This contribution analyses the genesis of a cantonal language law in Switzerland and shows, how this law becomes a terrain for language ideological debates (Blommaert 1999). The language law stems from Canton Graubünden and originally aimed at protecting the autochthonous linguistic minorities and strengthening the consciousness for the regional "trilingualism".

Graubünden is the only canton of Switzerland with three official languages: the majority speaks German (68.5%), 15% consider Romansh as their first language and 10% Italian. In 1947 the linguistic minorities tried to establish a Language Protection Law. After two more unsuccessful attempts, the cantonal parliament approved in 2006 a language law. A German speaking opposition, however, proposed a referendum against it, with the consequence that the population of Canton Graubünden had to vote in June 2007 about this law, which was finally accepted by 54% of the voters.

In this paper I will show the debates around democratic principles and minority language protection, especially how the principle of territoriality limits the freedom of language. The biggest dispute in the voting campaign was made on an article of the law which protects the Romansh territory by prescribing villages with more than 40% of Romansh speakers as Romansh villages. This new legal prescription of the principle of territoriality caused a debate about the legitimate speaker of this minority language, about the freedom of language and the peaceful social coexistence of the different language groups.

I will argue that the debate about the language law was fundamentally about the construction of minorities and about the threat to the national homogeneity (Duchêne 2008). At the same time economic aspects (costs of protection measures) have a big impact on the discussion about minorities (Heller 2006) and finally I will show that the minority status of the group is reproduced throughout the whole debate.

Keywords: Linguistic minority, Principle of territoriality, Language Law.