1. Introduction

This paper examines recent developments in the Swiss model of diversity management, focusing in particular on what may be contradictions in the model, and discussing ways in which such contradictions might be addressed—and possibly resolved.

The main line of argument is as follows: Switzerland, which claims over seven centuries of history, has only emerged as a modern state in the mid 19th century; since then, it has largely dispensed with language policy. Linguistic diversity has been managed almost by default, largely by relying on the principle of language territoriality and a remarkably high degree of decentralisation. This explains why, to this day, Switzerland still has no federal-level language legislation. This longstanding arrangement, however, is currently coming under severe pressure. However, challenges to the system are not the result of standard majority-minority conflict, which the principles established in the 19th century are reasonably well-equipped to deal with. The main challenges are the result of exogenous changes — in particular, the spread of English — which the Swiss approach to diversity was never designed to handle. Meeting these challenges, and ensuring that the “Swiss exception” keeps working in the long run, now requires a proper language policy. In short, this paper tries to explain why quadrilingual Switzerland has been able to do without a language policy for a long time, but now can no longer do without one.
The paper contains six sections, including this introduction. Section 2 is devoted to a brief overview of some essential historical and demographic features of Swiss plurilingualism. Section 3 discusses the concept of a “Swiss nation”, emphasising the inadequacy of some mainstream theories of nationalism to understand the Swiss case. Section 4 describes recent institutional developments regarding language, such as the 1996 and 2000 changes in the federal Constitution. Section 5 examines discrepancies between institutional aspects on the one hand, and socio-political trends on the other hand, and explains why language policy is necessary to find a way out of these contradictions. A few key points are taken up in the concluding section.

2. Swiss multilingualism: a brief overview

Until the end of the 18th century, the relatively loose confederation of micro-states that was then Switzerland operated in German, despite the fact that some cantons ruled neighbouring communities (traditionally called “bailiwicks”) in which German, French, Italian, or Romantsch were used. The Napoleonic wars, at the turn of the 19th century, eliminated these Ancien Régime structures; former bailiwicks were elevated to the rank of full-fledged cantons; additional, long independent micro-states like Geneva also joined the confederation, and Switzerland stabilised within its current borders in 1815.

Switzerland thus became a quadrilingual country whose citizens could be native speakers of German (usually in the form of an Alemannic dialect), French, Italian, or Romantsch. This pluralism was regarded as an anomaly at a time when the ideology of the unitary nation-state (one people, one language, one nation, one state) was holding sway. In addition, Switzerland was the only republic in a Europe of monarchies. The political and cultural discourse on Switzerland as a Willensnation (“nation of the will”) defined by its very diversity, was therefore developed in this period to legitimise this pluralism, giving rise to the Swiss national myth (Froidevaux 1997; Grin 2002). The country’s first modern constitution, in 1848, mentioned three national and official languages (German, French, and Italian); this provision was confirmed in the 1874 Constitution. Amendments in 1938 and 1996 gave Romantsch constitutional recognition at federal level. In the present Constitution (in force since 2000), all four languages are considered “national”; German, French, and Italian, in addition, are “official,” while Romantsch is also official, but only “for the purposes of communication between the Federal government and Romantsch-speaking citizens.”

Federal provisions regarding language account for only one part of Switzerland’s linguistic arrangement, and perhaps not the most important one. Switzerland remains a truly federalist country, where sovereignty rests with the cantons (Voyame, 1989). There are 23 cantons of which 3, for historical reasons not discussed here, are split in “half-cantons”; it is therefore an acceptable shortcut to say that Switzerland comprises 26 cantons. These micro-states delegate competencies to the federal government, making Switzerland, as it were, a case of devolution in reverse. Powers handed over to the feder-
al government include, for example, national defence, energy supply, highways, and large parts of the social insurance system; however, language policy and education are among the competencies that the cantons have retained.\(^1\)

It is important to note that language regions or language communities have no political or institutional existence as such, since the basic political and institutional units are, precisely, the cantons. Moreover, linguistic boundaries and (inter-cantonal) political boundaries do not coincide, and religion is not correlated with language either. The two main religions in the country, Calvinist Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, are symmetrically represented in the German, French, and Romantsch-speaking communities. Only the Italian-speaking community is predominantly (though not systematically) associated with one religion (Roman Catholicism). Given the deeply secularised character of modern Switzerland, religious affiliation is of no consequence. However, this is a relevant aspect of what is often referred to as Switzerland’s “cross-cutting cleavages.”

