Language policy in multilingual Switzerland

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Multilingualism
AND
government
BELGIUM
LUXEMBOURG
SWITZERLAND
FORMER YUGOSLAVIA
SOUTH AFRICA

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Summary

Switzerland is often quoted as a success story for its handling of linguistic and cultural diversity. The author offers an assessment of this success: to what extent is this reputation justified? What are the conditions that have resulted in this very particular way of dealing with diversity in a multilingual state? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the "Swiss model"? The reader is provided with an analytical, rather than descriptive, perspective on Swiss multilingualism today, concentrating on some of the essential dimensions of the challenges confronting it.

The roots of Swiss multilingualism

Despite having a small population of barely over seven million, Switzerland has four national languages: German (declared as their "main language", in the standard or dialectal form, by 63.6% of the resident population), French (19.2%), Italian (7.6%) and Romansh (0.6%), according to 1990 federal census returns. Yet 9% of the resident population claim a non-national language as their main language, which is a very high percentage in international terms.

A vast array of figures, giving a fuller socio- and demolinguistic portrait of Switzerland, can easily be retrieved from a variety of sources (e.g. Schlüpf, 1982; Département fédéral de l'intérieur, 1989; Lüdi, Werlen & Bianconi, 1997; Matthey...