

# Romansch

## The hidden dying language



## **Emma Jewell, undergraduate winner of our 2016 Young Writers' Competition, discusses the history and culture of Romansch, a language and population of Switzerland that is often overlooked.**

**I**n communities hidden between the peaks of the Swiss Alps, lives an isolated population, speaking and living like the Romans did thousands of years ago. Taking up barely 0.5% of Switzerland's population, these natives chatter in a tongue similar to a mix of German and Italian. The language they share is Romansch, a member of the Rhaetian Romance language group, and the closest known language to Latin. Despite its unique culture and direct connection to the Roman empire, this language has only 70,000 speakers, and is dying fast.

Recent linguistic accounts of language death suggest that the next century may see half the world's languages disappear, with over a thousand – Romansch among them – thought to be endangered. Since the fall of the Roman empire, Romansch has struggled to maintain its customs and language. In today's increasingly globally connected world, its prospects are grim. Through looking at Romansch's

past, present, and future, as well as the community's rich culture, it is possible to trace the causes of its decline, as well as the beautiful traditions that would be lost with its extinction.

The Romansch language first appeared as early as 15 BCE, when Roman soldiers brought it to a region called Rhaetia (now the Grisons Canton in Switzerland). During the Roman Empire, rich cultures and communities flourished across the Swiss Alps, and the number of Romansch speakers rose. These speakers created a strong economic workforce, incorporating their natural surroundings – for example, breeding cattle and cutting timber. However, by the 5th and 6th centuries AD, the Roman Empire was beginning to fall, paving the way for German rule over Switzerland. This was a major setback for Romansch, and is the root of the language's continuing struggle for survival. The increasing influence of German language and heritage in the Grisons Canton divided Romansch, altering many of its

words and creating different dialects, further separating the Romansch speakers' ability to communicate.

The fall of the Roman Empire was only the beginning of Romansch's battle to survive. The language was up against the other main languages surrounding Switzerland: French, German, and Italian. For example, *Britannica* notes that in 1880 two-fifths of the population of Grisons were Rhaetian speakers, a figure that decreased to one-fourth by 1970. Switzerland has made attempts to prevent the death of Romansch: in 1938, Romansch became a semi-official language of the nation, although it was only recognized locally, and rarely used for federal purposes. At the current rate of decline, even this legislation may not save Romansch and its traditions.

Romansch literature has also faced challenges to its existence. For some time, Romansch was only communicated orally. It wasn't until 1674 that one of the first pieces of written Romansch literature – the Romansch

bible – was completed in Basel, after many revisions. However, it was published in a German speaking community, with the printers themselves not conversant with Romansch, therefore further reducing Romansch authenticity. The act of translating in a language not your own, increases the probability that elements of that language will be lost. Without literature that properly reflected Romansch culture, the language has struggled to become well known in Switzerland, let alone throughout Europe.

Today, the rising popularity of German in the canton of Grisons means that Romansch speakers are being forced to stray from their traditional community. The Romansch population is miniscule compared to those that speak the other languages of Switzerland. According to the *CIA World Factbook*, out of Switzerland's total population of 8,121,830, only 1% are of the ethnic group Romansch, and only 0.5% speak Romansch as their first language. The globalised and connected world has caused this already small number of speakers to drastically decrease in numbers, with improved transport connections bringing ever more French, Italian and German speakers, pushing out Romansch. This rise in global connection has vastly increased the amount of German taught in Romansch schools, and it is now the only language taught at secondary school level in Romansch communities. Romansch speakers, knowing multiple languages, are often forced to adapt to their German surroundings, causing their abilities in their native language to suffer. Matthias Gruenert, a Romansch teacher at the University of Zurich, points out that Romansch

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Grisons Canton village.

speakers’ bilingualism can be a weakness – it means that when they communicate with German-speakers, it is they that communicate in their non-native tongue. Economic factors have also damaged Romansch’s prospects. Today, more and more young Romansch speakers are learning other languages in order to attain occupations in bigger cities. Straying from their traditional farming jobs and entering the tourism industry, many Romansch speakers give up their native language for German in order to earn a living.

