

Geneva between French, English and German — overview and summary

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Geneva is a French-speaking city in a predominantly German-speaking country, within a financial industry that is anglophone the world over. This threefold belonging defines its linguistic position and part of its strategy. French is the main language of 79 per cent of the population, down two points between 2020 and 2024, while English, Portuguese and Spanish are gaining ground. English is the canton's second working language, carried by the English-speaking community and by the international organisations, the multinationals and the financial industry.¹ German, the language of 62 per cent of the Swiss and of the federal authorities, FINMA, the National Bank and Zurich, remains the language of a minority in Geneva, yet a command of it conditions access to the country's institutions. This chapter describes that situation, analyses the tensions it creates and proposes a multilingual strategy for the financial centre.

1 Notes

1. “À Genève, le français recule et l’anglais gagne du terrain”, Tribune de Genève, 23 April 2026; “Les langues, indicateur de la chronologie migratoire”, 20 minutes, 23 July 2024, citing OCSTAT. ↩

2 In five sentences

1. French is the main language of 79 per cent of Geneva's residents, down two points between 2020 and 2024, and English that of 12 per cent. French and English are the two working languages in a canton where 41.5 per cent of the population are foreign nationals.
2. English is the language of global finance, of the markets, of contracts and of the international clientele. Its use in Geneva institutions has eased their global integration while creating tensions with the French-speaking authorities and population.

3. German, the language of 62 per cent of the Swiss, of the federal authorities, FINMA, the National Bank and legal scholarship, conditions the access and influence of Geneva practitioners within the country's institutions.
4. The tensions between the three languages — English against French, French against German, demands placed on employees — call for an openly embraced multilingual strategy, with a function for each language.
5. Geneva's multilingualism is an advantage that few financial centres possess, provided it is maintained by the schools, the universities, the employers and the authorities.

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-geneva-between-french-english-and-german-overview-and-summary