Another key factor in Switzerland’s language situation is, at least until 2000, the near-absence of any specific constitutional or legal provisions about language at federal level. This was supplemented by invoking the territoriality principle, which together with the extremely decentralised form of federalism that prevails in Switzerland, keeps shaping the key institutional aspects of Switzerland’s diversity management. The territoriality principle means that each point in the national territory (with a few exceptions) has one and only one locally official language. Whereas most cantons are defined as monolingual, three (Fribourg / Freiburg, Valais / Wallis, and Bern / Berne,) are bilingual (French and German) and one (Graubünden / Grischun / Grigioni) is trilingual (German, Romantsch, and Italian). In the three bilingual cantons, the language boundary runs right through the canton, and public services are available, either side of it, in one language only (German or French). A few municipalities are designated as bilingual, but they constitute exceptions. In geolinguistic terms, language boundaries have remained practically unchanged for some seven centuries (Haas 1985/2000). The situation in the trilingual canton is even more complex, since in this case, the cantonal authorities have devolved to municipalities the responsibility to choose their own official language; this arrangement has proved notoriously unstable, and is often seen as a contributing factor to the demolinguistic decline of Romantsch. In Switzerland, the territoriality principle overrides the “language freedom” (or “personality”) principle, although both were defined as unwritten constitutional principles by the Tribunal fédéral (Federal supreme court). They were only enshrined in the Constitution that came into force in 2000 (see section 3).

The rather intricate Swiss pattern is further complicated by the presence of a sizeable immigrant population. With foreigners making up about 20% of the resident population, Switzerland has the second highest rate in Europe after Luxembourg (apart from

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1. In addition, as a result of “federalism of execution”, cantons take charge of the local provision of some federal services, which are then provided only in the locally official language.
very small states like Andorra or Monaco). Ten percent of the resident population claims a main language other than any of the four national languages. The distribution of the population by main language spoken is provided in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Population by Main language, Percentages, 2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Resident Population N = 7,280,000</th>
<th>Swiss Citizens Only N = 5,792,459</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German*</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French*</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian*</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbo-Croatian</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albanian</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantsch*</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*National language

Source: Office fédéral de la statistique (2002).

According to a common belief abroad, the average Swiss person is multilingual. However, the reality is quite different. Survey results indicate that 97% report one (and only one) mother tongue. Competence in additional languages, national or other, is of course widespread, but unevenly distributed. Generally, the level of skills in other languages is higher in the smaller language communities. Speakers of Romantsch are also fluent in German and speakers of Italian tend to have high competence in French and/or German².

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2. For detailed survey results including skills levels in second or foreign languages, see Grin (1999). The decennial censuses include questions on a person’s “first language” and patterns of language use, but does not record language skills.
The case of the German-speaking parts of the country deserves additional commentary, owing to diglossia between standard German and one of the many local forms of Swiss German. Swiss German is markedly different from standard German, and even native speakers of German coming from Germany (apart the neighbouring south-western parts of the country) only understand it with great difficulty. Far from declining, the use of dialect is spreading, and it is not restricted to given socio-economic segments of the population. It is used as the regular medium of spoken communication in much of public life, including many television and radio programmes. The lack of a written standard is probably what prevents its spread to non-oral domains. The rising influence of English further complicates the picture (Grin and Korth, in press).

Against this highly complex demolinguistic, sociolinguistic, political, and institutional background, the use of analytical categories requires particular caution; this question is addressed in the following section.

3. The concept of a “Swiss nation”

In order to better understand the sense in which terms like “people”, “nation” and “minority” can be used in the case of Switzerland, and, by way of consequence, the context in which language policy may be deployed, it is necessary to steer clear of some received notions found in the mainstream literature on minorities, nations and nationalism.

