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*Multilingualism in Switzerland: receptive skills in Italian for promoting comprehension between the language communities*

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## **Multilingualism in Switzerland: receptive skills in Italian for promoting comprehension between the language communities**

Section 8: Sociolinguistique et multilinguisme

### ***0. Introduction***

This paper reports on a joint project of the Institute of Multilingualism (University of Fribourg, University of Teacher Education, Fribourg), the University of Bern and the Linguistic Observatory of Italian Switzerland (Bellinzona) that consisted in the development of a curriculum for teaching receptive skills in Italian to adults in the sociolinguistic context of quadrilingual Switzerland. The aim of the project was to contribute to improving comprehension between the language communities by enhancing the functional position of Italian, a minority language that nevertheless enjoys the status of official language. This is achieved by means of an intercomprehension approach, whose theoretical and practical concerns are sketched in this paper, and whose implementation is facilitated in a context of societal and institutional multilingualism as well as extensive individual plurilingualism.

### ***1. The sociolinguistic context of multilingual Switzerland***

The Swiss Confederation is characterized by institutional and societal multilingualism. The Federal Constitution and legislation attribute the three official languages German, French and Italian equivalent status and prescribe the advancement of the minority languages Italian and Romansh<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the legislation requests the promotion of comprehension and exchange between the language communities. In spite of the legal foundations aiming at widespread societal multilingualism, the plurilingual repertoire of individuals may vary a great deal within each language area.

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<sup>1</sup> Art. 70§1 Swiss Federal Constitution; Art. 5§1 Federal law on the national languages and the comprehension between the language communities.

The official languages of the Swiss Confederation are: German, French and Italian, (ordered by numbers of speakers). Moreover, there is one semi-official language, Romansch Grischun, a standard unifying a set of Rhaeto-Romance varieties. Within the linguistic communities, a variety of dialects are used in everyday conversation. In the case of the German speaking part, the numerous dialectal varieties enjoy a very high level of prestige and are spoken regularly in public debates and in the media.

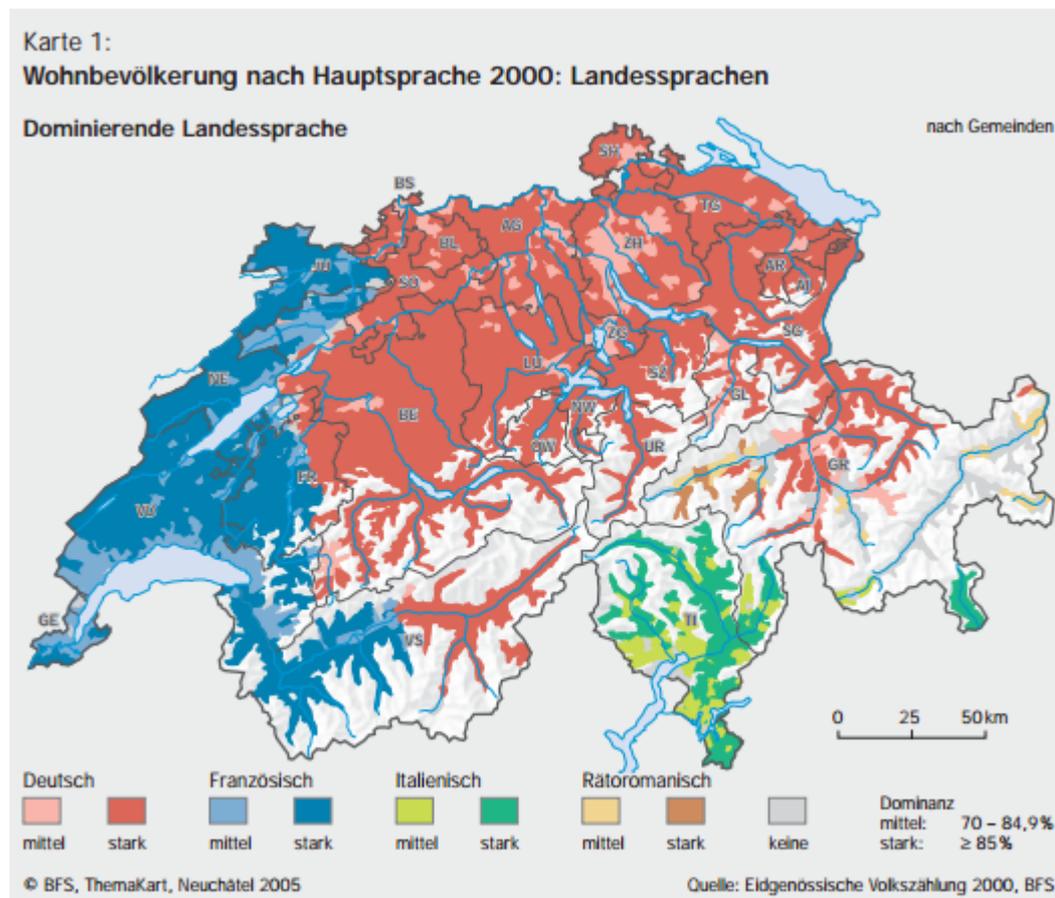


Figure 1: Linguistic landscape of Switzerland showing the language areas of medium (mittel) and strong (stark) dominance of the four national languages German, French, Italian and Romansh, based on the census of 2000 (Lüdi & Werlen 2005: 12)

