Landesmuseum Zürich.

Multilingual Switzerland
National Museum Zurich | 15.09.2023-14.01.2024 | 2nd floor, new building

Tour of the exhibition

Languages are a key part of Switzerland's intangible cultural heritage, and this exhibition explores them from a cultural history perspective. Visitors are invited to join an acoustic interactive tour and to travel through Switzerland's linguistic landscape in space and time. They wear headphones connected to a tracking system which allow them to move freely around the exhibition space to discover interactive content and to delve into three-dimensional soundscapes.

Intro: Station concourse
At the start of the exhibition, visitors are given headphones and asked to select their language. As soon as they put their headphones on, they are plunged into the multilingual soundscape of a station concourse, which symbolises both the start of the journey through multilingual Switzerland, and the clashing of many different languages and dialects in the public space. The station concourse is not only brought to life acoustically, but also through an eye-catching object: the former departures board from Zurich's main station, which has been reprogrammed by artist duo Gysin & Vanetti from Ticino, and which plays with the language, shapes and sounds of split-flap displays.

As they begin the tour, visitors are greeted by two voices – a tour guide and a museum trainee – who will accompany them on their journey. The guide's voice was provided by Julia Leitmeyer in German, Vincent Veillon in French, Margherita Coldesina in Italian, Olivia Spinatsch in Romansh and Cyril Jost in English. Comedian Vincent Kucholl from French-speaking Switzerland provides the voice of the trainee in all language versions, except Italian, which features curator Thomas Bochet. The two characters start by inviting visitors to explore the soundscape of the virtual station. When visitors move around the space, they hear a hubbub of voices made up of snippets of words and dialects in various languages and can thereby familiarise themselves with the interactive technique and the three-dimensional sound.

Part 1: History of Switzerland's language regions

In the first part, visitors experience an interactive and auditory history of Switzerland's language regions. They also gain an insight into the migrant languages Yenish, Yiddish and Italian and into the development of the four national dictionaries.

All the language regions underwent a process of standardisation, but evolved differently in terms of spoken language. In the western cantons of Switzerland, the regional dialects – known as patois – were largely supplanted by French by the end of the 17th century. French, which had emerged at the royal court in France, was spread ever further by the Reformers from northern France in Geneva and Neuchâtel. The centralised way in which the language was governed in France also influenced French-speaking Switzerland, particularly after the French Revolution. For example, a Genevan grammar book from 1790 shows how French was rigorously purged of local terms and expressions.

Besides the objects, historical and contemporary audio documents also highlight the diversity of spoken languages. On stools scattered throughout the space, visitors can listen to three examples of dialects from each of the language regions. For French-speaking Switzerland, visitors can listen to an example of the dialect spoken in the Jura and the patois that is still spoken in Évolène. Another example from the canton of Vaud shows that the French spoken in Switzerland today is mainly distinguished by accent.

In German-speaking Switzerland, too, the Reformation and the advent of printing had a significant impact on the spread of the written language, as shown by the example from the Zurich Bible of 1524. As opposed to the other language regions, dialects were less systematically stigmatised in the German-speaking cantons. In the 19th century, the status of Swiss German dialects was enhanced, and writers and researchers started documenting and cultivating them, such as in the 'Collection of Swiss Ranz des Vaches and folk songs' of 1826.

Amid this interest in dialects, the first dialect dictionary appeared in German-speaking Switzerland in 1881. Objects from the archives of dialect dictionaries from the four language regions illustrate the efforts made by dialect researchers since the late 19th century to preserve dialects from the threat of extinction.

As regards Italian-speaking Switzerland, a statute book from the Sonvico district of Lugano dating back to 1473 shows how, in the 15th century, notaries in Ticino started writing in a mix of local Lombardy dialect, a written Florentine dialect and Latin, rather than only in Latin. Tuscan Italian, which was shaped by Dante, initially became accepted as the written and administrative language, and ended up establishing itself as the spoken language through schools.

The Romansh-speaking area once stretched as far as Lake Constance, but was soon superseded by German, as demonstrated by the history of a coat of arms from the canton of St. Gallen. Five schoolbooks show that in the case of Romansh, standardisation did not result in one language, but instead in five 'idioms' that each developed discretely in the rugged mountain regions. Finally, an edition of the *Pledari Grond* dictionary epitomises the more recent standardisation work that saw Romansh become Rumantsch Grischun.

