

Regional or minority languages: Romansh (Rhaeto-Romance)

ENG

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The languages of Switzerland

Switzerland has four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. Of its 26 cantons, 17 are German-speaking, four are French-speaking (Jura, Neuchâtel, Vaud and Geneva), and one is Italian-speaking (Ticino). Of the four remaining cantons, three are bilingual (Bern, Fribourg, Valais) and one is trilingual (Graubünden). Graubünden is the ancestral territory of Romansh, one of the Rhaeto-Romance dialects (the other dialects are Friulian, spoken in north-eastern Italy, and Ladin, spoken in Tyrol). Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of Switzerland's four national languages, and Figure 2 shows the distribution of Romansh, German and Italian in Graubünden.

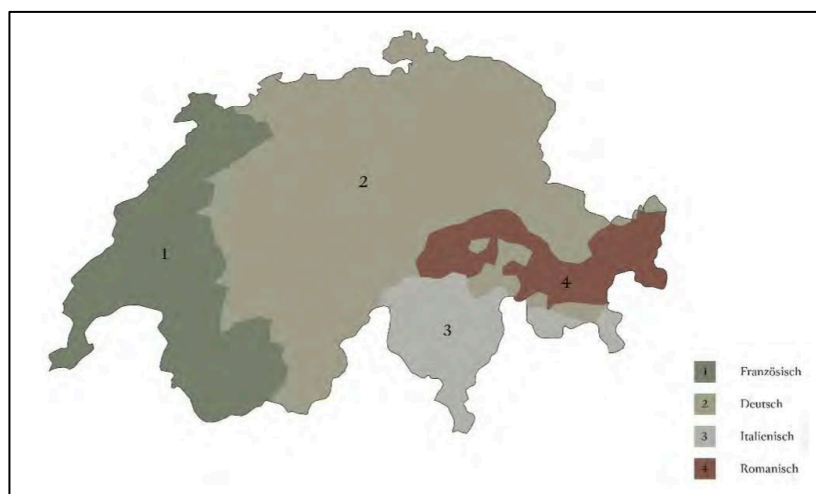


Figure 1: Geographical distribution of Switzerland's four national languages

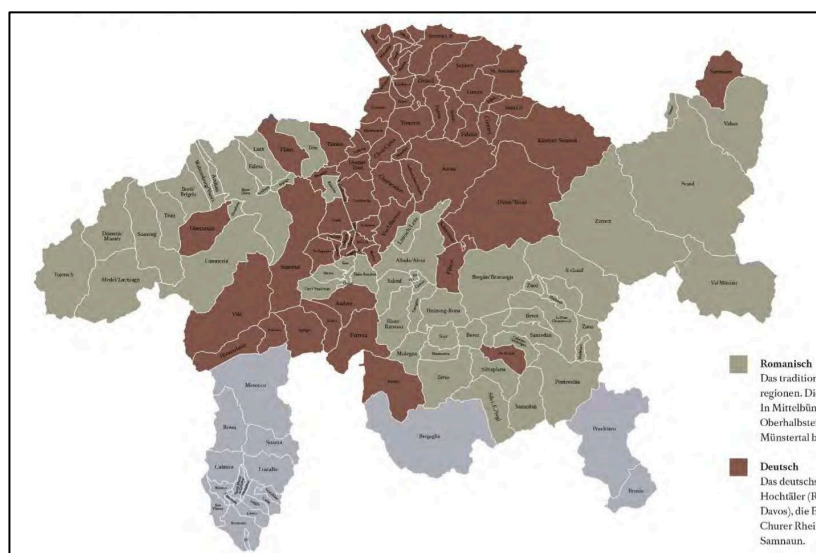


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of Romansh, German and Italian in Graubünden

¹ Compiled by David Little on the basis of information provided by Annalisa Schaniel and Andreas Gabriel, [Lia Rumantscha](#), Chur, Switzerland.

Status of Romansh

The [Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation](#) defines German, French, Italian and Romansh as “national languages” (Article 4) and German, French and Italian as “official languages” (Article 70). Regarding the official language status of Romansh, Article 70 states: “Romansh is also an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh”.

The [Constitution of the Canton of Graubünden](#) recognizes German, Romansh and Italian as both national and official languages of the canton. [The Languages Act of the Canton of Graubünden](#) makes the following provisions:

- In monolingual municipalities, Romansh is the official and school language.
- Communes in which at least 40 per cent of members come from an ancestral language community shall be deemed to be monolingual communes. In these municipalities, the ancestral language is the official communal language.
- Monolingual municipalities are obliged to make use of their official language, in particular in the municipal assembly, in municipal votes, in municipal notices and publications, in official communications with the population and in the addresses of official premises and streets. In the case of private addresses addressed to the public, the official language must be used appropriately.
- Multilingual municipalities are obliged to make appropriate use of the traditional official language.

Official language policy seeks to maintain and improve the legal framework in favour of Romansh, to protect and increase the presence of Romansh in all areas of public life, and to secure the position of Romansh as language of schooling in its ancestral territory and expand its use as language of schooling elsewhere in Switzerland.

Varieties, number of speakers and domains of use

There are five regional dialects of Romansch: Sursilvan, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Puter and Vallader; each has its own standardized written variety. A pan-regional written standard, Rumantsch Grischun, was introduced in 1982.

In its ancestral territory, Romansh is used in the home and the community, in leisure activities and sports, in arts and entertainment, in the workplace, in public life and politics, in religion and in education.