The Swiss linguistic landscape is traditionally territorial, i.e. the four linguistic communities are *de facto* confined to four separate, essentially monolingual geographical regions. Nonetheless, there is a certain permeability between the language areas, thus complementing societal multilingualism by a considerable degree of individual plurilingualism. This is due to language policy measures, such as language legislation and acquisition planning, as well as simply to contact phenomena.

The Swiss Constitution and legislation impose the encouragement of national solidarity and the comprehension between the language communities by means of a wide range of language



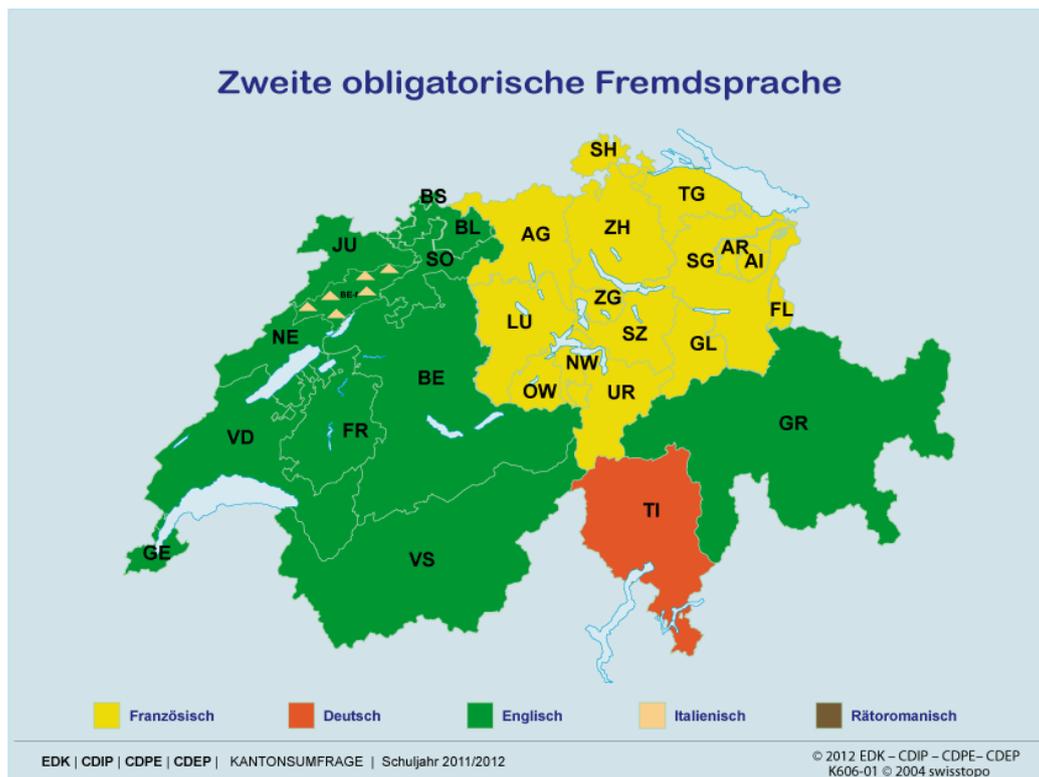


Figure 3: Second obligatory L2 teaching in the cantons of Switzerland. Chart from the website of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) <http://www.edk.ch/dyn/15532.php>

Taking into consideration the second compulsory L2 teaching, it can be observed that in all the German Swiss cantons whose first L2 is English, French is taught as the second obligatory L2. This means that in all cantons the teaching of at least a second national language is guaranteed, in observation of Art. 15§3 of the Federal law on the national languages and the comprehension between the language communities, which prescribes that, by the end of compulsory education, all students must have competences in a second national language and in a second foreign language. This formulation leaves the cantons free to choose the combination of languages, the modalities of teaching them, as well as the choice between English and a second national language as the second “foreign” language. As a consequence, as far as the national languages are concerned, most of the efforts towards national intercomprehension are concentrated on the acquisition of the two majority languages.

