

Language policy of the Swiss National Science Foundation

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) regards multilingualism as an asset for Swiss research and for the diversity and quality of Swiss scientific cultures. Maintaining high standards and competitiveness demands international networking and frequent use of the English language by researchers at the heart of the Swiss scientific community. Respecting these two premises, the SNSF is pursuing a policy of promoting both the unity and the diversity of scientific communication in Switzerland.

Scientists ought to be skilled language users, be it in their first language or in other languages. In the so-called “hard” sciences, English is generally acknowledged as the principle scientific language, and command of more than one language is essential in the humanities and social sciences. That said, the generalised use of English in all disciplines can influence the very methods by which knowledge is gained and formulated. This could conceivably lead to an erosion of scientific cultures – a risk that must be kept in check.

Through its policies and linguistic practices, the SNSF aims to promote a multilingual scientific culture. It regards English as a necessary “lingua franca”, but as insufficient if used to the exclusion of other languages.

1. Public relations at the SNSF

The official languages of the SNSF are German and French, and all correspondence is in both languages. Both are systematically used in public relations and in communicating scientific issues to the public, at considerable cost. All important publications (websites, periodicals, brochures...) are produced in both languages and, if needed, in English as well. French and German are used in media relations. Additionally, the SNSF communicates regularly in English and occasionally in Italian.

2. Communicating with the scientific community

Swiss science is essentially multilingual and must be affirmed as such even as it develops ever closer ties with the outside world. This involves finding the right balance between English and the other languages in each discipline.

2.1 Communicating with researchers

The increasing internationalisation of science is making a strong impact on the SNSF’s scientific communication, in particular with regard to reviewing and assessment activities. In all disciplines apart from the humanities and social sciences (psychology and economics excepted),

where the language of the proposal has a profound influence on its content, researchers are obliged to submit the scientific sections of their proposals in English.

To attract the best scientists in the world, Switzerland must be in a position to ensure good communication in English. Accordingly, the SNSF provides foreign scientists who have recently arrived in Switzerland with specific information and summaries in English. This service is limited in scope and does not therefore undermine their efforts to assimilate. The SNSF considers it important that a researcher engages in Swiss scientific culture and shows interest in sharing results and knowledge. This is conducive to scientific excellence, but can only be achieved if scientists have sufficient grasp of at least one of the Swiss languages.

2.2 Scientific assessments

By choosing English as its principal scientific language (except in the humanities and social sciences), the SNSF aims to ensure that all scientific assessments are up to international standards. Scientific discussions within the divisions and all scientific correspondence (including the scientific argumentation in letters of acceptance/rejection) are generally in English.

At the same time, the national languages of Switzerland should be allowed to interact with one another as often as possible in order to promote the cultural diversity of Swiss research. Appropriate measures must be taken to this end, for instance, in the form of language learning opportunities or essays assessing how multilingualism adds scientific value. The use of several languages would encourage authors from all fields to use more precise and meaningful terminology.

2.3 Scientific publications

The SNSF encourages researchers to publish articles in internationally recognised, peer-reviewed journals. In the humanities and social sciences, the SNSF plays an important role in editing books written in French and German. What is more, the SNSF is closely monitoring the potential of new information and communication technologies to promote linguistic diversity.

2.4 Procedures (decisions, appeal procedures)

Decision-making procedures at the SNSF comply with the provisions stipulated by the Swiss Federal Act on Administrative Procedures. This includes the following minimum conditions:

- Decisions and their motivating factors are to be formulated in one of the official languages. In practice, the SNSF issues its decisions in German or French.
- Hearings before the Swiss Federal Administrative Court must be held in one of the official languages, generally the language in which the decision was issued.

3. Internal communication

The SNSF strives to ensure a balanced representation of the linguistic regions in its various bodies. At the same time it seeks to recruit the most highly skilled members and staff in Switzerland and abroad to assist in its mission. Its multilingual culture is based on the following principle: Everyone shall speak and write in his or her first language or preferred language be it French, German or English, and shall have at least a passive knowledge of these three languages.

3.1 National Research Council

The members of the National Research Council are expected to show a certain degree of proficiency in German and French. While scientific discussions in the divisions, specialised committees and peer review panels (except in the humanities and social sciences) are conducted in English, non-scientific topics are generally discussed in German or French.

The SNSF aims to draw the best scientists to its bodies and commissions by creating conditions that help them to work and feel at home in an environment where French and German are spoken. This also contributes towards the goal of anchoring the sciences more firmly within society and politics. Accordingly, English speakers participating in plenary discussions held in German and French are provided with summaries in English while allowing communication in linguistic and cultural diversity.

4. Monitoring and resources

The SNSF is committed to high linguistic standards in its German, French and English communication. This calls for greater proficiency in English among administrative officers, in particular.

The SNSF's multilingualism comes at a price. The systematic implementation of its language policy and changes to linguistic practices have an impact on human resources and financial planning.

As scientific research becomes increasingly globalised, the SNSF would be well advised to continue pondering language policies and practices in the future. Such language monitoring would enable it to assess the status quo, propose innovative and feasible linguistic models and review linguistic policies if needed. What is more, thanks to its longstanding experience in multilingualism, the SNSF is well qualified to assume the task of developing a European pilot project.

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