In fact, much of this literature, while apparently rejecting Herderian models of the nation, appears happy to adopt some of its core assumptions. This is exemplified, among others, by the very title of Monserrat Guibernau’s generally insightful book on Nations without states (1999), which suggests that a nation (even if it may in some respects be a construct) ought to have a state, and that the absence of a state is the anomaly that needs explaining. What is more, the “nations without states” referred to in her book (the Basque country, Catalonia, Quebec and Flanders) are typically linked with one language (and an associated culture). Thus, there is little here to challenge the notion that a people is defined largely by its language, that a self-aware people rises to the dignity of a nation, and that a nation deserves a (titular) state. This approach can be represented by the following diagram, in which the arrows represent association and, in extreme versions of the model, structural and historical causation (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1. The “Standard” Model](image-url)
As we shall see in a moment, it would be quite mistaken to project this model on Switzerland, as shown, for example, by Stojanovic (2000) or Grin (2002). Two pitfalls, in particular, must be avoided.

One is to imagine that Switzerland’s German-speaking majority somehow constitutes the “titular” nation, or the norm with respect to which the French-, Italian- and Romansch-speaking minorities constitute less legitimate or less typical manifestations of Swiss identity – or “Swiss-ness”. In fact, Switzerland is not a country of minority rights, even though casual outside observation might suggest that it is (du Bois, 1999; Büchi, 2000).

The second error to be avoided is to assume that owing to a commonality of language, the French-speaking Swiss “actually” are (or feel, or should feel) French, that the Italian-speaking Swiss are in fact Italians, and that they view France and Italy respectively as their “kin state”. The whole notion of kin state, however, is alien to Swiss political culture and historical experience, and this also applies to the German-speaking majority, whose members could not be described as “Germans”. It bears repeating that the French-speaking part of the country never has, at any point of its history, been part of France (save for a few brief years of Napoleonic rule, and then only for parts of French-speaking Switzerland). In the same way, Italian-speaking Switzerland was never part of Italy. Quite apart from the fact that Italy did not stabilise as unitary state before 1871, the Swiss canton of Ticino (which makes up the bulk, though not the entirety, of Italian-speaking Switzerland), has since 1515 not been part of any political structure that later became part of Italy.

It would therefore be mistaken to describe the French- and Italian-speaking minorities as “national groups”, as if either one of these two communities were an instance of “a regionally-concentrated group that conceives of itself as a nation within a larger state, and mobilizes behind nationalist political parties to achieve recognition of its nationhood, either in the form of an independent state or through territorial autonomy within the larger state” — as Kymlicka (2002: 3) characterises national groups. Switzerland is a case where reality does not conform to mainstream theoretical models.

In what sense, then, can we talk about “nation” and “people” in the case of Switzerland? The building blocks of the standard model can be re-used, but they have to be combined in a rather different way. Let us therefore start with the cantons, remembering that they constitute Switzerland’s basic political units and the source of political legitimacy. Stretching social history a bit, we could say that cantons, being micro-states, constitute “nations” and that each therefore stands for a small “people”; let us also

3. I sometimes try to clinch this point using a somewhat personal example: as a French-speaking Swiss, I am a member of a community that is one hundred percent francophone, but zero percent French (without this implying any kind of animosity towards France or the French); a shared language does not necessarily imply a common history, let alone the same identity.
remember, however, that out of the 26 cantons and half-cantons, three are bilingual and include French- and German-speaking areas (BE, FR, VS) and one (GR) is trilingual, with German, Romantsch and Italian, which means that from the outset, the Switzerland’s basic “nations” or “peoples” are not necessarily associated with one language.

The notion of a Swiss nation, or of a Swiss people (two terms between which no sharp distinction exists in Swiss political culture and discourse) was subsequently created, largely through the process of national myth building already mentioned in Section 2. Therefore, we may represent the Swiss case in a diagrammatic form as follows (Fig. 2), where (unidirectional) arrows denote causation in history and discourse; note, however, that a bidirectional (red) arrow connects Switzerland’s plurilingualism and the notion of a “Swiss nation”.