## ***2. Italian in multilingual Switzerland***

Italian is the third national language by numbers of speakers. The percentage of speakers has undergone considerable change over the last decades, especially between 1970 and 2000 (see Figure 4). The relatively high percentage of 11.1% in 1975 is due to a peak in immigration in the 1960s and 1970s, which gradually decreased in later years reaching a percentage of 6.5% according to the Federal Census of 2000 (Lüdi & Werlen 2005: 7). This percentage refers to the “main

language”<sup>3</sup> and includes speakers of Italian within, as well as outside the traditionally Italian-speaking territory of Ticino and part of the Canton of Graubünden. The data from the more recent survey of 2012<sup>4</sup> indicates a percentage of Italian speakers of 8.3%. However, it must be noted that the data of the census of 2000 and the survey of 2012 are not directly comparable, chiefly because the questionnaire of the 2012 census admitted more than one main language, while the older one admitted only one. Furthermore, the 2012 survey was not addressed to the whole resident population of Switzerland, but only to a sample. This “break” in the statistics is indicated by a vertical line in the table of figure 4. Therefore we cannot infer an absolute increase in speakers of Italian between 2000 and 2012. Nevertheless, the percentage of people who declared Italian as at least one of their main languages in 2012 suggests that the option of indicating more than one language in the questionnaire permitted this language to surface as a main language to a larger extent than in censuses/surveys where only one language was admitted. (This applies to an even larger degree to other, non-national languages, whose salience as an element of a bi-/plurilingual repertoire increases from 8.5 to 21% between 2000 and 2012).

The emergence of Italian as an component of a bi-/plurilingual repertoire in recent surveys is chiefly to be associated with second- or third-generation Italian immigrants, who are well integrated and educated in the non-Italian-speaking territory of Switzerland. This section of the Swiss population had indicated only German or French as their main language in the census of 2000 and previous censuses, while in the more recent surveys, they were allowed to mention Italian as part of their plurilingual repertoire.

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<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire was submitted to the entire population and the question regarding the main language was: “Which is the language in which you think and which you know best?”

<sup>4</sup> The data of the structural survey of the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) provides information on the themes of population, households, families, housing, employment, mobility, education, language and religion. The characteristics of the survey are the following (<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/en/index/news/02/03/02.html>):

- written sample survey of 200,000 persons;
- participation by internet or by completing written questionnaire;
- conducted annually (reference day: 31 December);
- geographic aggregation levels: Switzerland, major regions, cantons and communes with more than 15,000 inhabitants;
- the results can be aggregated from 3 to 5 years. This facilitates geographically smaller-scale evaluations (after 5 years for communes with more than 3000 inhabitants);
- cantons and cities can enlarge the sample.

## Permanent resident population 15 years or over by main language(s), 1970 to 2012

in %

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2012	CI in %
Total	4'575'416	4'950'821	5'495'018	5'868'572	6'662'333	*
German	65.3	65.7	64.6	64.2	64.9	0.1
French	18.7	18.6	19.3	20	22.6	0.1
Italian	11.1	9.3	8	6.8	8.3	0.1
Romansh	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.5	0
Other languages	4.0	5.5	7.6	8.5	21	0.2

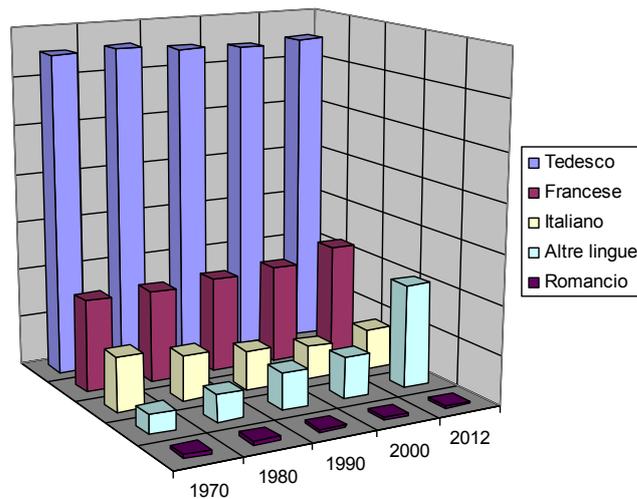


Figure 4: The table and its graphic visualization show the distribution of the different languages among the Swiss population. The vertical line in the table between 2000 and 2012 shows a break in methods: The figures of 1970-2000, where only one language could be indicated as a “main language”, refer to federal censuses of the entire population, whereas the data of 2012 was gained from a survey, where respondents could indicate more than one language as their main language, thus the increase of speakers of French, Italian, and, especially other, non-national languages. (Data: Federal Statistical Office; graph by M. Casoni)

The data regarding the main languages discussed above indicate a certain degree of multiple main languages in the Swiss population. This is confirmed by further data from the 2012 Federal survey which reveal that, on average, about 15,5% of the Swiss population indicate more than one language as their main language. In absolute figures, about 850,000 people are main-language bilinguals and approximately 180,000 are main-language trilinguals, totalling slightly above a million people. The highest rate of main-language plurilingualism is found in the Romansh language area, where nearly 25% (of a total of nearly 22'000 speakers) of this minority language are main-language bi- or trilinguals. Second in this rating is the French-speaking area: of a total population of slightly over 1.5 million, over 20% are main-language bi- or trilinguals. In the Italian language area, the rate is somewhat lower: of a total population of 300,955, main-language bilinguals or trilinguals make up 17,33%. This rate is yet slightly lower in German-speaking

Switzerland, where 13.37% of a total of nearly 4.8 million are main-language bi- or trilinguals. These findings show a considerable degree of individual plurilingualism in Switzerland, which is not necessarily the result of language policy, but rather a natural consequence of language contact.

