

The Swiss variety of Italian

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

The Italian used in Swiss institutions is standard Italian, as Article 5 paragraph 2 of the Languages Act requires. It is nevertheless a recognizable variety. Linguists call the words and uses specific to Swiss Italian *elvetismi*, Helvetisms. Some of them have recently been included in the dictionaries of the Italian language.¹ They fall into several groups. The first group consists of institutional terms that reflect the different political order of Switzerland. *Consiglio di Stato* means the cantonal government in Ticino, while in Italy it designates the supreme administrative court. *Gran Consiglio* is the cantonal parliament, *Municipio* the executive of a commune. A member of the cantonal parliament, whom the constitution calls a *deputato*, is commonly referred to as a *granconsigliere*.²

A second group consists of loanwords and calques from German and French. *Autocollante* for a sticker follows the French *autocollant*, *Natel* for a mobile phone comes from a German acronym, and *NPA*, for the postal code, renders the French *numéro postal d'acheminement*. *Autopostale* designates the PostBus service, and *franchetto* is a colloquial calque for the Swiss franc. Signs such as *Grazie per non fumare* follow the French *merci de ne pas fumer*.³ In commerce, an *azione* is a special offer in a shop, from the German *Aktion*, whereas in standard Italian *azione* also means a share in a company. A *classatore* is a ring binder, from the German *Klassierer* and the French *classeur*, where Italy uses *raccoglitore*. In the language of federal administration, the Federal Council *licenzia* a dispatch when it adopts it and sends it to Parliament, a usage shaped by the German *verabschieden*. It extends a sense that standard Italian knows from *licenziare alle stampe*, to approve a text for printing, while in everyday Italian *licenziare* above all means to dismiss an employee.⁴

The *elvetismi* matter for legal work because some of them are terms of art. A Swiss Italian contract speaks of the *società anonima*, the *ditta* as the business name, the *precetto esecutivo* as the payment order in debt

The Swiss variety of Italian

enforcement and the *rigetto dell'opposizione* as the setting aside of the debtor's objection under the Debt Enforcement and Bankruptcy Act, the *legge federale sulla esecuzione e sul fallimento* (LEF). An Italian lawyer who reads these terms with the meanings they have in Italian law will misunderstand them. Conversely, a Swiss Italian document that uses Italian legal terms where Swiss terms exist can create ambiguity in Swiss proceedings. The terminology of Swiss Italian law is a separate legal language, and its relationship to the terminology of the Italian Republic is the subject of Chapter J.III.

Common misconception. Italian clients and advisers often assume that Swiss legal texts in Italian use the terminology of Italian law. They do not. Swiss Italian legal language follows the concepts of Swiss law, which it renders through terms such as *società anonima*, *precetto esecutivo* or *Consiglio di Stato* that either do not exist in Italian law or mean something else there. A Swiss text in Italian must therefore be read as Swiss law in the Italian language.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Italiano svizzero", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italiano_svizzero (used as a last resort), which cites Mario Savoia and Antonio Vitale, *Lo Svizzionario* (2002), and the work of Elena M. Pandolfi and Matteo Casoni on language contact in Swiss Italian. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Italiano svizzero" (above), on Consiglio di Stato; Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Ticino (above), Art. 17 (Municipio), Art. 57 (Gran Consiglio) and Art. 65 (Consiglio di Stato). ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Italiano svizzero" (above); Wikipedia, "Lingua italiana in Svizzera" (above). ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Italiano svizzero" (above), on azione; Vocabolario Treccani, "classatore", <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/classatore/> (only the sense of a grain-sorting device), and "licenziare", <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/licenziare/> (including licenziare alle stampe). ↩

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/lugano-the-swiss-variety-of-italian

Copyright © 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP - Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong), Solicitor (England & Wales). For more information on legal, tax and trust services in Switzerland, please visit www.ressos.ch