





Language landscapes

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Sources:

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2.b.8 Language landscapes

The fascination of travelling through the world of languages in the Albula / Bernina region is the existence of the German, Rhaeto Romansh and Italian languages and their dialects side-by-side within such a small area. Virtually every village constitutes a microcosm with a settlement history and language development of its own; a puzzle piece in a multi-faceted overall language pattern. The Rhaetian Railway has wholeheartedly embraced Graubünden's trilingualism, as can be gathered from the official name "Rhätische Bahn – Viafier retica – Ferrovia retica".

History and current situation in the language landscape of Graubünden

With its national languages German, Rhaeto Romansh and Italian, Graubünden is the only trilingual canton in Switzerland. Virtually nowhere else, can such linguistic diversity be found in such a small area.

Until the middle of the 19th century, Rhaeto Romansh was the mother tongue of most of Graubünden's population. With roots going back more than 2,000 years it developed, after the advance of the Romans into the alpine region, from the language of the native inhabitants (generally referred to as Rhaetians) and dog Latin. The five Romansh idioms still spoken today – Sursilvan, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Puter and Vallader – evolved along different lines, depending on the degree to which they were influenced by German or Italian.

Today German is dominant in Graubünden; introduced early by immigrants from the north, it gained momentum progressively with the colonisation by the Walser in the High Middle Ages, the settlement of the Rhine Valley by the Alemanni and the impact of tourism in modern times. According to the 2000 public census, 14.5% of the canton's population give Rhaeto Romansh as the language they speak best. The proportion of Italian speakers has always been small and currently stands at 10.2%.

But this trilingualism is by no means a relict that belongs in the museum. Besides the regional associations with their strong commitment on the cultural front and the various language institutions, the cantonal government also supports and promotes linguistic diversity. There are three models for schools in Graubünden: one each with German, Rhaeto Romansh or Italian as first language and a second cantonal language taught as compulsory first foreign language. Both the state and the canton are in the process of drawing up language laws in line with the constitutional requirements.

A special measure to protect the threatened Rhaeto Romansh language is the introduction of the standardised Rumantsch Grischun; merging the five written idioms currently in use.

While the passionate debate this has triggered reflects the difficulties of language policy today, it also underscores the vitality of language diversity in Graubünden.

Medley of languages

What is the linguistic situation along the railway line between Heinzenberg/Domleschg and the Poschiavo valley? Thusis, where the line starts, originally belonged to the Sutsilvan language area, but German was already dominant here before 1850. This is explained by the village's role as an important reloading point on the Splügen/

San Bernardino transit route. Indeed, the entire valley community of Heinzenberg/Domleschg was affected by the successive ousting of Romansh in favour of German. Today Sutsilvan – the most endangered Rhaeto Romansh idiom of all – is only spoken beyond the Viamala in the villages around Zillis and Andeer.

The Schin Gorge, that imposing natural frontier between Thusis and Tiefencastel, is also the language border between Sutsilvan and Surmiran. In the midst of this Rhaeto Romansh-speaking area is the tiny Walser settlement of Mutten, an island where German is spoken; as in so many other places, the colonists who had come over the mountains from the Valais into an area that was already settled, had to put up with a remote, inhospitable piece of land.

The distribution area of Surmiran originally extended over the entire Albula valley and beyond, towards Lenzerheide to the north and to Savognin/Surses to the south. Romansh is being eroded both in the Albula valley and in the area towards Lenzerheide. According to the 2000 census, native Romansh speakers account for between 10 and 40 % in the communities along the railway line. At 36.5 %, the proportion was already low in Filisur in 1880; the continued sharp regression in the following decades is a direct consequence of the building of the Albula line (1898 – 1903) and the opening of the railway from Filisur to German-speaking Davos, in 1909. In 1914 the community adopted German as the official language.

However, the villages of Schmitten and Wiesen on the way to Davos are again Walser settlements and thus quite distinct from the Surmiran language area, like the next village on the line towards Albula, Bergün/Bravuogn. Even though it is still on the north side of the Albula tunnel, this village is already in the catchment area of Puter

the Romansh idiom spoken in the Upper Engadin. Together with the Lower Engadin form, Valader, Engadin Romansh is also called Ladin. St. Moritz switched to German very early due to the boom in tourism in the late 19th century. The villages of Bever, Samedan, Celerina and Pontresina, on the other hand, continue to run a school with Rhaeto Romansh as the first language despite the low proportion of Romansh speakers (now between 10 % and 20 %). Like certain communities in the Albula valley, this is their way of emphasising the importance of schooling in Rhaeto Romansh for the conservation and promotion of the original language. Furthermore, the region has also tried out a new bilingual educational model in recent years and new methods of promoting the language are also being implemented outside the schools. Samedan, for example, has created the post of languages officer whose job is to ensure the continued use and cultivation of Romansh in the community.