	Total		Monolingual		Bilingual		Trilingual	
	Absolute Values	%	Absolute Values	%	Absolute Values	%	Absolute Values	%
<b>Switzerland, total</b>	6'662'333	100	5'625'900	84.44	849'708	12.75	182'940	2.75
<b>German Speaking Region</b>	4'760'432	71.45	4'121'021	86.57	525'345	11.04	110'970	2.33
<b>French Speaking Region</b>	1'579'240	23.7	1'239'914	78.51	278'287	17.62	60'511	3.83
<b>Italian speaking Region</b>	300'955	4.52	248'627	82.61	41'483	13.78	10'684	3.55
<b>Romanch Speaking Region</b>	21'706	0.33	16'338	75.27	4'593	21.16	775	3.57

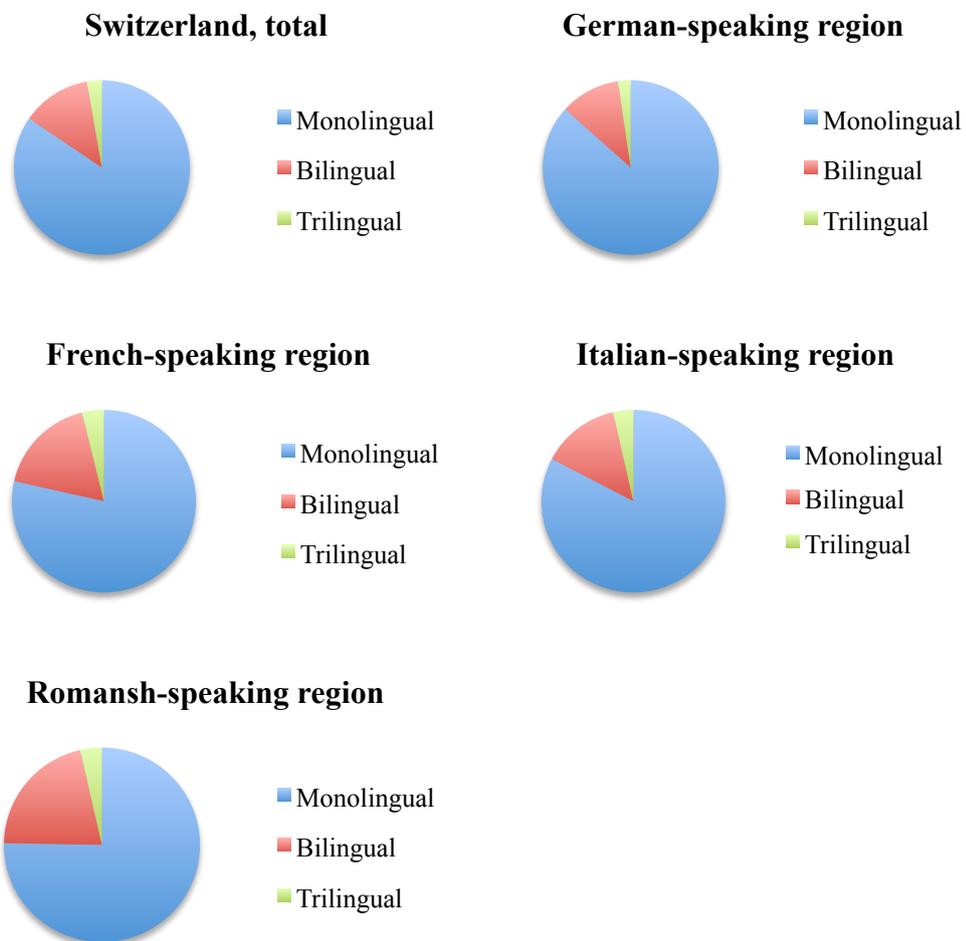


Figure 5: The table shows the rates of main-language bi- and trilingualism of the total Swiss population and of the inhabitants of the four language regions. The figures and percentages refer to the respondents of the 2012 survey who indicated one, two or three main languages. These percentages are visualized in the graphs.

Nevertheless, it would be exaggerated to claim that all main-language bi- or trilinguals emerging from these statistics are necessarily strictly speaking native speakers of these languages in the sense that their primary socialization took place in more than one language. For instance, focusing on Italian-speaking Switzerland, a number of respondents, having resided in the Italian-speaking cantons for years, claimed to have two or three main languages in their repertoire (bilingual or trilingual: Italian-German, Italian-French, Italian-German-English, Italian-other languages). These respondents cannot, strictly speaking, be considered native speakers of Italian, since their language of primary socialization was often not Italian. They are to be considered 'semi-native' (or 'near native') speakers (cf. Berruto, Moretti & Schmid 1988: 12, Berruto 2003: 8). Such phenomena of contact in bilingual or trilingual speakers may moreover result in what Thomason (2001: 59-91) defines as "contact induced language change" and may have some influence on the differentiation that occurs at various levels of the national languages in contact with each other (as well as with English and other languages).