In 2000 there were about 60,000 speakers of Romansh according to the national census carried out in that year. Since 2017 the national census has been replaced by an annual survey of a sample of the population. This yields a current estimate of between 40,000 and 45,000 speakers of Romansh. More than half of them live outside the language’s ancestral territory (Figure 2), either in German-speaking Graubünden (the Chur Rhine Valley) or elsewhere in Switzerland.

Romansh in the media

Print media – A state-sponsored news agency, [Fundaziun Medias Rumantschas](#), provides texts in the five regional dialects of Romansh and in Rumantsch Grischun. A recent innovation is the exchange of content between the news agency and the public radio and television station, [Radiotelevisiun Svizra Rumantscha](#). Private and public publishers can make use of edited material from these sources free of charge. Newspapers: [La Quotidiana](#) is published in Romansh five times a week; [Posta Ladina/Engadiner Post](#) appears in Romansh and German three times a week for the Engadin (a region in Graubünden); and [La Pagina da Surmeir](#) is published once a week for the central region of Graubünden.

Broadcast media – The national public radio and television broadcaster, [SRG SRR](#), has a Romansh branch, [Radiotelevisiun Svizra Rumantscha \(RTR\)](#), which provides a full radio programme and television broadcasts on SRG SSR stations. Individual programmes made by commercial providers are broadcast on regional television and local radio.

Print publication – Annual calendars, magazines and yearbooks published in Romansh: [Calender Romontsch](#) (Surselva); [Chalender Ladin](#) (Engadin/Val Müstair); [Revista digl noss Sulom](#) (Oberhalbstein/Albula); [Calender per mintga gi](#) (Surselva and Sutselva); [Annalas da la Societad Retorumantscha](#).

[Chasa Editura Rumantscha](#) publishes books in Romansh, and [Lia Rumantscha](#) operates an online bookshop.

Online resources – Three notable online resources are the Romansh dictionary, [Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun](#); [Crestomazi Retoromantscha](#), a collection of Romansh texts that runs to more than 7,000 pages; and the Romansh version of [Wikipedia](#). Automatic translation between Romansh and English, French, German, Italian and Swiss German is available [here](#), and details of digitalisation projects can be found [here](#).

Civil society/politics – At the level of the Swiss Confederation, the websites of the [Parliament](#) and the [Federal Administration](#) publish important content in Romansh. The website of [Pro Helvetia](#) has a Romansh version but provides little content in Romansh, and important pages of the [Swiss Literary Archives](#) are not in Romansh.

On the website of the [Cantonal administration](#) of Graubünden important pages are in Romansh, but much content is given only in German. The [Bündner Rechtsbuch](#) (containing the laws of Graubünden) is available in Romansh in its entirety, as is the cultural portal [portacultura](#). Romansh often has only a minimal presence on the websites of organisations oriented to tourism, though [Marke Graubünden](#) (Brand Graubünden) endeavours to emphasise the canton's trilingualism more strongly. The presence of Romansh on the websites of municipalities is variable, but sometimes very good, as with [Scuol](#), [Sumvitg](#) and [Disentis/Mustér](#).

Support from NGOs

[Lia Rumantscha](#) has been the umbrella organisation for all Romansh-speaking individuals and organisations since 1919. From its headquarters in Chur, it supports, promotes and coordinates the work of regional associations, inter-regional bodies and Romansh organisations outside Graubünden. A list of affiliated NGOs is available [here](#).

At national level, [Forum Helveticum](#) provides a meeting place for Switzerland's four national languages); [Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk](#) distributes inexpensive youth-oriented literature in the four national languages to support the promotion of reading in schools; and [Helvetia Latina](#) promotes Switzerland's linguistic and cultural diversity.

The role of Romansh in education

In an institutionally quadrilingual and socially multilingual Switzerland, languages play an important role in the education system. In the federal education system, there is a constant balancing act between [harmonising](#) which (foreign) languages should be learnt at which level and prioritising the national languages or English. For the Romansh school system, it is important that there is continuity so that pupils do not suffer any disadvantages as their education progresses. Romansh is thus taught at all levels of formal education, from pre-school to tertiary; it is also taught outside the formal education system and online.

Teacher education – Teachers of Romansh are trained at the [University of Teacher Education Graubünden](#) (primary level) and the [University of Fribourg](#) (secondary level).

Teaching and learning materials – Responsibility for the development and dissemination of teaching/learning materials lies with the [Canton of Graubünden](#), in accordance with Article 35 of [the Law on Primary Schools of the Canton of Graubünden](#).

Teaching approach – Details of the languages offered in Graubünden schools are available (in German) [here](#); details of bilingual education in Graubünden are available (also in German) [here](#).

Challenges

The three principal challenges facing Romansh are:

- maintaining its presence, audibility and visibility in all public spaces (the language community is bilingual and understands and writes German without difficulty);
- maintaining its use in everyday life (the mixing of languages in the language area leads to a gradual takeover by German);
- supporting the acquisition of the language by children who live outside the language area and so cannot access education in Romansh.

An interesting initiative: distance language learning

From the school year 2024/25, young people in Switzerland will be able to learn Romansh with the help of an online course, [Rumantsch a distanza](#) (“Romansh at distance”). The course is primarily aimed at young people who live outside the Romansh-speaking area and so cannot access education in Romansh. Course delivery will combine face-to-face teaching and e-learning; exchange and project weeks in Graubünden will complete the programme.

The German-speaking municipalities in Graubünden are legally obliged to offer a course in Romansh if there are enrolments. Since the school year 2021/22, Lia Rumantscha has offered an online programme as an alternative to organising lessons on site.

These online courses are also aimed at two other groups: students living outside the Romansh-speaking area who speak and understand the language at home but have not learned to read and write it, and students who want to learn Romansh from scratch.