

Original article published in the Bündner Woche, July 31, 2024, p. 49

Research in Graubünden

## The language detective from Graubünden

How international words find their way into Romansh



Coffee – A linguistic, cultural, and culinary phenomenon.  
Image: D. Heinen

Angelica Blumenthal is a research assistant at the Institut dal Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun (I-DRG) in Chur. For her dissertation, she investigates with detective-like precision how international words travel from their source language into Bündnerromanisch (Graubünden Romansh). “Internationalisms are words that appear in at least three languages and two different language families. They often spread along historical trade routes and through cultural exchange from one language to another,” she explains. So far, their integration into Bündnerromanisch has hardly been studied scientifically.

Through literature research and access to over two million index cards in the I-DRG archive, Blumenthal has identified relevant terms. For her analysis, she selected two distinct categories: colonial goods such as banana, coffee, chocolate, and sugar, as well as technical and scientific terms like gasoline, particle, and vitamin. Her interdisciplinary approach combines linguistics, history, and cultural studies. “To determine the exact origin of a word, I have to consider all possible historical and cultural influences,” says Blumenthal.

Blumenthal illustrates her research with the example of coffee: “At the end of the 17th century, this popular stimulant spread in Switzerland and reached Graubünden in the 18th century. In the more remote valleys, coffee only became a daily beverage in the mid-19th century. The first known record of the word coffee in Bündnerromanisch was provided by Gion Casper Collenberg in 1766 in his travel report from La Réunion to his relatives in Graubünden. However, older, yet undiscovered records may exist. Since 1823, the word has appeared regularly in Bündnerromanisch dictionaries, often with different spellings such as café, caffee, and caffè. The Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun describes caffè as an international loanword from Turkish but does not specify the exact borrowing pathway.”

A clue to possible borrowing routes is provided by the term ‘Kaffeebohne’ (coffee bean), as Blumenthal explains: “In the Romance languages, the coffee bean is usually referred to as a grain (e.g., Italian grano/chicco di caffè). In Arabic, the coffee fruit is called ‘bunn’ (which means ‘berry’ in German), and this was interpreted in German and English as ‘Bohne’ and ‘bean’, respectively. In Bündnerromanisch, both ‘Bohne’ (br. fav, fev) and grain (br. gran, graun) exist as terms, with regional differences. For Surselva and Central Graubünden, I consider a borrowing from German to be the most plausible explanation, as the ‘German type’ of naming the coffee bean is predominant there. In the Engadin, however, the predominant use of the ‘Italian type’ suggests a borrowing from Italian. I have also examined a possible borrowing from French but consider it less likely.”

Blumenthal's work demonstrates how closely culture and language are intertwined. She aims to complete her doctoral dissertation by 2026 and hopes that her findings will make a valuable contribution to linguistics.

Angelica Blumenthal and Daniela Heinen



Angelica Blumenthal.

Bild: I-DRG

## **“Graubünden forscht 2024”**

On November 8 and 9, 2024, the Academia Raetica will host the ninth conference “Graubünden forscht” at the Davos Congress Center. On Saturday, November 9, 2024, the public is invited to gain insight into the diverse research activities in the canton at the “Mittag der Forschung” (Science Noon) and experience science up close. For details, visit [www.gr-forscht.ch](http://www.gr-forscht.ch).

Sponsored Content: The content of this article was provided by Academia Raetica, the association for the promotion of science, research and education in Graubünden: [www.academiaRaetica.ch](http://www.academiaRaetica.ch).

Text translated with the support ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>)