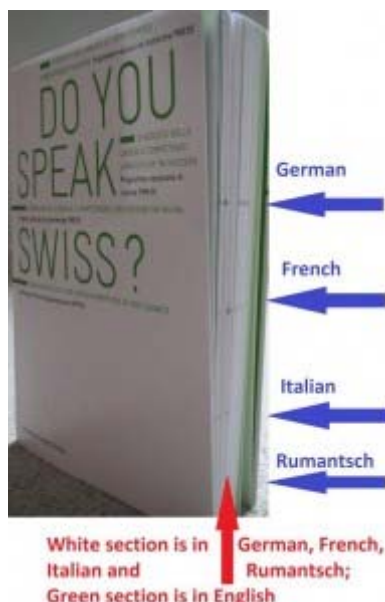


Do you speak Swiss?



A most amazing book has just landed on my desk: [Do you speak Swiss](#), edited by [Walter Haas](#), is the final report on a Swiss National Research Project devoted to [Linguistic Diversity and Language Competence in Switzerland](#). Initiated by the Swiss Parliament in 2003, the national project (which was known as NFP56 for short) consisted of 26 research projects, which, over a period of three years from 2006 to 2008, investigated a wide variety of aspects of multilingualism, language policy and language learning. I was privileged to head one of those projects, [an investigation into multilingualism in the Swiss tourism industry](#), together with [Alexandre Duchêne](#); and it's great to see it all come together in this final report.

One of the beauties of the report is how the book is iconic of its content. The front cover is quintilingual in English, French, German, Italian and Romansh although the English title obviously overshadows the subtitle in the four national languages. About two thirds of the 240-page report is presented quadrilingually in the four national languages, followed by an English translation, which is printed on green paper. So, the design makes it easy to navigate between the national languages and English. Within the national languages section, the languages are mingling nicely rather than being segregated into separate sections. However, a thumb index makes it possible to go straight to a particular language if you so wish. The thumb index for German is almost a solid line, indicating that there is a lot of German used throughout; the indexes for French and Italian are more like a dotted line, and the index for Romansh consists only of three dots, iconic of the minority status of that language.



Overall, the report provides a wealth of findings around three key research questions: how does Swiss multilingualism work? What are the current linguistic competences of the Swiss population? What should the linguistic competences of the Swiss population be in the future and how can we plan for those? There is such a wealth of findings that I'll blog about some of the 26 projects individually in the near future. For now, I'll focus on the six key issues highlighted by the editor as emerging from the national project:

1. **How multilingualism works:** projects devoted to institutional multilingualism in contexts such as the Swiss army or tourism businesses (as in our project) highlight people's pragmatism and flexibility in relation to the multilingual realities in which they find themselves. Of course, institutional pragmatism and flexibility is only possible if there are a certain number of multilingual individuals in the institution. However, institutions do not do much to promote individual multilingualism and to offer systematic language training. So, one of the report's recommendations is for institutions to acknowledge individual multilingualism more as a resource and to remunerate it accordingly and also for the provision of more systematic language training.
2. **Learning languages:** language learning needs to happen in school and there are a range of challenges to make language education more effective. These range from questions around which languages should be introduced when and other language-in-education policy issues to more classroom oriented questions such as language teaching methods. A number of projects, for instance, highlighted the importance of resourcing language teaching properly as shallow learning results in quick forgetting, and so is largely a wasted effort.
3. **English:** the role of English is as hot a topic in Switzerland as elsewhere and the report's pragmatism is refreshing: English is here to stay and a central facet of the Swiss linguistic landscape, as it is globally, but English is not enough. For Switzerland, at least, the future continues to be multilingual.
4. **Standard- and non-standard varieties:** German-speaking Swiss often quip that Standard German is their first foreign language. However, NFP56 research has shown that the majority population is largely unaffected by this difference between Swiss and standard German varieties. The people who have trouble to master the standard, both in German-speaking and Francophone Switzerland are those with a migration background pointing to the need to improve educational opportunities for migrant populations.
5. **Linguistic minorities:** the indigenous minority languages of Italian and Romansh have traditionally enjoyed equality before the law, even if not outside the institutions of the state. While the challenge to ensure equal opportunities for the speakers of the indigenous minority languages remains to some degree, the much

larger challenge that has emerged in recent years is the one to ensure equal opportunities for the “new” minorities that have resulted from the migrations of the past decades. The report is adamant that there is often a double standard that views the maintenance of indigenous minority languages as desirable but views the same maintenance as a failure of “integration” when it comes to non-indigenous minorities. However, research projects in the NFP56 also found that migrant languages are maintained well in Switzerland, even in the 3rd generation, and most of the projects highlighted the importance of acknowledging and supporting their maintenance in the interest of Swiss society as a whole.

6. Multilingual media: somewhat surprisingly the media were found to be far behind the country's multilingual reality with most media catering narrowly to what they see as their linguistic clientele.

Ultimately, the linguistic challenges of Switzerland are those of every contemporary society. The Swiss are fortunate in that they have been thinking about how to make societal multilingualism work for the common good for much longer than pretty much everyone else. Switzerland is also fortunate in that their politicians had the good sense to initiate and fund a national research project that will form the basis of future language policy. Everyone involved in language policy, language-in-education policy, the sociolinguistics of multilingualism and language learning has a lot to learn from NFP56! If you only read one sociolinguistics book this year, make it *Do you speak Swiss?*



Walter Haas (Ed.) (2010). *Do you speak Swiss? Sprachenvielfalt und Sprachkompetenz in der Schweiz*. Nationales Forschungsprogramm NFP 56 NZZ Libro