

GERMAN VS FRENCH

The 'Rösti divide', a barrier that binds the Swiss

By Isabelle Eichenberger

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The Sarine/Saane river in the canton of Fribourg is considered as the frontier between French- and German-speaking Switzerland

(aerialswiss)

The 2014 votes on immigration and medical insurance exposed a divide between French- and German-speakers in Switzerland. Yet, diversity is key to the country's existence, with some even claiming that it is worthy of national heritage status.

"The Röstigraben, a symbol of the desire to unify within pluralism, should be on the list of Switzerland's living traditions," says René Haenggi, director of the Vindonissa archeological museum in Brugg in the canton of Aargau. The museum attracted attention when it announced it was collecting signatures to register the "rösti ditch" (named after the typical Swiss-German potato patties) on UNESCO's world heritage list, together with the yodel, fondue and the alphorn. Haenggi opted to provoke when he opened the exhibit entitled, "Röstigraben – How Switzerland holds together".

"The difference derives from an ancient friendship which has influenced us over thousands of years," says Haenggi, to explain why he chose to bring the exhibit to the German-speaking part of Switzerland, after it was presented in 2004 at the Roman museum in Vidy-Lausanne.

The director of the earlier exhibition, Laurent Flutsch, came up with the idea after a referendum in 2004 intended to streamline the naturalisation process, which revealed a strong divergence in views between French- and German-speakers.

"Our argument was meant to show that we cannot deny differences. Rather, if we accept diversity from within, we can accept more easily what comes from outside," Flutsch explains. "Diversity is a result of geographic phenomena, dating back 7,000 years, which show that Switzerland is in the middle of everything, and at the margin of it all, because it is located at the edge of three or four large linguistic regions."

BURGUNDIANS AND ALEMANNI

A 7,000-year-old divide

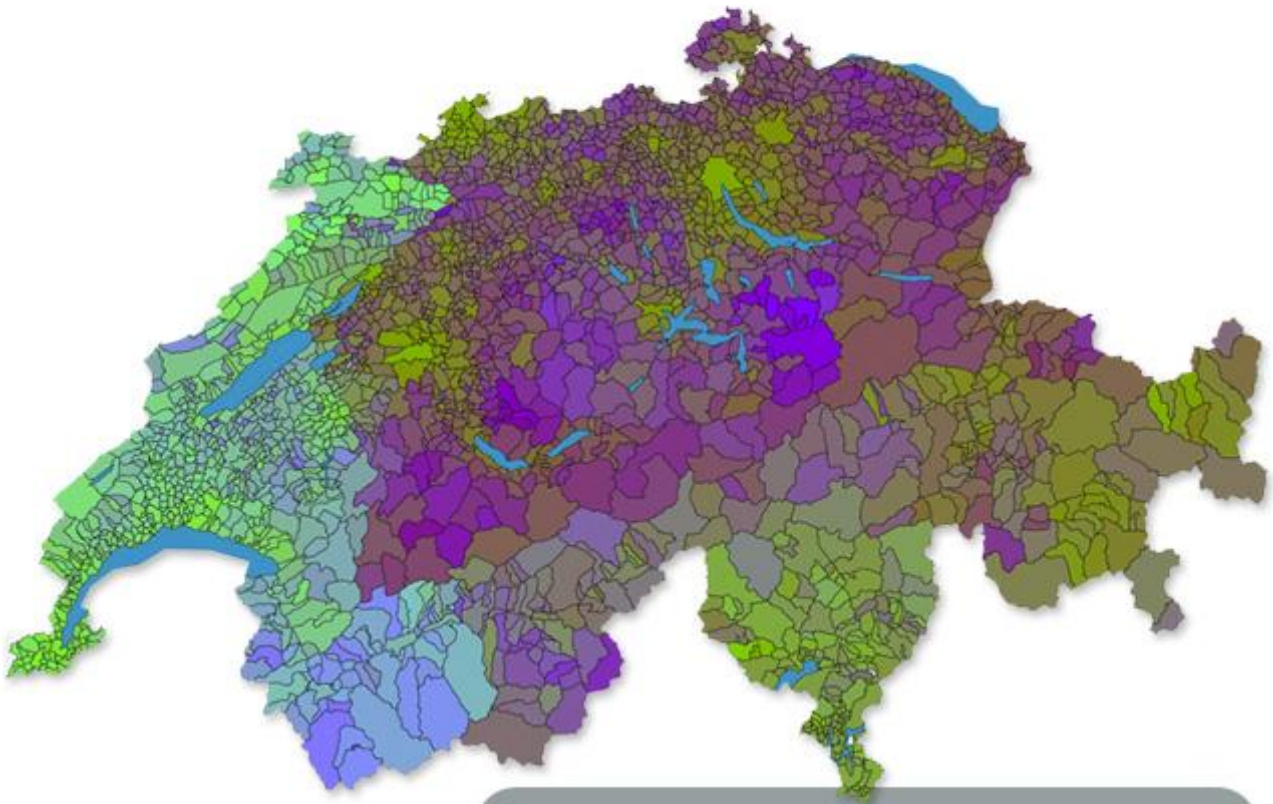
The difference between Switzerland's north-east and south-west dates back some 7,000 years, with the arrival of new inhabitants in ...

