Quantifying Speakers in an Era of Calculation
As Sally Engle Marry states in her 2016 book, quantification is in many ways seductive; it creates the impression that we can understand objectively the world, organize it and contribute to anchor a regime of truth based on indicators, comparison and categorization. This produces knowledge effects and governance effects. In this talk I shall examine what is behind the quantification of speakers, how is it one and with what consequences for whom. Based on historiographic and ethnographic data on language surveys and census in Switzerland and elsewhere I argue that the making of numbers and its mundane and academic usage are inscribed in an era of calculation, where statistical “facts” become essential in the management of the uncertain and speculative dimension of language.