



## Which official languages do they speak in Switzerland?

Switzerland's **four official languages**, traditionally spoken in different regions of the country, are **German, French, Italian** and **Rumantsch** [sometimes also transcribed as *Romansh*, *Romansch Rhaeto-Romanic* or even *Romance* etc.]. Some statistics showing a fairly high percentage of "other" languages might give a false idea, if not interpreted properly.

Language	Public Use	Mother Tongue
German	74 %	63.7 %
French	21 %	19.6 %
Italian	4 %	6.6 %
Rumantsch	1 %	0.5 %
Spanish	n.a.	1.7 %
Serbo-Croatian	n.a.	1.4 %
Portugese	n.a.	1.3 %
Turkish	n.a.	1.1 %
English	n.a.	1.0 %
Albanese	n.a.	0.7 %
Other Languages	n.a.	2.4 %

## What is the difference between official languages and mother tongues?

### Interpreting Statistics Correctly

Due to massive immigration (20% of the resident Swiss population are non-naturalized foreigners, 50% do have at least one parent that has not been born in the country!), there are many individuals who will not say they speak one of the *four official languages of Switzerland* when asked for their *mother tongue*.

Nevertheless, in **everyday public life** (economy, schools, administration, recreation) only one (or two) of the traditional *four official, "native Swiss" languages* will be used, depending on the region. Why this?

### Regional Languages in Switzerland

There are clearly defined regions for all *four official languages* (German in northern, central and eastern Switzerland, French in western Switzerland, Italian in southern Switzerland and Rumantsch in southeastern Switzerland, see map above).

The regions do, however, overlap just a little: German is being used in parallel to Rumantsch in all Rumantsch areas and in parallel to French in the bilingual cities of Biel/Bienne, Fribourg/Freiburg, Murten/Morat and in some smaller towns and villages along the language border in western Switzerland.

## Major Swiss Cities by Language and Metropolitan Area Population

German Speaking	German/French bilingual	French Speaking	Italian Speaking	German/Rumantsch bilingual
<b>Zurich (970,000)</b> <b>Bern (290,000)</b> <b>Basel (240,000)</b> <b>Lucerne (230,000)</b> <b>Winterthur (110,000)</b> St. Gallen (90,000) Thun (50,000) Schaffhausen (40,000) Zug (30,000) Rapperswil-Jona (30,000) Frauenfeld (25,000)	Biel/Bienne (90,000) Freiburg/Fribourg (40,000)	<b>Geneva (410,000)</b> <b>Lausanne (240,000)</b> Montreux-Vevey (50,000) La Chaux-de-Fonds (40,000) Neuchâtel (40,000) Sion (30,000) Yverdon-les-Bains (25,000)	Lugano (40,000) Bellinzona (25,000) Locarno (20,000)	Chur (40,000)

Metropolitan area population: population of the city including its suburbs, though they may be politically independent communities.

### Public Use of Languages in Switzerland

Immigrants to Switzerland come from a broad variety of countries with very different cultural and language backgrounds (see table: the six non-official languages shown there are just the top of the iceberg, many more Scandinavian, Slawonian as well as Asian languages make up the last 2.4% summarized as *other languages*).

Therefore none of these languages is understood by more than 2% of the resident population (native Swiss people and immigrants speaking other languages). So the use of the official Swiss language of the region (German, French, Italian) is the only practical way to communicate when talking to native Swiss people or with immigrants from other countries.

Many immigrants do not even know some key words they use in their professional life in their mother tongue since these are related to technologies not used in their native countries. So there are several practical reasons to the fact that immigrants use the official regional language in everyday life.

### Private Use of other Languages in Switzerland

So there are several practical reasons to the fact that immigrants use the official regional language in everyday life. Among friends (insofar as having the same nationality) and within the family, the mother tongue is of course used.

You might easily get, for example, a Turkish or Serbian newspaper at almost any Swiss newsstand and receive TV programs in almost any European language via satellite.

### English as the Unofficial Fifth Language

Tourists and foreign business people may express themselves in English, however, and have a good chance to get answered. In some multinational companies' offices in Switzerland English has been declared as corporate language, especially if their customers speak English anyway. Sometimes even native Swiss people with different mother tongues (German vs. French or Italian) will use some English words as a common basis.

# Why do the Swiss speak German, French, Italian and Rumantsch?

## *The Origins of Switzerland's Native Ethnic Groups*

Switzerland is not and has never been an ethnically homogeneous nation. The first tribes settling in the region today known as Switzerland having left written historic records were the celtic **Helvetians** (some 2500 - 2000 years ago), speaking a celtic language and the **Rhetians** who were not Romans but have adopted the Roman language (Latin) before they left any written traces. While the Rhetians, living in the alpine valleys of southeastern Switzerland, were able to preserve their language (Rumantsch) and culture to our days, the original celtic population has left almost no traces in Switzerland except from a few geographical names.

In 58 B.C. the Helvetians attempted to leave Switzerland and to settle somewhere in southern France, but they were stopped and defeated by the Roman commander Julius Caesar. So they had to return to Switzerland under Roman administration. From the times of Caesar, a Gallo-Roman culture flourished in western Europe (Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, England and western and northern Switzerland). Generally speaking, River Rhine separated the sphere of the Romans and Celts from those of Germanic tribes.

But during the migration of nations around A.D. 400, several Germanic tribes, among them the **Franks** (hence: *France*) and the **Burgundians** (hence: *Burgundy*, a region in southeastern France) crossed the Rhine border. The Franks settled in northern France (around Paris), the Burgundians in western Switzerland and Burgundy (their capital being Geneva). These tribes negotiated agreements with the Romans and installed themselves as heirs to the Roman administration. So they also adopted the Latin language and culture.

Another Germanic tribe, the **Lombardians** (hence: *Lombardia* = northern Italy around Milan) settled in Italy and in the valleys of southern Switzerland geographically easily accessible from there. In the course of the centuries since, Latin dialects spoken in France / western Switzerland, Italy / southern Switzerland and Spain have developed into French, Italian and Spanish.

Groups belonging to yet another Germanic tribe, the **Alamannen**, infiltrated northern Switzerland while a part of the tribe remained in southwestern Germany (today known as Baden-Württemberg with capital Stuttgart). Contrary to the above mentioned tribes they were neither really interested in Roman towns nor in Roman culture, settled in small villages and stuck to their Germanic language. Within two centuries they had established a clear majority of the population in northern Switzerland, however, while many Celts and Romans retreated and the public use of the Latin language disappeared in northern Switzerland (except, of course, for the use of Latin in church rituals and on documents, as generally everywhere in medieval Europe).

So the **ethnic origin** of the **native Swiss population** (that is, the population present before migration in the 20th century) is in any case some kind of **melting pot**:

- Celtic - Roman - Burgundian in western Switzerland
- Roman - Lombardian in southern Switzerland
- Alamannic - Celtic - Roman in northern Switzerland

## **Widespread Use of Swiss German Dialects**

While using dialects is considered to be somewhat uncultured in other countries, German speaking Swiss people are very proud of their regional Swiss German dialects - even business people use them in formal negotiations and university professors when discussing scientific theories.