### ***3. Comprehension between the language communities in Switzerland***

This frame of pervasive societal multilingualism and individual plurilingualism as a result of considerable efforts in promoting comprehension between the language communities by means of language education, as well as due to contact phenomena as described above, has proved to be an asset from various perspectives (economic, social, cultural etc., cf. Lüdi, Seelmann & Sitter-Liver 2008). Nevertheless, effective communication between speakers of different languages in Switzerland is a challenge which, in practice, cannot always be met entirely. For the following reasons, communication between the speakers of different languages in Switzerland can still be improved, especially as far as the minority languages and the dialectal varieties are concerned:

- Language competences are not reciprocal: the two minority languages, Italian and the Rhaeto-Romance varieties, are scarcely known outside their traditional territory, whereas the speakers of the minority languages generally have a good knowledge of at least one of the majority languages. It can be argued that this lies in the nature of minority languages. However, the Swiss Constitution pays special attention to the language minorities by conferring to German, French and Italian equivalent status of official languages (and to Romansh the status of semi-official language) and by prescribing measures for the promotion of the minority languages<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, for perfectly justifiable practical

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<sup>5</sup> Art. 70 of the Swiss Federal Constitution

1 The official languages of the Confederation shall be German, French and Italian. Romansh shall also be an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh.

2 The Cantons shall decide on their official languages. In order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, the Cantons shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take account of indigenous linguistic minorities.

3 The Confederation and the Cantons shall encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities.

reasons (numbers of speakers, economic and social salience), the implementation of the above-mentioned Art. 15§3 of the Federal law on the national languages and the comprehension between the language communities undoubtedly favours the majority languages.

- The pervasive use of the dialectal varieties due to their high prestige in German Switzerland is a source of considerable difficulties for non-German speakers, whose acquired competences in standard German, often prove insufficient for efficient communication in the German language territory.
- Productive competences in other Swiss national languages frequently prove to be inadequate, so that native speakers of different Swiss languages frequently resort to English as their shared instrument of communication, cf. Dürmüller (2001 and 2002), Watts & Murray (2001), Durham (2007), Schaller-Schwaner (2008).

It is therefore necessary to explore new ways of integrating the constitutionally prescribed equal status of the three official languages and the legislation prescribing the encouragement of understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities, whose implementation caters primarily for the majority languages as well as the global language English. A promising approach to this problem is the promotion of receptive competences, which ensure a mode of communication already successfully practiced in various institutional settings in Switzerland: everyone speaks their own language and understands the language(s) of the others. Such a solution presupposes some degree of multilingual competence of the individual which however does not necessarily need to be productive in all languages. In order to practice this mode of communication, it is sufficient to acquire comprehension competences in the less familiar languages (not excluding, however, productive competences in some of the languages of the repertoire), thus considerably reducing the acquisition effort. As a result, the language learning effort could be spread out among a larger number of languages, including the minority languages and even the dialectal varieties, in order to potentially include all varieties as means of communication and all speakers of different languages and varieties as participants in the communication process.

#### ***4. Multilingual skills, receptive skills and intercomprehension***

The multilingual skills of the individual are indeed not to be considered a pigeon-holed set of competences in single languages, but a holistic repertoire of communicative proficiencies resulting from the interaction between skills acquired in different languages that mutually construct,

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4 The Confederation shall support the plurilingual Cantons in the fulfilment of their special duties.

5 The Confederation shall support measures by the Cantons of Graubünden and Ticino to preserve and promote the Romansh and the Italian languages.

reconstruct, influence and complement each other throughout the lifespan (cf. Degache 2006, Candelier 2005, Grosjean 1985 and 2004, Matthey 2005). The multilingual repertoire of the individual is a complex and unique whole of cultural and linguistic competences emerging from the total of linguistic experiences acquired in a lifetime and which is continuously reorganised by new linguistic input, whose acquisition is facilitated by the establishment of relations to elements already present in the repertoire.

Intercomprehension is “a form of communication in which each person uses his or her own language and understands that of the other” (Doyé, 2005: 7). The concept was developed in the early 1990’s in the Council of Europe with the intention of valuing the cultural and linguistic diversity as a complementary solution to communicating by means of a single dominant language only (*lingua franca*). In order to practice intercomprehension, receptive skills (i.e. the understanding of spoken utterances and written texts) in the non-native languages are therefore sufficient.

