Episode 48: Swiss Languages

Summary

Nick's friend Yassin is an English teacher in his native Switzerland. In this conversation, he talks about the four Swiss national languages: (Swiss) German, French, Italian and Romansh.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Yassin about his country, which is Switzerland, and in particular we're talking about Swiss languages, umm, because it's a very interesting country with several different languages spoken. So firstly can you just give us a <u>breakdown</u>[1] of how the languages work in Switzerland?

Yassin: Yep, uhh, so we have four national languages - uhh, French, German, Italian and Romansh. So French and Italian and Romansh, three of those, are Latin languages, the Romance family of languages. And <u>as for</u>[2] German, it's actually a different group of dialects, Swiss German dialects, umm, so people who speak Swiss German, uhh, can of course read or write in what we call High German or standard German, that's what you would learn in school. However, when they're speaking to their parents or friends, they will use their local dialect.

Nick: Right, that's quite interesting because more or less, I think, the French and Italian that's spoken in Switzerland is pretty similar to French from France and Italian from Italy.

Yassin: Yeah.

Nick: But the German's really different.

Yassin: Yes, exactly. Yeah, there's a huge difference. Germans don't actually understand Swiss Germans when they speak, <u>for the most part</u>[3]. Umm, however, Swiss Germans of course understand Germans. Umm, <u>that being said</u>[4], there are, of course, differences between Swiss French and French French, right? For

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[1] <u>breakdown</u>: summary, analysis

[2] <u>as for</u>: regarding, concerning

[3] <u>for the most part</u>: mostly, in general

[4] <u>that being said</u>: having said that (used when you are going to say something that counters or appears to counter something you said before)

example, the way we count. Uhh, typically, a Swiss person will say, umm, will say *septante* (70), *huitante* (80), *nonante* (90) instead of, umm, *soixante-dix* (70), *quatre-vingts* (80) and, uhh, *quatre-vingts-dix* (90). So the French system's a bit weird, you already know about that. Umm, as for Italian, uhh, there is actually a dialect in Ticino, the Lombard dialect. But it's the same dialect that you'll find in the whole of Lombardy, so also in Milan.

Nick: OK, so it's like *Milanese*, basically?

Yassin: Exactly, yeah, yeah, the dialect. Well not exactly. Well, *Milanese* could be, you know, the Italian they speak in Milan. But I mean really, this is really a dialect, uhh, so it's quite different from the standard Italian actually, very different.

Nick: Right, so you have … it's interesting because you have these three languages that are very famous languages, known around the world. Then you have this fourth one, uhh, which you mentioned - Romansh - and that's spoken by I think only about one per cent of Swiss.

Yassin: Yes, that's exact, yeah. It's about, uhh, I'd say, if I remember correctly, it's about 50,000 people, <u>give or take</u>[5], who use it every day. I'd say there are only about 30,000 people who really work in the Romansh and use it all the time with another 30,000 or so who use it sometimes when they speak to their family or certain friends. But, umm, there are actually five dialects of Romansh.

Nick: Is that right?

Yassin: Yes, it's quite interesting, yeah. You've got a standard Romansh which was invented by a linguist in Zurich, uhh, called *Rumantsch Grischun*, and, uhh, it takes different aspects from those five dialects. So they tried to unify it, to fight against the death of the language. But, sadly, people are very <u>stubborn</u>[6], so everybody <u>sticks to</u>[7] their own dialect. No one has really adopted this standardised Romansh, uhh, so yeah.

Nick: That's really interesting. No, I didn't know that. So it's almost like, in a micro-form, it's like Esperanto. It's trying to create a unifying, uhh, language, but then it didn't work.

Yassin: Yes, exactly. It's a bit like that actually, yeah, yeah.

Nick: Because it's really spoken in these kind of mountain areas, so it's very, you know, it's sort of village to village in areas that are traditionally difficult to traverse and to travel from one place to the other, right?

