

Four languages, one association: A*dS

Barbara Sauser

Switzerland has four official national languages: German, which is by far the most widely spoken, French, Italian and Romansh. Most native speakers of Romansh are completely bilingual, while people from other language regions learn the other national languages only as ‘foreign’ languages at school, (if at all). A feature of German-speaking Switzerland is that people speak in dialect in all settings, but they write in standard German. Books are therefore usually translated into standard German.

For a translators’ association, a linguistic context of this nature means that it has to deal not only with the ‘normal’ diversity of members – different levels of professionalism, different genres and fields, etc. – but also with four distinct cultural spaces. Economic conditions vary from one linguistic region to another and the economic conditions of the reference countries – Germany, France and Italy – are even more different. To give a concrete example: according to the [2020 CEATL survey](#) on the working conditions of literary translators in Europe, the typical rate for 1,800 characters is 22 euros in Germany, 29 euros in Austria,

25 euros in France and 15 euros in Italy. In Switzerland, with its high cost of living, it is 50 euros. Translators living in Switzerland must contend, both at home and abroad, with colleagues who work for lower rates. Above all, it is thanks to the support of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and other foundations that it is possible to earn a living as a literary translator in Switzerland.

Impact of national association

Notwithstanding their different languages and the lack of homogeneity, literary translators have joined together to form a national multilingual association. Firstly, because a national association can have more impact in terms of cultural policy, but also because the number of literary translators would be simply too low for separate language-based associations: of the approximately 1000 writers and translators who are members of A*dS, only 140 are translators, and, in the case of Italian and Romansh in particular we are only talking about a handful of people.

The head offices of A*dS are in Zurich, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. To ensure contact with



WE SPEAK SWISS

24.3%

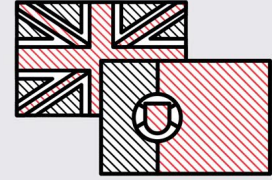
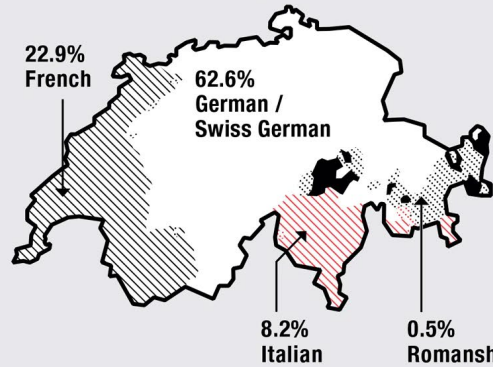
of the population do not have one of the four national languages as main language.

DIALECTS

“Swiss German” is a term that covers a large variety of Alemannic dialects.

4 LANGUAGES

Switzerland has 4 national languages.



English and Portuguese are the most commonly spoken foreign languages in Switzerland.

Romansh is a language from the Rhaeto-Romance family, derived from Latin.

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French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino, there are paid outposts with a small workload. The seven members of the Committee represent the different fields – books for young people, the spoken word, translation, etc. – but also the various linguistic regions including the ‘fifth national language’, which in Switzerland is currently receiving more and more attention in cultural affairs and cultural policy. The ‘fifth national language’ is the multiplicity of languages spoken by 23% of the Swiss population whose mother tongue is not one of the four official national languages. A practical initiative is, for example, the provision of work bursaries for those writing in a foreign language.

One of the objectives of A*dS is, of course, to ensure that translators are correctly paid for their work. The association has published a brochure with recommended rates (the brochure can be downloaded [here](#) in French, German and Italian.) These rather ambitious rates recommended by

the association have indeed sent out shockwaves throughout Switzerland to organisers of (small) cultural events, such as readings. This is much less of an issue in German-speaking Switzerland, with a tradition of paying authors and translators for presentations compared to French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino, where they often do not get paid at all for this kind of work. In its initiatives, A*dS must therefore always strive to ensure that members from all regions feel truly represented and that efforts to achieve professional recognition do not simply lead to the disappearance of cultural initiatives.



A*dS Board meeting, Biel/Bienne, 2023
Photo: A*dS



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Barbara Sauser
Photo: Nicola Terzaghi

The cultural message

A*dS also maintains contacts with translation associations in neighbouring countries – for example, we meet up in Frankfurt or at events organised by one of these associations – and participates in discussions relating to a particular language region (with the possible exception of EU-specific issues). In the coming months, A*dS will undertake a survey in Switzerland along the lines of the one carried out this winter by the ATLF, “Machine Translation and Post-Editing”, and in the case of French as the target language will expand on a current **VdÜ** research project for German, on the subject of artificial intelligence.

At national level, cultural promotion is defined by a ‘Culture Message’, each with a time-span of four years. A feature of the latest ‘Message’ is that the Swiss Confederation’s support for cultural endeavours requires the beneficiaries of funding to be paid in accordance with the guidelines of respective umbrella associations on the remuneration of the artists/actors involved. So if a

festival pays fees that are too low, it runs the risk of no longer being eligible for public funding. This places a lot of pressure on the organisers to pay acceptable fees. However – and this is rather complicated – it is not the federal government but the cantons, cities and municipalities that are responsible for the promotion of literature in Switzerland. They are currently engaged in discussions on whether and how they will follow federal measures in relation to fees. The aim of A*dS is to ensure that the 26 Swiss cantons also recognise this principle as a standard, so that the financial situation of writers and translators can be improved.