

Who speaks Italian in Switzerland

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

The legal equality of Italian rests on a demographic minority. The Federal Statistical Office measures language through the structural survey, in which respondents may indicate more than one main language. According to its figures, the share of the permanent resident population that named Italian, Ticinese or Italian-Grisons dialect as a main language fell from 11 per cent in 1970 to 8 per cent in 2020. Over the same period the share of German and Swiss German fell from 66 to 62 per cent, French rose from 18 to 23 per cent and Romansh declined from 0.8 to 0.5 per cent.¹ Italian is thus the only official language whose share has fallen substantially in half a century. Expressed in absolute numbers, the Italian-speaking population is of the order of 700,000 persons.²

1 The decline since 1970 and its causes

The figure of 11 per cent in 1970 reflected a historical peak caused by immigration from Italy. In the 1950s and 1960s hundreds of thousands of Italian workers came to Switzerland, above all to the industrial regions of German-speaking Switzerland, and many of them reported Italian as their main language in the census. When many of these migrants returned to Italy after the recession of the 1970s, and as the second and third generations of those who stayed adopted German or French as their main language, the share of Italian outside Italian-speaking Switzerland declined.³ The decline therefore reflects above all the end of a migration cycle and says little about the vitality of Italian in its historical territory. In Ticino and the Italian-speaking valleys of the Grisons, Italian remains the language of the overwhelming majority.

The definition matters for interpretation. Since 2010 the structural survey has allowed several main languages, which means that a bilingual person in Zurich who names German and Italian counts for both. The figures for language use add further detail. In 2020, 8 per cent of the employed

population used Italian at work, and 8 per cent of the population spoke Italian at home with their family. Among adults aged 25 and over who were learning a language, 9 per cent were learning Italian, compared with 34 per cent learning English and 15 per cent each learning French or German.⁴ More than two thirds of the population aged 15 or over use more than one language at least once a week. Italian thus has a presence beyond its native speakers, but this presence is smaller than that of English, which has become the leading foreign language in Switzerland.

2 Ticino

The Canton of Ticino had 358,903 permanent residents at the end of 2024, an increase of 1,183 persons or 0.3 per cent over the previous year, which placed it last among the cantons in demographic growth. Foreigners made up 29.4 per cent of the population, and Italian citizens formed the largest foreign group with 64,240 persons, or 60.9 per cent of all foreign residents.⁵ Most of the canton's residents name Italian as their main language. The share of German speakers, concentrated among retirees and secondhome owners in Locarno and Ascona and in a few German-speaking communities such as Bosco Gurin, lies below one tenth of the population.⁶ The Italian citizens among the residents, together with about 80,000 cross-border commuters from Lombardy and Piedmont described in Chapter H.I,⁷ reinforce the Italian character of daily economic life.

Ticino is thus the only canton in which Italian is the sole official language and the language of a complete set of state institutions: parliament, government, administration, courts, schools from kindergarten to university, cantonal bank and public broadcasting. That institutional completeness is what distinguishes Ticino from Italian-speaking communities elsewhere in Switzerland. It also explains why the financial centre of Lugano can operate entirely in Italian when its clients and counterparties so wish.

3 Notes

1. Federal Statistical Office (FSO), "Languages", <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/languages-religions/languages.html>; Italian version at <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/it/home/statistiche/popolazione/lingue-religioni/lingue.html>, which defines the category as "italiano/dialetto ticinese o italo-grigione". ↩

2. Wikipedia, "Lingua italiana in Svizzera", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingua_italiana_in_Svizzera, gives about 720,000 persons, or 8.4 per cent of the population, without a clear reference year (used as a last resort). ↩
3. On the Italian immigration to Switzerland after 1945 and its demographic effects see Ernst Halter (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Italiener in der Schweiz* (Zurich 2003). ↩
4. FSO, "Languages" (above). ↩
5. Ufficio di statistica del Cantone Ticino (USTAT), "La popolazione cresce e invecchia", *Notiziario statistico 2025-31*, 11 September 2025, https://www3.ti.ch/DFE/DR/USTAT/allegati/news/254778ns_2025-31.pdf. ↩
6. FSO structural survey, main languages by canton, and USTAT, *Annuario statistico ticinese*; Wikipedia, "Canton Ticino", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canton_Ticino, gives a decline of the German share from 11.1 per cent in 1980 to 8.3 per cent in 2000 (used as a last resort). ↩
7. "Frontalieri: calano ancora in Ticino", *Tio.ch*, 6 August 2026, <https://www.tio.ch/ticino/attualita/1942262/frontalieri-calano-ancora-in-ticino> (79,121 cross-border commuters at the end of the second quarter of 2026, 0.6 per cent fewer than a year earlier); see Chapter H.I. ↩

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-who-speaks-italian-in-switzerland