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[5] <u>give or take</u>: maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less (used with approximating numbers)

[6] <u>stubborn</u>: unwilling to change, fixed in their ways

[7] <u>sticks to</u> (phrasal verb): remains faithful to, doesn't move from

Yassin: Right, right. The valleys don't make it easy for dialects and languages in general to, you know, travel from one region to the next, which is why we have different dialects in Switzerland with, say, Swiss German as well. Umm, but with Romansh, you could actually compare it to Ireland. So I don't know if you know anything about Irish, but there are actually four different dialects of Irish, uhh, depending on which province you're from. And they tried to unify Irish, and, you know, that's what they teach in schools, generally, although you have input from the local province. And, uhh, however, those who actually do use Irish, or Gaelic, in their daily life, they will use their dialect. So that's the thing with languages. You can try and impose a kind of scientific, standardised, uhh, form, but the actual users of the language will always stick to their roots.

Nick: And do you think because Romansh is almost … I mean, you could call it an indigenous language, or do people call it that?

Yassin: Yeah, definitely.

Nick: So is there any pride in that because the others are kind of imported languages from larger, nearby countries <u>to a certain degree</u>[8].

Yassin: Yeah, it's, uhh, it's interesting. We do have pride in having four languages and being multilingual and yet having, you know, a strong national identity. However, I don't think we feel like they necessarily are foreign languages. We very much feel like French is also our language, Italian, German … umm, because as you know, Switzerland was, you know, organically created, right? A group of cantons, mini states if you will, city-states, grouped together to create Switzerland. So, yeah, I feel like there is pride in our own version of French and our own version of Italian, our own version of German. It's … just because they're also spoken in other countries, I don't feel that, uhh, there's any less pride there.

Nick: Fair enough. And so you're from Geneva, so you're a French speaker, but your family history's a little bit more complicated than that, right?

Yassin: OK, so my Dad is from Morocco.

Nick: OK.

Yassin: From Fez, to be precise. And my mother's from Swiss Germany, from Graubunden, which is the very opposite from Geneva on the map, it's the far east of Switzerland. And, uhh, Graubunden is a very interesting place, because you have, you know, three languages, right? It's the only canton, in fact, to have three languages.

Nick: OK, and so those are German, Italian and Romansh.

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[8] <u>to a certain degree</u>: not completely, but in a limited or partial way

Yassin: Exactly, exactly. With Italian probably being the minority language, actually. Umm, there are quite a few Romansh speakers, about 50,000, and then you have of course the Swiss Germans, uhh, so, yeah.

Nick: But I've even found when we've been to Graubunden, 'cause we don't speak any German, and obviously we don't speak any Romansh, so sometimes we ask people if they speak Italian, and sometimes they do, and then we can get by at a restaurant or a hotel or something in Italian if English doesn't work or if French doesn't work as a common language. So, yeah, that's quite interesting.

OK, so you have an Arabic-speaking father and a Swiss-German-speaking mother, but you're a French speaker at your core.

Yassin: Yes, uhh, well, my Mum and Dad spoke to each other in French. So, you know, when you're a child, my mother spoke to us in Swiss-German, my Dad spoke to us in Arabic. But very quickly, we both saw - my brother and I - that they were speaking to each other in French. So when you're a kid you want to speak the language your parents are speaking to each other. So we just started using French with them and at some point they sadly gave up. Umm, but I was lucky enough that my Swiss-German grandparents don't speak a word of French, and so I was able to learn Swiss-German with them. Uhh, however, as you know, Morocco is a Francophone country and my family, being educated, they all speak French fluently, so I never had to learn Arabic, sadly.

Nick: OK, and so that's interesting, though, that … 'cause I have a lot of students as well who are adults who have … yes, they struggle to sometimes speak their native language, even with their children, when it's easier to have, say, French as a common language in that way, just like in your experience.

Yassin: Yeah.

Nick: And so you went to an international school, right?

Yassin: Yep.

Nick: So that's why your English is essentially a native level as well. Umm, and so I know that in regular Swiss public schools, you have to learn one of the other Swiss languages for quite a few years, right?

Yassin: Yes, yeah.

Nick: So if you're in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, then you learn German or perhaps Italian, but most likely German, and vice versa[9] as well. And so did you have to do that as well?