Understanding discourse in another language is favoured by the activation of knowledge already present, such as world knowledge, including the physical and social reality, as well as linguistic competences already acquired. All these different types of knowledge contribute to the (re-)construction of sense in discourse. The understanding of discourse in a not very familiar language is especially facilitated if lexical, morphological and syntactic structures are shared with better known languages. However, in the process of understanding a less familiar language, lexical and structural affinity need to be completed with contextual information (Berthele & Lambelet 2009). Since the process of understanding discourse consists primarily in the activation of a pre-existing knowledge base by integrating these different types of knowledge, the acquisition effort of receptive skills in a new language is considerably reduced compared to the acquisition of both receptive and productive skills. The knowledge base activated in understanding discourse in a not so familiar language is the following:

- Contextual knowledge (Rigotti & Rocci 2006)
- Situational knowledge
- Cultural knowledge, including encyclopedic (Doyé 2005)
- Language competences (lexical and structural), especially if the target language is typologically similar to languages already in the repertoire. Specific studies have been conducted in order to describe similarities in languages of the same language family: EuroComRom for Romance languages (Giudicetti et al. 2002), EuroComGerm for Germanic languages (Hufeisen & Marx 2007) and EuroComSlav for Slavonic languages (Zybatov 2002).

### ***5. The CIR project and receptive skills in Italian***

First of all, why focus on Italian? Although a minority language in Switzerland, Italian enjoys equal *de jure* status as German and French, but its functions are *de facto* limited, as a consequence of the difference in numbers of speakers and economic salience. Indeed, Italian is rarely used in multilingual settings (Lüdi 2013). German, French, or sometimes even English, are preferred as a language of communication (cf. Dürmüller 2002, Watts & Murray 2001, Durham 2007). Furthermore, Italian is not included in compulsory language education outside the Italian-speaking territory. As shown in figures 2 and 3 above, Italian is taught neither as a first, nor as a second L2<sup>6</sup>. Within the obligatory educational system, the majority languages and English are clearly given priority.

The CIR project, together with other initiatives<sup>7</sup>, represent important instruments for improving multilingual skills based on mutual understanding (cf. Matthey, 2005; Berthele/Lambelet, 2009). Receptive language skills facilitate effective communicative interaction between speakers of different languages, since everyone speaks their own language, while understanding the other's. In the case of Italian in Switzerland, the learning effort is reduced to a minimum, because the acquisition of receptive skills relies to a large extent on knowledge already present in the repertoire due to lexical and structural similarities between the two genealogically related languages Italian and French (cf. Giudicetti et al. 2002; Klein, 2002). The CIR project has developed teaching materials for self- and/or guided learning, enabling adults to acquire receptive skills in Italian as a first step towards the language and culture of Ticino and Italian Graubünden. The materials are specially designed for either native speakers of French or people who have a good knowledge of French. In Switzerland, one or the other is the case, thanks to compulsory language teaching.

The acquisition of Italian is facilitated in Switzerland not only due to the knowledge of French, but also thanks to the presence of a great deal of 'submerged' Italian competences in non-Italian-speaking territories as the result of e.g:

- contact with Italian-speaking immigrants in non-Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland;
- some aspects of the linguistic scenery (signs, billboards, announcements, instructions, product descriptions etc.);
- holidays in Italian-speaking territories (Italy or Italian Switzerland);

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<sup>6</sup> Italian is present in the obligatory teaching of L2 only in the in the Canton of Graubünden, where it is taught as a first L2, being an official language at a cantonal level.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. the handbook *Chunsch druus* for the acquisition of receptive competences in the Swiss German dialectal varieties for speakers of standard German by Müller, Wertenschlag et.al. (2009).

- a partial comprehension of Italian due to the presence in the individual repertoire of competences in genealogically and/or typologically related languages;
- to some extent, teaching in schools, especially at a non-compulsory level

Moreover traces of Italian are present the other languages of the Confederation, e.g.:

- in loan words such as *ciao*, *subito*, *quasi*, *tutti quanti*, *tutti frutti*;
- the creation of pseudo-Italian lexicon such as *pico bello*, *alles paletti*;
- the adoption of lexical morphology in word formation, e.g. the suffix *-eria* for designating a commercial site, *Brilleria*, *Rösteria* (Franceschini 2002).

The approach of the CIR project to language education is particularly suitable for a context of societal multilingualism with a high degree of individual plurilingualism as found in Switzerland. The focus on receptive skills optimizes the cognitive economy of adult learners by operationalizing linguistic and other cognitive resources already acquired during the lifespan (cf. Bertele & Lambelet 2009: 152).

The CIR project represents an effective instrument for improving multilingual interactive skills between individuals of different linguistic backgrounds. Activating and enhancing receptive skills promotes communication between speakers of different languages for the following reasons:

- if the speakers of different languages acquire receptive skills in the languages of their interlocutors, each speaker can express him/herself in his/her own language. This mode of communication is very efficient both on the production, as well as on the reception side.
- since no productive skills must be acquired and the acquisition of receptive skills generally precedes the acquisition of productive skills, the acquisition effort is reduced to a minimum.