Journalists' stereotype

In 2014, popular votes once again saw the return of the divide. Basel-based historian Georg Kreis believes that using the divide to explain electoral results is too easy. "The political split is a stereotype created by journalists. After all, there is no "Romande" [French-speaking] ethnicity... I wonder to what degree political behaviour is rooted on the ground, given that mobility increases". He prefers to emphasise the divide between urban and rural populations, as well as social differences.

Yes, the "Röstigraben" (cultural differences between language regions) exists!

This map analyses and condenses all federal votes since 1981, broken down by individual Swiss municipalities.



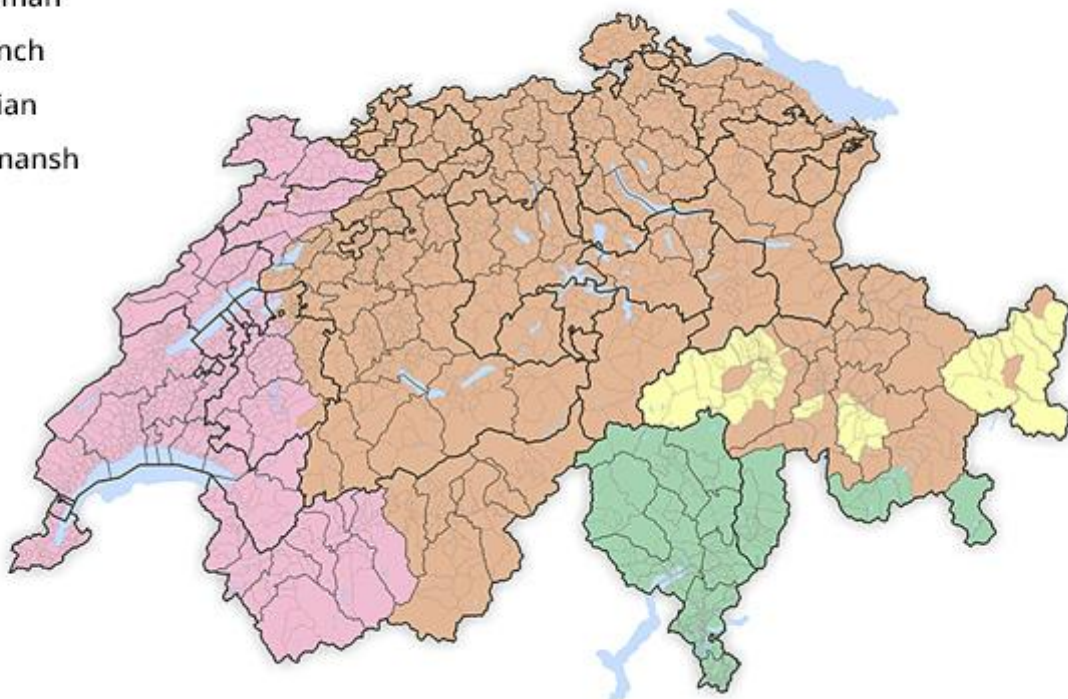
The system was developed by Vincent Etter and Julien Herzen, statisticians at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL)

<http://www.predikon.ch/de/wahlverhalten/sprache>

The municipalities are coloured to reflect how their citizens voted (similar colour signifies similar voting behaviour). The analysis shows that the French-speaking part votes different from the rest of Switzerland.

Swiss language regions

- German
- French
- Italian
- Romansh



(swissinfo.ch)

The “rösti trench” does make a point. Are French-speaking Swiss more inclined to opt for social services or medical care? The German-speaking political rightwing can quickly condemn what they consider to be “bad citizens”. But when Mr Switzerland is systematically German-speaking, French-speakers wonder, “why not us?”

Last summer, a survey of the Swiss population showed that more than three quarters of the country’s population felt the split. While 22% denied its existence, the deniers camp in German-speaking regions totalled 25%, compared with 14% in French-speaking areas. Is the Röstigraben therefore not more of an issue for French-speakers?

A victims’ reflex?

“French-speakers are mathematically frustrated when they demand more positions in the federal government, as well as more orders and contracts from the government,” Flutsch explains. “They also have a different perception of the role of the state, the army, the environment, work, and all sorts of indicators, reinforcing the clichés,” says Flutsch, who has also written a book on the divide.

René Knüsel, a political analyst from the University of Lausanne, refers to “a type of wound, which reopens every time. The problem arises when one confronts a systematic domination by a majority, which is always the same. The French speakers react by withdrawing when they feel that their future, preserved by federalist principles, is threatened, and that their development is hindered by a type of Germanic majority conservatism”.