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[9] vice versa (from Latin): in reverse

Yassin: Well actually I did learn German in school. I could actually choose between German and Spanish. So I ended up choosing German because I was kind of forced to by my Mum, umm, which I don't regret, but, you know, I wanted to go for Spanish because it's easier. But, yeah, in Swiss schools, though, if I remember correctly, you have to … if you're in any of the minority regions, so, you know French-speaking, Italian … you have to learn German. But at some point you can start with Italian here, at least I know it's the case in Geneva. And, uhh, some people can drop German altogether for Italian, but you have to start with German, always.

Nick: OK, because German is about, what, sixty-four, sixty-five per cent of the people?

Yassin: Exactly, yeah, very good statistics there, yeah!

Nick: And so, I mean, a lot of the people I speak to say, you know, they might have done - if they're French speakers - six, seven years of German and they say they speak barely anything.

Yassin: Yeah, it's not very motivating because German's a hard language first of all. But more importantly, everybody knows that the Swiss Germans don't speak standard German. So unless you, you know, love Germany and, you know, you're going to go and party in Berlin and you see a use for it, most people just feel … I mean they just give up because they know that Swiss Germans will speak to each other in Swiss German and, you know, if you ever go thee, you kind of have to adapt. So honestly, I think we should learn Swiss German in schools instead of High German. I know it's maybe a bit controversial, but, uhh, it would be more useful.

Nick: Right, and so even with these four languages, it turns out that perhaps English is the uniting language that a lot of Swiss people use with each other.

Yassin: Yes, that's the really funny thing. Umm, people who don't have a high level of German here would probably try and use, you know, French or English when they're, say, travelling to Bern or another part of Swiss Germany. And, umm, it's quite interesting because, yeah, you will sometimes find Swiss people using English as the _lingua franca_[10]. However, I'm usually pleasantly surprised by the level of French that lots of Swiss Germans have. So they tend to make more of an effort. As for people from Ticino, which is the Italian-speaking canton, uhh, they tend to have a good level of German if they go study there. Because, you know, they have no big university there, so they have to learn either French or German and go to university in one of those, uhh, two linguistic regions.

Nick: OK, very interesting. Thank you very much.

Yassin: Thank you.

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[10] _lingua franca_ (from Italian, commonly used in English): common language

Comprehension Questions

1. Nick and Yassin compare the attempts to create a unified Romansh language with which two other examples?

2. Why did Yassin and his brother start speaking French at home when they were children instead of the Arabic and Swiss German that their parents were speaking to them?

3. Why did Yassin choose to study German at school?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. He refuses to change his mind even though everyone disagrees with him. He's very _____ that way.

2. There are 15 different national languages in India, but Hindi is the most widely spoken so it serves as the _____.

3. He has just a few close friends and he _____ them rather than trying to meet new people.

4. Of the four languages spoken in Spain, Castilian, Catalan and Galician all come from Latin. _____ Basque, its origin is unknown.

5. If you look at our yearly report, you can see a _____ of which advertising campaigns were successful and which weren't.

6. She doesn't like him, and _____. I don't know why they can't get along better.

7. The capacity of the stadium is about 50,000 people, _____. I don't know the exact number.

8. Portugal has great weather _____. Occasionally it's rainy, but usually it's sunny.

9. I usually like Latin languages more than Germanic ones. _____, I would like to learn Dutch.

10. _____, she's the reason we're getting married, because she was the one who introduced us in the first place.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Yassin said that he thinks Swiss German, not High German, should be taught in schools in the French and Italian cantons of Switzerland. Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. Do you think governments should try to standardise languages that have dialects as was attempted with Romansh, or let them be?

3. Would you like to learn a 'niche' language like Romansh even though there aren't many speakers of it? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Nick compares it with Esperanto and Yassin with Irish (Gaelic).

2. Their parents spoke French to each other (even though it isn't the native language for either of them), so Yassin and his brother wanted to imitate them.

3. He chose German because his mother wanted him to study German, even though he wanted to choose Spanish.

Exercises

1. stubborn
2. *lingua franca*
3. sticks to
4. As for
5. breakdown
6. vice versa
7. give or take
8. for the most part
9. that being said
10. to a certain degree