

The languages of International Geneva

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

The international organisations established in Geneva add a linguistic layer of their own. The United Nations recognises six official languages, while its Secretariat works in English and French. The United Nations Office at Geneva is, together with the headquarters in New York, one of the places where French retains daily use in international administration.¹ The World Trade Organization uses three official languages, English, French and Spanish.² The International Committee of the Red Cross, founded by French-speaking Genevans, long worked in French and today uses mainly English and French.³

This presence has two effects on the financial centre. The first is the formation of a pool of multilingual staff: the international organisations employ thousands of officials, translators and interpreters, some of whom move on, over the course of their careers, to Geneva's banks, law firms and trading houses. The second is the maintenance of French as an international language in Geneva: where the English-speaking financial centres have only one working language, Geneva has two. This duality is part of its identity in the eyes of the delegations, the permanent missions and the non-governmental organisations, which recruit and contract locally.

The interpreters and translators trained in Geneva are a particular resource. The École d'interprètes founded in 1941 by Antoine Velleman, which became the École de traduction et d'interprétation in 1972 and then the Faculté de traduction et d'interprétation of the University of Geneva in 2011, trains professionals who work for the international organisations, the courts, conferences and businesses.⁴ Chapter IV returns to this resource, which makes Geneva one of the few financial centres with a faculty of translation a few minutes from the banks.

1 Notes

1. United Nations, “Langues officielles de l’ONU”, un.org, and Dag Hammarskjöld Library, “Quelles sont les langues officielles des Nations Unies ?”, ask.un.org (accessed September 2026): six official languages; English and French are the working languages of the Secretariat. ↩
2. World Trade Organization, “Carrières à l’OMC”, wto.org (accessed September 2026): “the three official languages of the WTO – English, French and Spanish”. ↩
3. ICRC, “Sites web du CICR” page (icrc.org): the International Committee’s content is offered in eight languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic, Russian and German). ↩
4. University of Geneva, “L’École de traduction et d’interprétation fête ses 70 ans”, unige.ch, 2011. ↩

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-the-languages-of-international-geneva