**FIGURE 2. A Diagrammatic Representation of the Swiss Case**

In this considerably more complex system, the Swiss nation is linked to language in a logic that turns the standard, received model on its head: the nation is instituted by the state (which, to this end, encourages myth-building), and becomes “ethnicised” through its very multilingualism—hence expressions such as “Willensnation” (“a nation of the will”) or “Sonderfall Schweiz” (the Swiss exception).4

4. These German terms are normally used as such, without translation, in discourse formulated in French.
4. Recent developments

Since Switzerland has a well-accepted national myth (Raffestin, 1990, Büchi, 2000), a constitutional structure that resonates with it (Froidevaux, 1997), and 150 years of history under this arrangement, we might expect that whatever political decisions need to be made operationalize the arrangement would pose no particular problem. However, this is not quite the case, as can be seen with languages, a sensitive dimension of the arrangement.

There is no federal language act in Switzerland, and even recent efforts at giving the country a more specific treatment, at constitutional level, of language issues, have been slow and painful. This raises the question of whether such reluctance to act in language matters reveals a crisis in the system, or whether it should, upon closer consideration, be understood as proof of its continuing effectiveness. Most likely, a bit of each is involved, and we will try to settle this question by looking at recent institutional developments, namely, the 1996 and 2000 constitutional changes, and the 2001 draft Language Act.

The 1996 constitutional amendment was the result of a motion tabled 11 years earlier by a Romantsch-speaking MP. Although the decline of Romantsch over the years had long been a cause for concern, other malfunctions in Swiss multilingualism (in particular, the insufficient visibility of Italian in federal affairs, and a progressive decline in the frequency of contacts between the French- and German-speaking regions) prompted an in-depth investigation of Switzerland’s language situation, which gave rise to a substantial report (Département fédéral de l’intérieur, 1989) followed by the government’s proposals for constitutional change (Conseil fédéral, 1991). The proposed change was far from sweeping. An explicit mention of the principle of “language freedom” was considered, but abandoned, because politicians (mainly in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland) feared that this might imperil the stability of language boundaries; on the other hand, the introduction of any formal mention of the territoriality principle was also dropped. Apparently, the only change that everybody could agree on, beyond general principles regarding the desirability of fostering contact and exchange between language regions, was to upgrade the status of Romantsch. Therefore, a very drawn-out process was needed before ending up with a rather modest constitutional change. The latter, however, was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of voters (76.2 %).

Shortly afterwards, more explicit (and ipso facto bolder) provisions regarding language were taken on board as part of the general overhaul of the federal constitution, resulting in the new Constitution that came into force on 1st January 2000. The articles regarding language are the following (see http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/101/index.html)
Art. 4 Langues nationales
Les langues nationales sont l’allemand, le français, l’italien et le romanche.

Art. 18 Liberté de la langue
La liberté de la langue est garantie.

Art. 70 Langues
1. Les langues officielles de la Confédération sont l’allemand, le français et l’italien. Le romanche est aussi langue officielle pour les rapports que la Confédération entretient avec les personnes de langue romanche.

2. Les cantons déterminent leurs langues officielles. Afin de préserver l’harmonie entre les communautés linguistiques, ils veillent à la répartition territoriale traditionnelle des langues et prennent en considération les minorités linguistiques autochtones.

3. La Confédération et les cantons encouragent la compréhension et les échanges entre les communautés linguistiques.

4. La Confédération soutient les cantons plurilingues dans l’exécution de leurs tâches particulières.

5. La Confédération soutient les mesures prises par les cantons des Grisons et du Tessin pour sauvegarder et promouvoir le romanche et l’italien.

It is interesting to note that, whereas conflicting views over the appropriateness, or not, of mentioning the principles of language freedom and language territoriality had, just a few years before, stalled the debate over constitutional provisions, these more extensive changes were adopted without anybody being much exercised over it. This may be explained by two factors. One is that the politicians and media were focussed on weighty constitutional issues other than language; the other is that voters’ clear — and also placid — endorsement of the 1996 revision suggested that public opinion would certainly countenance a somewhat more daring approach to language issues. Thus, the fifteen-year span between the initial parliamentary proposal and the adoption of meaningful constitutional provisions are probably not a sign of deficiency of the Swiss model. Rather, it confirms that this model is one that can only change slowly, because it ultimately rests — in language as well as in other fundamental matters — on a quest for broad consensus.

