level. In this way, the executive power is shared in equal terms by the different language groups, which, as Schmid (2001) highlights, is a custom in the Swiss political culture, rather than a legally mandated rule. This power-sharing between linguistic groups applies to the federal council, parliamentary committees, the judiciary, the public service and the military. According to Schmid (2001), power-sharing between language

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groups in Switzerland is a crucial part of the Swiss political culture and a key element of social integration for the French and Italian-speaking minorities.

Areas of Potential Linguistic Conflict

Even if Switzerland has achieved an exemplary status of linguistic cohesion and stability within a complex multilingual setting, it would be misleading to think that no linguistic conflicts have arisen. According to Barbour and Stevenson (1990), conflict is most likely to occur between the French-speaking and German-speaking areas. It is in these two areas which the vast majority of the population are found and where the economic and political power resides.

As Barbour and Stevenson (1990) argue, there is an economic and linguistic imbalance between German Swiss and French Swiss. Even if economic resources were distributed across both French and German-speaking areas, the economic power is concentrated in the German area, where the most important industries, businesses, banks and insurance companies are based. Moreover, Switzerland has more trading relations with Germany rather than with France. When considering the linguistic imbalance, Barbour and Stevenson (1990) claim that amongst senior posts in the federal administration there is a predominance of German-speakers, even if each language group is represented proportionally in the overall number of posts.

Indeed, the most critical period for Swiss linguistic unity was during the 20th century. During this time, different conflictive episodes between the German Swiss and the French Swiss took place, especially at the political level (with its obvious cultural and linguistic consequences). As Schmid (2001, p. 135) claims, “with increased Europeanisation and globalisation, there are increased tensions on the political order in Switzerland. The tradition of multilingualism and multiculturalism makes Switzerland particularly vulnerable to such tensions”. The most significant political and linguistic conflictive episodes between the German Swiss and the French Swiss are listed below:

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World War I

With the outbreak of World War I, a deep fissure (known as *graben* or *fossé*) opened between the German Swiss and the French Swiss and threatened to destroy the moral unity of the country. Both groups felt threatened by the other, and they founded two organisations in order to defend their interests: the *Deutschschweizerischer Schprachverein* (1904, by German Swiss) and the *Union Romande* (1907, by French Swiss). The situation became so critical that even the Swiss Federal Council had to reassert that Switzerland was a cultural and political community above the diversity of race and language. Moreover, as the war continued, German Swiss and French Swiss became involved with the discussion of neutrality of Switzerland in World War I. In the end, both groups agreed to remain neutral in the armed conflict (McRae, 1983).

The Jura question

The Jura region was once the northern district of Switzerland's second-largest canton, Bern. The region engaged in riots and violence for more than forty years. Jura had a double minority: French-speakers, who were Catholic, in a German-speaking Protestant canton. Indeed, in the canton of Bern at the time of the riots, 85% of the population were German-speaking and 15% French-speaking. Finally, after a long struggle, the three predominantly Catholic French-speaking districts of Jura were able to create their own canton, on January 1, 1979 (Schmid, 2001).

According to McRae (1983), the creation of the new canton was praised as an innovative solution to moderate linguistic conflict. During the conflict, political parties stood neither in favour nor against the problem. Indeed, as McRae (1983, p. 111) argues, "Swiss political history is noteworthy and unique for the fact that no significant or political movements have ever emerged to promote the interests of any language group or language region as such in the Confederation".

Helvetic malaise or identity crisis: the question of the European Union

Some social observers have claimed that Switzerland has suffered from a *Helvetic malaise* or identity crisis, in the decades after World War II. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the division (*graben* or *fossé*) between German Swiss and French Swiss has opened and widened again, due to differing views in the area of foreign policy.

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In December 1992, there was a referendum in Switzerland concerning the possible membership in the European Union. Once again, the division between German Swiss and French Swiss came to the surface. There was a massive participation of 78.3% of Swiss citizens at the polls. However, the treaty was unsuccessful, and Switzerland voted against entry into the European Union. All the German-speaking cantons rejected the treaty (with majorities of up to 74%), as did the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino. In contrast, all the French-speaking cantons voted to join the European Union, with majorities of up to 80%, but because the German Swiss occupy a large majority of the population and cantons, the measure failed (Schmid, 2001).

Conclusion: the "Helvetic Solution" Revisited

Despite several political and linguistic conflicts between German Swiss and French Swiss during the 20th century as mentioned above, there is still room for a peaceful coexistence between the different language groups in Switzerland. Switzerland has been a product of regionalism, and cantonal and federal identities have been long perceived as fully compatible. According to Schmid (2001), Switzerland has a strong common culture that moderates social and linguistic conflicts and promotes stability. Furthermore, tolerance and mediation are highly valued by both German and French Swiss populations, and multilingualism has long been a strongly accepted component of Swiss life. However, linguistic boundaries and attitudinal differences between linguistic groups exist and could become sensitive on some issues, even in a country such as Switzerland that maintains a low level of intergroup tension. Even so, Switzerland remains a very politically and linguistically stable country in relation to other multilingual states.

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