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straight out of the Roman Empire. Romansch houses, unique to the Grisons Canton, are typically solid stone and boxy with deep-set medieval-style windows. Usually these homes are decorated with beautiful grafitto, intricate drawings and carvings that display stories from the past. Romansch food is extremely diverse, and unique to its area: typical bakeries sell birnenbrot (pear bread), tuorta da nusch (nut tart), and chunks of caramel. Food plays many roles in Romansch culture: for example, it is traditional for a young boy to give his girlfriend sugar, with which she mixes cream to make caramel candy. Other exotic Romansch food includes Trippa (tripe) and chastagnas cun latmielch (chestnuts covered in cream). Testigna, or 'cow's head', is a unique food traditionally eaten at Chalandamarz, a festival native to the Romansch community that is celebrated across the Swiss Alps, full of many unique customs. On this day, children march in parades through the villages, ringing bells to drive away winter. The children go door to door, filling their bells with holiday candies and cakes. Custom clothing for this holiday includes blue shirts and red ties around the heads of children. Bavania is another holiday unique to the Romansch community. Celebrated on January 6th, in the town of Ardez, village girls choose escorts for an evening ball through a lottery, reserving their man through the application of a red band around his neck. This holiday, like Chalandamarz, is one only celebrated within the Romansch community. With the rapid loss of the Romansch language, holidays such as Chalandamarz, and other traditions may never be

celebrated again. Romansch culture could be lost forever, if the language is not preserved.

Traditional Romansch poems and written works are disappearing, as less of the community writes and reads in the language. Iso Camartin, an author, publicist, and anchorman, born in Chur Switzerland in the canton of Grisons, suggests that the increasing influence of German has resulted in fewer authors choosing to write in Romansch; traditional Romansch literature remains in only a few undeveloped villages that are on the brink of collapse. Few readers even notice Romansch-written works today: in the past there was a small population who read Romansch exclusively, but this population is declining.

Even religion in the Romansch region is becoming less authentic to the language. Before, services were preached solely in Romansch, but now that tradition has become a rarity. John Tagliabue of the *New York Times* observes that religious services performed in Chur Switzerland, the capital of the Romansch language tend to be delivered in German. Duri, a local Romansch citizen quoted in a *Los Angeles Times* article on Romansch, notes that "German for me, is a foreign language, but with Romansch you don't get so far".

Although it is connected to the Roman Empire, and possessed of a beautiful and unique culture, the precious language of Romansch is dying, and its death will be costly. However, there are still hopes that the rich culture and history of this language can be preserved. It is clear that the Romansch language enhances our understanding of architecture, food, holidays, literature, and

other traditions, contributing to the diversity and liveliness of Switzerland. The presentation of Romansch through forms of media other than just its own literature, for example through social media, newspapers, magazines, and television, could raise awareness of this dying language. Modern methods of communication are already being used to promote Romansch, as in the Romansch newspapers, radio and TV programmes of the Swiss Alps. All hope is not lost, but in order to preserve this language, a true understanding of its past, present, and culture is needed. Romansch may be a hidden dying language, but it is also enriching, and deserves to be acknowledged and spoken for generations to come. ¶

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**Emma Jewell** is a student at Prairie Ridge High School in Crystal Lake, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. In her free time she enjoys playing the cello, photography, reading, and spending time outdoors.

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### Find out more

#### Articles and book chapters

Iso Camartin and Ellen von Nardroff (1993) 'The Consequences of Being Different', in *Literary Review* 36(4).

William Freund (1856) 'Ethnological Observations Made on a Journey through the Rhaetian Alps in 1853', in *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* 4.

Rebecca Posner and Marius Sala (2015) 'Rhaetian Dialects', in *Encyclopedia of Britannica*.

'Switzerland World Data.' *Britannica*. N.p.: n.p., 2015. N. pag. Print.

#### Online

A Swiss Romansch bible at King's College London – [kingscollections.org/exhibitions/specialcollections/bible/european-bible/swiss-romansch-bible](http://kingscollections.org/exhibitions/specialcollections/bible/european-bible/swiss-romansch-bible)