

German, Swiss German and the official language

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The canton of Zug belongs to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Its authorities and courts conduct their business in German.¹ The Federal Constitution recognises four national languages, German, French, Italian and Romansh, and leaves it to the cantons to determine their official languages. The cantons must respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take account of indigenous linguistic minorities.² English is not a national language of Switzerland. It has no official status in the canton or the Confederation.

The spoken language of the canton is Swiss German, a group of Alemannic dialects that differ considerably from standard German. Children grow up speaking dialect, learn standard German at school and use it for writing and formal occasions. This situation, which linguists call diglossia, is typical of German-speaking Switzerland.³ For foreigners, it creates a double hurdle. A newcomer who learns standard German can read the newspaper and deal with the authorities in writing. In conversation with neighbours, colleagues or the parents of their children's classmates, the same newcomer will often hear a dialect that differs from what was learned in the language course. Many foreigners in Zug speak neither German nor Swiss German fluently. For them, English fills the gap.

1 Notes

1. Obergericht des Kantons Zug, Bericht und Antrag zur Änderung des Gerichtsorganisationsgesetzes (Zivil- und Strafrechtspflege), Vorlage Nr. 3638.1 – 17499, 8 November 2023, [kr-geschaefte.zug.ch](https://www.kr-geschaefte.zug.ch): German is the language of court proceedings, and no party is entitled to have proceedings conducted wholly or partly in another language. The Constitution of the Canton of Zug of 31 January 1894 contains no express provision designating an official language, so the sentence describes established practice. ↩

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2. Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation (BV), Art. 4 (national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh) and Art. 70 para. 2 (the cantons designate their official languages, respecting the traditional territorial distribution of languages and taking account of indigenous linguistic minorities), [fedlex.admin.ch](https://www.fedlex.admin.ch). ↩
3. Stefan Sonderegger, "Deutsch", Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, version of 1999 (edited 24 January 2018), hls-dhs-dss.ch: Swiss German dialects belong to South Alemannic and are almost exclusively spoken; the situation is described as medial diglossia (different language use depending on the medium); in 2000, 85.1 per cent of German speakers in Switzerland said they spoke dialect in everyday life; standard German is in principle the language of instruction in schools. ↩

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