“When we look at European issues, the French-speaking Swiss are not afraid of opening up, as they think they feel they know how to deal with a majority, while German [and Italian] speakers are fearful,” adds Knüsel. “Switzerland survives with a contradiction that is its strength, the respect for differences, and the threat of it breaking up, which could put into question all that has been achieved, which one senses is always very vulnerable”.

Christophe Büchi, correspondent for the Neue Zürcher Zeitung in western Switzerland, and author of books on this issue, points out that “the German-speaking majority does not have too many problems and displays a sort of benevolent indifference towards French speakers. French speakers, however, are wary of the market economy, and are concerned that without regulation, the economy would be concentrated in the German-speaking region, to their detriment.”

Clichés about German speakers are, he says, sustained by “French speakers, who are very influenced by neighbouring France, and believe in the redistribution of national resources and the state’s role in society.”

'Swiss do not share everything'

In 2012, the weekly *Weltwoche* magazine caused a stir when it qualified the “Welsches” (French-speakers), as “Switzerland’s Greeks”: lazy, hedonistic state parasites.

“We have given too much importance to these things which have been reactivated and simplified by the [rightwing] Swiss Peoples’ Party, without consideration or reserve. As soon as you claim you are threatened, you begin to ask yourself, where the limit stands between who you are and what is ‘no longer us’,” clarifies anthropologist, Isabelle Raboud-Schüle.

“A large part of the population has a parent from another language, or even with two or three such great grandparents. In fact, the country is held together by very diverse inhabitants. But just as in any frontier region, it is complicated, because Swiss share certain things, but not all,” explains Raboud-Schüle, who is also the director of the Gruyère Museum in Bulle, in canton Fribourg.

'The barrier helps us exist'

Paradoxically, the cliché is sometimes used to close ranks, and celebrate the Swiss “exception”. Such an example is when people ask whether Roger Federer (German-speaking) and Stanislas Wawrinka (French-speaking) could together win the Davis Cup for Switzerland? Indeed, the national tennis team “bridges the linguistic divide better than any political speech”, according to the Neuchâtel daily, *L'Express*.

For Knüsel, “the symbolic rösti divide helps us exist, as it allows us to distinguish everyone from each other. On an international level, Switzerland shows that it has the wisdom needed to manage minorities. The frontier is not static because people move. But its strength comes from allowing us to live on the same territory and continue to be autonomous. One can live in Switzerland without knowing German on one side, or French on the other.”

Rösti, fondue and polenta

Named after the Swiss-German roasted potato patties, the “Röstigraben” (literally, rösti ditch) follows roughly the geographic delineation of the Sarine/Saane river near Fribourg, and refers to the difference between German speakers (63% of the Swiss population) and French speakers (20% of the population). Similarly, the term, “polentagraben”, was also created, without much success, referring to differences between the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland, to the south of the Gotthard pass (with 6.5 % of the population), and the rest of Switzerland.

The imagery of a trench first appeared during the First World War, when Switzerland’s French speakers mainly supported France, and the majority of German speakers backed Germany. The metaphor is commonly used to describe behavioural disparities in national votes, particularly when they affect Switzerland’s relations with Europe,

immigration, and the role of the state. A telling moment occurred in December 1992, when 50.3% Swiss rejected the country's accession to the European Economic Area (EEA).

(Source: Historic Dictionary of Switzerland)

(Translated from French by Paula Dupraz-Dobias), swissinfo.ch

max Dec 31, 2014 12:06 PM

Interesting report! The yodel and the Röschtigraben have no merits to be listed on the world cultural heritage. Neither of the two is a typical Swiss phenomenon.

Franz Jan 2, 2015 12:59 AM

The Roestigraben is a lazy excuse for journalist to make a cheap headline. On immigration the divide is not between german and french speaking cantons, but between the urban and rural regions. Geneva, Lausanne, Fribourg, Neuchatel, Basel and Zurich often vote the same way. By repeating false stereotypes, we don't contribute to the solutions required for 21st century problems.

Thus the Roestigraben should be put into the dustbin instead on the world cultural heritage list.

max Jan 2, 2015 7:54 PM

Franz, you are right about the vote results. However, the language divide is a genuine problem, albeit often overblown by journalists. It could easily be overcome by ensuring that everybody speaks fluent English but the cultural barrier seems to be still too high. The motivation to learn French and standard German is pretty low. The former is quite complex and requires some linguistic talent. By reading the press of the Romandie you will find that even for French-speakers it is quite difficult to write it correctly. For all practical purposes, the latter is almost exclusively used for written communications and to speak with people who cannot understand Swiss. Maybe two of my former work colleagues had the beginning of a solution - one speaking his native French and the other his Swiss-German. Watching the reaction of other guests in a restaurant was just too funny...

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