The Bernina Pass is the next language ‘watershed’. Poschiavo together with the Misox, Calanca and Bergel valleys all belong to the “Valli” or Italian-speaking valleys in southern Graubünden. The local dialect spoken in the valley of Poschiavo is called Puschavign. In contrast to Romansh, which has no cultural hinterland to fall back on, the Valli can orient linguistically to the Ticino and Italy.

Proactive trilingualism on the Rhaetian Railway

The Rhaetian Railway has succeeded in making the linguistic multiplicity of the region an integral element of their corporate identity. The use of Italian on the Bernina line, which runs through the Italian-speaking region, has always been a matter of course from the very outset. However, integrating Rhaeto Romansh was

incomparably more difficult. The construction of the rail network brought with it far more widespread use of German in Romansh-speaking Graubünden while the regular train services and increasing number of tourists (cf. 2.b.10) accelerated the regression of Romansh. The names of all the stations in the Romansh-speaking regions were originally written only in German. After Rhaeto Romansh was officially recognised as one of the national languages in 1938 the Romansh place names were added in brackets after the German names, for example Bergün (Bravuogn) or Celerina (Schlarigna). Since 1944 the policy has been to write the names of all stations in the Romansh-speaking regions in the original language or at least to use German-Romansh double names. This change affected a total of 21 stations which, as the Rhaetian Railway emphasised in its annual report, entailed “by no means insignificant costs”. However, it did send a valuable signal to the Romansh-speaking population: the rest of Switzerland, not to mention foreign visitors, should recognise the Romansh identity of its villages and hamlets. In this sense the *Viafier retica*, as the Rhaetian Railway is called in Romansh, contributed to the strengthening of the minority language and the self-awareness of its native speakers.

Today the Rhaetian Railway is proactively trilingual. The footer of its stationery reads: “Die kleine Rote. Il trenino rosso. La pitschna cotschna” – referring to the red colour of the trains. For some 20 years all the writing on all the engines and carriages has been in all three cantonal languages; in the case of Romansh, the Rumantsch Grischun standard version has been adopted: “Rhätische Bahn – Viafier retica – Ferrovia retica”. Pragmatism determines the use of the three cantonal languages, not

theoretical considerations based on fictitious functionality that is not questioned due to the dominance of German and the consequent bilingualism of the Italian- and Romansh-speaking people of Graubünden. The choice of language for the writing on the trains is left to the painter in his workshop, a connoisseur of Graubünden and its linguistic peculiarities. The writing on the snow blowers used on the Bernina line is in both Romansh and Italian (“*Viafier retica / Ferrovia retica*”); they must be the only ‘bilingual’ snow blowers in the world. Conversely, the same name on both sides of the blowers used in the German-speaking Schanfigg valley on the stretch from Chur to Arosa, is written only in German.

Graubünden’s trilingualism as practised by the Rhaetian Railway goes even further: since May 2001 passengers have been informed by loudspeaker of the change in language area whenever the train enters the Romansh- or Italian-speaking region. On the Albula line this happens in the Albula tunnel shortly before reaching the Engadin. In the Engadin itself, all the station names are announced first in Romansh and then in German. An interesting feature here is that regional differences in language forms are respected. So in the Upper Engadin, before the train arrives at the main town of Samedan, you will hear “*Prosmas fermada Samedan*” (next stop Samedan) whereas in the Lower Engadin village of Guarda (the setting for the delightful Schellenursli children’s story) you will hear “*Guarda – fermada sün dumonda*” (Guarda – request stop). People from these regions recognise their local identity in the small linguistic nuance of the E of *fermeda* and the A of *fermada*; this might even prompt the attentive tourist to take an interest in the richness and variety of Rhaeto Romansh.



Bergün/Bravuogn > The name of the station is given in German and Romansh.
Rhaetian Railway



Albula line > A panorama carriage on the Landwasser Viaduct; the writing is in Italian and German.
P. Donatsch

So everyone – whether there is a sense of identification with the languages or not - has the opportunity of experiencing trilingualism as a concrete fact on every trip and of hearing the Latinate cantonal languages as they are used day in day out.

Rhaetian Railway employees are naturally also recruited from all three language areas. A scientific study of trilingualism in Graubünden concludes that the proportion of Romansh- and Italian-speaking employees in the company reflects the linguistic make-up of the canton. What is very important from a European perspective is the fact that a high percentage of the workforce is either bilingual or multilingual. Even in the staff bulletin, for example, information from senior management is published in Italian under the heading “La voce della direzione”. And from time to time the bulletin runs articles written by members of staff in Romansh. Clearly Rhaetian Railway personnel can rest assured that their views are taken seriously, despite being written in a minority language!