This is particularly true if the different languages in the repertoire of the individual are genealogically and/or typologically related.

The CIR project aims at the enhancement of intercomprehension between the linguistic communities by equipping non-Italian speakers with basic comprehension skills, which, in interactions, allow Italian speakers to express themselves in their own language. This is an effective means of not only preserving, but enhancing multilingualism in Switzerland.

Since recent efforts in unifying curricula in the Swiss education system (HarmoS, Lehrplan 21) have practically excluded Italian from obligatory and post-obligatory education and preference is given to the economically and socially more significant majority languages as well as English (cf. figures 2 and 3 above), the traditional teaching of Italian is hardly contemplated in Swiss language education policies anymore. This makes the development of alternative ways of promoting this

language all the more necessary. The acquisition of receptive skills, especially in adults, is one effective means of keeping Italian competences alive outside its traditional territory without interfering with basic decisions in language education policy. Other possible measures aiming at the promotion of minimal competences in Italian are extracurricular activities in schools designed for young adolescents<sup>8</sup>.

## 6. Didactic principles of the curriculum

The CIR project developed teaching materials collected in the handbook *Capito?* which is intended for self-learning and/or for the implementation in language courses/training. It enables adults, who are either native speakers of French, or have acquired a good knowledge of French, to take a first step towards the Italian language as well as the cultural peculiarities of Ticino and Italian Graubünden.

The teaching principles are based on four keys to comprehension<sup>9</sup> permitting the reconstruction of sense in spoken and written discourse. The four keys draw the learner's attention to comprehension strategies of which she/he is usually not aware.

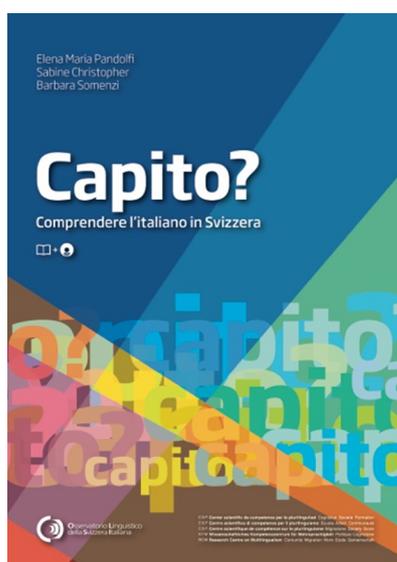


Figure 6: The cover of the handbook *Capito? Comprendere l'italiano in Svizzera*: [www.ti.ch/olsi-capito](http://www.ti.ch/olsi-capito)

<sup>8</sup> The one-week intensive course *Italiano subito* is the implementation of the *Curriculum minimo d'italiano*, the result of the project *Per una nuova posizione dell'italiano nel contesto elvetico. Strumenti e strategie per l'elaborazione di un curriculum minimo di italiano* directed by Bruno Moretti of the University of Berne within the framework of the National Research Programme 56 (Linguistic Diversity and Language Competence in Switzerland). (Antonini, Christopher Guerra & Moretti 2009, Bernasconi, Christopher Guerra, Lucini, Moretti & Pettenati 2009, Bernasconi, Christopher Guerra, Lucini, & Pettenati 2009). This extracurricular course is aimed at 13 to 15 year-old German-speaking secondary-school students and develops minimal communicative skills relevant to the target group by taking advantage of a pre-existing knowledge base, especially the plurilingual repertoire. Cf. the website of the curriculum: <http://www.italianosubito.ch/>

<sup>9</sup> This approach hinges on knowledge of the context drawn from Rigotti & Rocci (2006) as well as on lexical and structural comprehension strategies called “the seven sieves”: 1. international lexicon, 2. shared Romance lexicon, 3. phonological equivalence, 4. graphic and pronunciation equivalence, 5. Pan-Romance syntactic structures, 6. morpho-syntactic equivalence, 7. prefixes and suffixes, Giudicetti, Maeder, Klein & Stegman (2002).

**The first key is the context.** It is essential to become aware of the features of the context, i.e. the conditions that make spoken or written discourse meaningful, and of the social action it fulfils (Rigotti & Rocci 2006: 155). This enables the interpreter to make predictions about the content of the discourse, before even being exposed to it.

The first key is a guide to the analysis of the context which encourages the learner to answer a set of questions about the conditions that make the discourse or interaction meaningful:

- Who is speaking/writing? To whom is the discourse addressed?
- Which is the topic?
- Which is the objective of the discourse/interaction?
- Where does the interaction take place?
- Which are the roles of the participants?
- Which is the genre of the discourse?

Answering these questions helps the learner make explicit all the background information that allows him/her to make educated guesses about the content of the discourse or the interaction he/she is about to tackle.

**The second key is the co-text** which encourages the learner to consider the surroundings of any particular section of the discourse or interaction. What occurs previously, together with the knowledge of the context, generates strong expectations as to what may reasonably follow. E.g. in a spoken dialogue, the anticipations created by a previous turn, being embedded in a specific context, help the listener/reader/inter-agent imagine what kinds of contributions are admissible in the following turn.