Somewhat different, however, is the matter of the draft Language Act. Work on a Language Act began shortly after the adoption of the (March 10) 1996 constitutional amendment, but it was tabled by the administration on October 26, 2001. The draft law was generally well received, but considering that five and half years’ work were invested in the enterprise, the resulting output seems rather disappointing (see following section).
The proposed Act was scheduled for debate in Parliament in 2004, but was withdrawn early in the year by the government, which said that for cost reasons, the Language Act no longer was among its policy objectives.\(^5\) The administration's estimates of the additional expenditure following the full implementation, by 2008, of the proposed provisions stood at about CHF 17m (meaning the equivalent amount in Canadian dollars). This, however, roughly corresponds to 0.034% of federal expenditure, 0.004% of nominal GDP and a per-capita expenditure of less than CHF 2.5 per resident\(^6\). In other words, the orders of magnitude are modest, making the cost argument only partly credible. Other factors may be at hand, and I believe that we may, in this case, speak of symptoms of an actual crisis. The issue, therefore, is to assess the nature and extent of this crisis.

A closer look at the draft Language Act\(^7\) reveals several serious shortcomings (Grin, 2001): it mixes up general principles and very specific development projects; the feasibility of certain measures (for example, for ensuring that the federal administration really operates multilingually) has never been evaluated; proposals for the revitalisation of Romantsch appear to be cut off from any reference to the rich body of experience accumulated in other countries, particularly in Western Europe, on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of measures in favour of minority languages\(^8\); almost nothing is said about non-national languages present in Switzerland, in particular the “langues d’origine” or “Herkunftssprachen” (meaning, in clear text, immigrant languages) or English. More fundamentally, the draft Language Act seems to contain no systemic language policy vision, with the result that proposed measures appear incomplete, somewhat haphazard, and of doubtful effectiveness.

At least two of these shortcomings may be interpreted as reflecting innate weaknesses the system:

- at this time, it is still not designed to come up with robust policy measures to protect Romantsch against the encroachments of neighbouring German. The reason is that in the Canton of Grisons where the five different varieties of Romantsch are spoken, responsibility for choosing the official language has been devolved by the Canton to the municipalities; as I have already pointed out, this local arrangement is notoriously unstable;
- the entire approach is also characterised by a strong reluctance to conceptualise language policy and address language issues in a coordinated manner, as a (legitimate) form of public policy\(^9\).

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5. At the time of writing (April 2005), political pressure has led to the reintroduction of draft Language Act on the parliamentary agenda.
7. See http://www.kultur-schweiz.admin.ch/pm/d/2001/f26-10-01.htm
9. One of my papers published in Canada some twelve years ago was titled «La Suisse ou la non-politique linguistique», precisely in reference to this state of affairs. The fundamentals have arguably not changed much in the meantime.
There is no doubt that the formulation of a proper language policy approach is required to overcome these failings (in fact, for the second of them, by definition). The need for Switzerland to engage in a more active, structured and targeted language policy has been pointed out for a long time (e.g. Furer, 1992; Grin, 1993; Ghisla, 1997). To some extent, Switzerland’s language policy practices (for lack of an overarching concept) require an aggiornamento, which could greatly benefit from looking beyond national boundaries; this is particularly urgent if Romantsch is to survive (see e.g. early proposals by Furer, 1984). However, it is in relation with other shortcomings of the draft Language Act that language policy appears to be needed not only in order to rise to the language policy challenges, but also in order to ensure that the Swiss model of diversity management can keep operating in the future. This is because some of the difficulties now confronting Switzerland — and calling its longstanding arrangement into question — are a consequence of developments occurring on a scale much beyond the boundaries of a small country. These challenges cannot be met by resorting only to the standard approaches historically called upon in Switzerland, namely, a narrowly legal-constitutional one, or (following a completely different path) educational prescriptions. What is needed is a proper language policy approach which would need, however, to be well anchored in, and explicitly articulated with respect to the Swiss arrangement.

