

Language shift in the Raeto-Romansh community

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The paper aims to explore the language situation of the Raeto-Romansh community against the multilingual context of Switzerland. In the light of rather scarce existing literature I would like to gain an insight into the communicational interactions of the speakers of Romansh and their Swiss compatriots from other linguistically different parts of the country, and specifically from the German-speaking one. It must be stressed that virtually all speakers of Romansh can speak either two or more languages, which makes them - beside their Italian-speaking compatriots - truly multilingual individuals. Thus, their attitude to bilingualism needs to combine “an emotional attachment to Romansh and a rational commitment to German” (Stevenson 1990:252). As a rule, every Romansh speaker needs to be capable of expressing himself either in Romansh or in German, be it his private, professional or political interest. However, the juxtaposition of various quantitative surveys clearly indicates a downward tendency in the number of the Swiss who speak Romansh as their L1. Although the referendum in 1938 elevated Romansh to the rank of a national language, this did not remove the unpropitious aura over its pending demise. Already today some authors classify Romansh as a unique minority language (Edwards 2004), whereas others overtly call it a relic, spoken in the mountainous regions between the Gotthard massif and the eastern Alps, primarily in the Rhine Valley in the Swiss canton of Grisons.

The vital part of the paper is the attempt to assess the viability of the Romansh language in Switzerland in the context of the cantonal language policy. Certain mechanisms of language change may be detected through defining both linguistic and non-linguistic factors that are conducive to that change. In order to carry out such an analysis, I shall make use of the “cycle of language shift” proposed by Haugen (1980). There are signs proving that not only the federal or cantonal authorities are concerned about the nearest future of Romansh. Also the Swiss public in general, including several linguists, seems to be conscious of the dramatic decline in the number of the speakers of Romansh. Less than thirty years ago, one of the most far-flung measures undertaken to avert the further dialect fragmentation of Romansh, was the introduction of an experimental form of a common language named *Rumantsch Grischun*. For anyone wishing to see Romansh live on, its standardised form is now to be observed with a curious optimism. Interestingly, no stage of change involved in the Haugen’s cycle is inevitable, and it can be stopped or even reversed, provided that the countermeasures have been initiated in due time.

Sample references

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