**The third key is the shared lexicon**, i.e. the words in the discourse/interaction in the new language shared with the lexicon of the learner's repertoire. In the case of French speakers learning Italian, the proportion of shared lexicon is quite considerable, given the genealogical relation between these two languages. The French-speaking learner of Italian will possibly also be able to fall back on other shared lexicon in her/his repertoire, e.g. English or German.

In approaching a written text or a spoken discourse, the French-speaking learner of Italian will recognise the following categories of lexicon:

- Internationalisms: e.g. *e-mail, fax, hotel, taxi*.
- Proper names: e.g. *Locarno, Giovanni*.
- Shared romance lexicon: e.g. *billets/biglietti, abonnement/abbonamento, instant/istante, prendre/prendere, d'accord/d'accordo, va/va, bonjour/buongiorno, francs/franchi*.

- Words with a shared or partially shared consonant structure that allows the learner to recognize correspondences, although some sounds differ: e.g. *bien/bene, lieu/luogo, moitié/metà, prix/prezzo, pour/per, moitié/metà, prix/prezzo, puis/poi, peut (pouvez)/può, lieu/luogo, veut/vuole, me/mi.*
- Bridge words: in some cases the relation between French and Italian words is not immediately apparent, but the sense can be reconstructed by means of a directly related word (bridge word) which is similar in pronunciation and/or writing and shares part of the meaning: e.g. *niente = rien* [bridge] *néant; alto = haut* [bridge] *altitude.*
- Words that share their form with a word in the learner's repertoire, but their meaning can be retrieved only from the context: e.g. *grazie (grâce) -> 'merci', stazione (station) -> 'gare'.*

**The fourth key is word formation.** Understanding the mechanisms of word formation enables the learner to reconstruct the meanings of new words starting from already known, related lexicon. French and Italian lexical morphemes are often similar or alike, e.g. *organizzare* (verb) > *organizzabile* (adj) (French: *-able*) *funzionare* (verb) > *funzionamento* (noun) (French: *-ment*). This key presupposes some degree of metalinguistic competence, which may not be accessible to all learners, but it represents a very powerful additional key to comprehension and it is well worthwhile exploiting, if possible.

The first key (the context) is fundamental for the comprehension of all discourse, be it in a well-known or less well-known language. This key, being essentially based on extra-linguistic knowledge, is all the more valuable when attempting to understand discourse in a little-known language, with which a smaller amount of linguistic knowledge is shared. The subsequent keys are increasingly based on linguistic knowledge and their application depends strongly on the learner's previous linguistic experience. The application of these keys will therefore vary to a large extent, since every learner, according to her/his previous linguistic experience, will have preferences as to the combination of keys to apply, depending on her/his education, language repertoire, and metalinguistic competences. The keys to comprehension are applicable to any spoken or written discourse, and throughout the handbook, the learner's attention is drawn to one or the other key whenever it appears particularly relevant for the comprehension of a sequence.

## **7. Final remarks**

The linguistic landscape of Switzerland and its sociolinguistic characteristics offer a challenge for exploring new ways of increasing comprehension and exchange between the language communities and for enhancing the different language groups' awareness of each other's cultures as

part of the Swiss multicultural identity. This is, on the one hand, a necessity prescribed by the language legislation, and, on the other hand particularly favoured by societal and individual multilingualism as a consequence of already present language education as well as contact phenomena.

Especially the minority languages and the dialectal varieties are little known and provide scope for enhancing multilingual skills. As for Italian, a minority language for which teaching resources are limited, it seems beneficial to make this language and culture accessible to members of other language communities by re-dimensioning learning objectives from complete productive and receptive to minimal or partial skills.

Acquiring partial, especially receptive skills is advantageous from the point of view of the learning effort, which is reduced considerably in comparison to the acquisition of all four skills. Focusing on receptive skills, and thus taking an intercomprehension approach to communication between members of different language communities, contributes to reconciling the *de jure* equal status of the official languages and the *de facto* situation of higher frequency of use in interactions of the majority languages due to their economic and social saliency. The minority language Italian can therefore be included in the communication process by means of a mode of interaction already widely practiced between the two majority languages, where everyone speaks their own language and understands the language(s) of the others. By reducing the learning effort for every single language, a larger number of languages (including minority languages or even dialectal varieties) are made accessible as part of the individual's repertoire of potential communication instruments.

Promoting an intercomprehension approach to communication between the language communities in Switzerland, furthermore, may well be a viable alternative to the use of a *lingua franca*. In this specific context, the intercomprehension approach is clearly advantageous with respect to the use of a *lingua franca* as

- a. it increases communicative efficiency by enabling the individual to express her/himself in the language in which she/he is most proficient and
- b. it contributes to preserving and valuing the economic, social and cultural asset of both societal and individual multilingualism in Switzerland.

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