But it is not only Switzerland's current national languages that have a long history, other languages spoken in the country do too. For example, the exhibition includes a wooden sign featuring Yenish – which is currently recognised as a minority language, but is rarely seen in the public space – and visitors are invited to try and decrypt it. A Western Yiddish dialect was spoken in a number of towns and villages in the Surbtal until the last century, as shown by an embroidery sampler with Hebrew lettering.

Other exhibits document how migration causes languages to evolve. For example, visitors can listen to an audio document on code switching between Swiss German and Italian, which ties in with a 1960s radio programme on the story of Italian as a lingua franca during the age of Italian labour migration.

Part 2: Language policy and identity

Switzerland's four official languages are now a key part of the country's identity. While this multilingualism is based on the historical development of the language regions described above, politically, it only emerged with the establishment of the modern federal state, 175 years ago. The second part of the exhibition looks at the politicisation of Switzerland's quadrilingualism. It focuses on the struggle for supremacy among the languages and the question of whether and how its four national languages are part of Switzerland's identity.

Along the timeline, different objects represent specific moments in the politicisation of language. The 1848 Federal Constitution, which sets out Switzerland's three main languages as the Confederation's official languages, marks the moment when Switzerland officially became a multilingual country.

Amid the nationalist movements in the early 20th century, Switzerland was divided along language lines, and particularly before and during the First World War, the fronts between 'deutsche Schweiz' and 'Suisse française' became entrenched, as illustrated for example in a caricature from the satirical magazine *Nebelspalter* of 10 November 1917. However, the exploitation of language communities for nationalist ends in Switzerland was set against multilingualism and the apparently 'old values' of the Confederation. Quadrilingualism was to become an essential feature of Switzerland's national identity. Romansh was therefore enshrined in the Constitution as the fourth national language in 1938.

In the second half of the 20th century, tensions repeatedly flared up between the language regions. The most marked political division along linguistic lines appeared on 6 December 1992 during the vote on Switzerland joining the European Economic Area EEA. The caricature of the *Röstigraben* from the newspaper *24 heures* of 7 December 1992, as well as various authentic radio segments, provide visitors with an insight into the deep rift between the German-speaking and French-speaking parts of Switzerland at that time.

Finally, the poster on early English learning in primary school highlights a current language conflict: the fact that in some German-speaking cantons, English is now taught as the first foreign language ahead of French. Many French-speaking cantons consider this a threat to Switzerland's cultural identity. This 'linguistic

conflict' shows that Switzerland's language policy is still constantly evolving and raising new questions.

In the centre of the third room, visitors are transported into a restaurant setting which may sound different depending on the language region. At four large tables, the virtual tour guides and their travel companions sit down to have a break. They then meet representatives of the four language regions and start chatting. Visitors will be able to recognise well-known voices such as those of Patti Basler, Flavio Sala, Vincent Kucholl and Flavio Spescha, who each poke fun at language policy issues and stereotypes from their own individual perspectives and have a go at speaking English and Switzerland's other national languages.

A media installation with four screens can be seen from the tables. A compilation of programmes from Switzerland's four language regions suggests channel hopping through Switzerland's television stations. Older and newer clips are mixed up, some of which are actually about language, while others bring aesthetic parallels, and then they all play simultaneously in four languages. The compilation features a number of well-known faces and formats, as well as some gems from the archives of Switzerland's four public TV channels.

Part 3: Multilingual society

Switzerland is a country with four national languages, but Swiss society is multilingual. An array of languages and dialects are spoken in the workplace, on the street and at home. Around two thirds of the population regularly use more than one language. But there are also many people who only speak one language. More than 20% of the population cite a non-national language as their first language. The last section of the exhibition features nine people who all have a special link to language and multilingualism. In a fictional train compartment, visitors meet the writer Usama Al Shahmani, who talks about writing in a foreign language; Pirmin Vogel, who gives an insight into sign language; Alizé Rose-May Monod, who looks at inclusive language; Canadian Mary Yacob, who talks of her experience as an expat in Switzerland; Eritrean Abdu Mohammed Andu, who speaks eight languages; Lily Lucy, who describes young people's language; and Kosovan Shemsije Elshani, who talks about language as an obstacle and an opportunity. They all contribute to Switzerland's linguistic diversity.

At the end of the exhibition, the tour guides bid farewell and ask visitors to hand in their headphones. Visitors then have the opportunity to leave a comment about their own experiences of languages and multilingualism in Switzerland.