The Swiss approach to diversity was not designed by 19th-century constitution- alists to handle modern migration on the one hand, and the spread of an external language (currently, English) as a quasi lingua franca on the other hand. With 10% of the resident population with a mother tongue other than a national language (see table 1 in section 2) some adaptation of the received model is necessary, particularly in the education system, which is confronted, in some larger cities, with an increasingly heterogeneous student body10. The nature of changes that could be introduced in the education system, however, opens up a whole range of questions, if only because Switzerland, owing to its federalist structure, has not one, but 26 education ministries.

However, it is the issue of the spread of English that may constitute the most serious challenge that the “Swiss exception” has had to face in its history11. What makes the challenge a very serious one is a widespread belief in the neutrality of English, linked to the twin illusions that language is no more than a communication code, and that communication is little but information transfer; it is well-known, however, that language is power, and macro-level language dynamics are associated with considerable transfers of power and financial resources (Grin, 2004). This is reflected in recent developments that concern cantonal education systems.

10. To take a somewhat extreme example, some 40% of the children in Geneva’s compulsory education system (ages 6-15) have a language other than French as a first language.

11. With the possible exception, during World War I (during which Switzerland remained neutral), of a split of public opinion, with most French-speaking Swiss supporting France, Britain and Russia, while a majority of German-speaking Swiss supported the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires).
5. Discussion

Traditionally, the 26 cantonal education systems of Switzerland have agreed to give priority, when it comes to language teaching, to national languages. In practice, this means that in the French-speaking part of the country, the first “foreign” language taught was German, while in the German-speaking part, the first “foreign” language taught would be French. Not everybody had to study English as a subject. This arrangement, which for a century and a half had been seen as a matter of course — and as a proper acknowledgement of the nation’s linguistic diversity — was recently called into question owing to a variety of factors. Against a general trend of earlier L2 instruction in Swiss schools, as well as experiments with more communication-oriented teaching, new demands on the system appeared, in the form of expectations that, in addition to national languages, English be also widely taught as a foreign language. Consequently, English (which was an assigned subject only in some, usually “pre-academic” streams), was introduced in most or all educational streams, but normally after national languages.

However, some sectors of the opinion in certain cantons (all of them in the German-speaking part) started questioning this precedence of national languages, demanding that English should be taught first. Such demands dovetailed with the dissemination, among the general public, of widely-held views about the virtues of early foreign language acquisition, the superiority of the native speaker as a teacher of foreign languages, and the effectiveness of immersion. All these issues are the stuff of one of the hottest public debates in Switzerland right now. Some German-speaking cantons (AI, NW) now teach English before French; in others (TG, ZG, ZH), citizens have tables “initiatives” (which have to be submitted to public referendum) requiring the same; in seven more, such initiatives are in the offing (GL, GR, LU, OW, SG, SH, SZ), or contacts being established to this end (AG, BS, BL). Such drifts away from the longstanding arrangement prioritising national languages constitute a major challenge not only to the cantonal education systems, but to the national approach to the management of linguistic diversity.

In order to prevent this drift from causing actual rifts, the standing conference of cantonal education ministers (CDIP/EDK) has attempted various strategies. One, summarised by the so-called “Gesamtsprachenkonzept” (Lüdi et al., 1998) was to adopt the following stance: it does not matter what language cantons choose to teach first; what matters is the outcome. In the Swiss context, national languages are important, and hence the level achieved by students at the end of their compulsory education must not be less than the level they reach in English (even if the teaching in English starts earlier). A similar position is reflected in the CDIP resolution adopted on 25 March 2004, which enshrines cantons’ freedom to decide which foreign language is introduced first, but

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12. Situation as of late March 2005. Cantons’ names have been replaced by the standard two-letter abbreviations. Correspondance with full names can be found e.g. on
along with rather complex requirements—for example, that by the 2006/7 schoolyear, the first L2 must be introduced no later than grade 5, and the second L2 no later than grade seven, but that by 2012, these crucial years in the curriculum are brought forward to 3rd and 5th grade respectively.

