

Measuring English in the canton

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The Federal Statistical Office measures language use through its structural survey. Respondents indicate their main languages, which may be more than one, and the languages they use regularly at work and at home. In German-speaking Switzerland, German or Swiss German is the main language of the large majority. English is named as a main language by a growing minority, which reached several per cent of the population nationally in the 2020s. In the cantons with many international companies, particularly Zug, Zurich, Basel-Stadt and Geneva, the share is higher than the national average.¹ The figures understate the role of English in the economy. A French or Dutch executive who works in English and speaks French or Dutch at home will not name English as a main language, although English is the language of his entire working life. The share of the workforce that uses English regularly at work is therefore much higher than the share that names it as a main language. The survey data on languages used at work confirm this and show that English is the most frequently used non-national language at work in Switzerland, particularly in finance, consulting, information technology and the management of large companies.²

1 Notes

1. SRF News, "Nicht-Landessprachen auf dem Vormarsch", srf.ch, reporting Federal Statistical Office data: 6 per cent of the permanent resident population named English as a main language in 2023, up from 4 per cent in 2010. Canton of Zug, Fachstelle für Statistik, "Sprachen im Kanton Zug", zg.ch: about 14 per cent of the population aged 15 and over in Zug name English as a main language, well above the Swiss average and the neighbouring cantons. Figures for Zurich, Basel-Stadt and Geneva are not covered by these sources. ↩

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2. SRF News, "Nicht-Landessprachen auf dem Vormarsch", srf.ch, reporting Federal Statistical Office data: in 2023, 23 per cent of the employed population usually spoke English at work (French 28 per cent, Italian 8 per cent). Canton of Zug, Fachstelle für Statistik, "Sprachen im Kanton Zug", zg.ch: about 41.7 per cent of employed residents of Zug regularly speak English at work, close to the share for standard German (45.3 per cent). A breakdown by sector is not given in these sources. ↩

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