

The tensions and how to manage them

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The coexistence of the three languages creates tensions that the financial centre must manage.

The first sets the English of the institutions against the French of the authorities and the population. Institutions that impose English as their working language exclude a part of the local staff and of the French-speaking clients, and expose themselves to criticism over their integration into the city. The cantonal authorities, attached to French, expect institutions to communicate with them and with the public in that language. Geneva law, moreover, requires French in dealings with the administration.¹

The second sets the French of Geneva against the German of the federal institutions. The Genevans sometimes complain of being poorly understood in Bern and Zurich, and of seeing their interests neglected in favour of those of the Zurich financial centre. These tensions are long-standing and have accompanied the whole history of Geneva within the Confederation, as Part C noted in connection with the canton's accession in 1815.

The third concerns the staff. The financial centre expects them to command French, English and, for certain functions, German, to which are added the languages of the clientele — Arabic, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Chinese. This requirement limits recruitment and pushes up salaries, but it is also an advantage of the financial centre, whose multilingual staff are in demand.

Managing these tensions calls for an openly embraced multilingual strategy: French as the language of the city, the cantonal authorities, the courts and the French-speaking clientele; English as the language of international finance and the global clientele; German as the language of the federal institutions and of the relationship with the rest of Switzerland.

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This strategy presupposes investment in language training, suitable recruitment policies and a recognition by the institutions of the value of each language.

Language	Function for the financial centre	Challenge
French	language of the city, the cantonal authorities, the courts and the French-speaking clientele	preserving the francophone advantage in the face of anglicisation
English	language of international finance, the markets and the global clientele	ensuring command of it without excluding French speakers
German	language of the federal institutions, legal scholarship and Zurich	securing access and influence in Bern and Zurich
Other languages	languages of the clienteles	recruiting and training multilingual staff

1 Notes

1. Art. 5 para. 1 of the Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva of 14 October 2012 (A 2 00): “The official language is French”; silgeneve.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

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