Such a position, however, could be described as what is called in French a “vœu pieux”, a pious wish. For how can we reasonably expect pupils to reach an equivalent level in a national language that would not only be introduced later, but which a majority of pupils have much less desire to invest in? It is not even being cynical to say that the CDIP’s recommendations lack credibility, and amount to little else than what is called in French “un enterrement de première classe”, the downgrading of national languages in the education system, albeit with great pomp and circumstance. And even though most of the media, possibly puzzled by the complexity of the latest round of CDIP recommendations, have not wised up yet to this fact, it will not be long until they do, and some voices are already demanding a clear political move, either to a reassert the primacy of national languages in the education systems, or to stop playing cat-and-mouse. This would amount to an acknowledgement of the primacy of English and of a certain readiness, among some segments of the opinion, to further downgrade national languages to elective instead of compulsory subjects.

Beyond its symbolic meaning, this drift is a reflection of a general decline in the awareness of the specificity of the Swiss model, as well as of the amount of work necessary to keep some of the main arrows in the lower panel of Fig. 2 operating. Developments in recent years suggest that the institutional arrangement inherited from the 19th century (including the non-essential changes introduced in the new Constitution) is not designed to address the problem; clearly, neither are purely education-focused solutions, which do not even qualify as a quick fix. For example, in the face of rising doubts about the credibility of its recommendations (or of its multilingual resolve), the CDIP holds what it believes to be a trump card, and this trump card is called “content and language integrated learning”, or CLIL, a.k.a. language immersion. With CLIL, or so the argument goes, Swiss schools can perfectly well teach two foreign languages in parallel throughout the system, skirting the limitations of a normal weekly timetable, and avoiding pupil overload. This stance, however, is open to criticisms of two kinds.

First, it is very difficult to make general claims regarding the effectiveness of CLIL, if only because of the endless variety of its possible implementations (Marsh et al., 2001). While most observers agree that all other things being equal, CLIL is a pretty good idea, things are hardly ever “equal” in practice, and the extent to which CLIL (and, more importantly, what form of CLIL) can yield vastly superior results remains an unsettled empirical question. Second, CLIL is a pedagogical instrument, which cannot be expected solve political problems. The decision of which foreign languages to teach, when to start teaching them, which to make compulsory or elective subjects, all these are eminently political questions, which must be acknowledged as such. It is not fair, nor wise
of politicians to shirk their political responsibility and to pass on the baby to language education specialists, waiting for the latter to get them out of a tight corner. More generally, a pedagogical instrument cannot take the place of proper political debate and of self-aware language policy.

In other words, neither legal-institutional fine-tuning, nor pedagogical innovation will be enough for Switzerland to meet the new challenges it is confronted with. The first question to address is that of the type of linguistic environment (more or less diverse, with what distribution of functions between languages, and what distribution of material and symbolic resources among residents) Swiss citizens wish to strive for; the precise form of institutional arrangements and nature of pedagogical instruments can only become an object of choice after the higher-order social goals regarding diversity have been discussed and selected. What is needed for this purpose is a proper, self-aware language policy approach, in which linguistic diversity is seen as a reasonable object of intervention by society on itself, and language policy a legitimate component of public policy.

6. Conclusion

Public debate over language issues and their far-reaching implications is currently picking up momentum in Switzerland. There is talk of a new federal-level citizen’s initiative being launched, in order to enshrine, at constitutional level, the primacy of national languages as the first “foreign” or “second” language that children should learn at school.

Ultimately, Swiss society has to determine more clearly and specifically what extent and content of linguistic diversity it wishes to strive for and maintain, how this goal can be reached, and what instruments should be designed for this purpose. There again, a proper assessment of the options at hand, of their material and symbolic costs, and of their material and symbolic benefits, requires a full-fledged language policy analysis.

Surprisingly much hangs in the balance, since Switzerland, despite having the flattering reputation of having found once and for all a successful way of dealing with diversity, is highly exposed to challenges originating in large-scale global trends. These challenges have little to do with the issues described in the literature on minorities and nationalism. Rather, the Swiss model may be in danger —though this still looks far away — of implosion through neglect. If it is to be rejuvenated and to keep operating as successfully in the 21st century as it has, by and large, for the last 150 years, it will need a lot of insightful language policy.
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