

The advance of dialect : way to isolation?

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The advance of dialect

Way to isolation?

First, a personal confession: I consider our language situation, the coexistence of high (standard) German and dialect, to be a so-called «stroke of luck» in view of the uniqueness of our country and its position in the German-speaking cultural realm. What we understand as our «affinity to the German language in two forms of expression» raises problems, but nevertheless – after comprehensive consideration of the issue – provides a cultural enrichment, in contrast to a centralized single language.

Finding the right proportion

«Swiss German» in its rich variety of regional dialects gives the individual his identity and expresses the cultural diversity of the German-speaking population. It provides a unique and original vocabulary, sentence flow and intonation, and forms one of the most significant characteristics of what we call native place.

High German, for its part, links the German-speaking Swiss to the German-speaking part of the world numbering about 100 million people. Above all it enables him to share in the language culture which has been so richly cultivated in all German-speaking countries over centuries and which includes an immense treasure of works of literature.

Against this background, the polarization between high German and dialect appears to be a misfortune. Anyone who bears a cultural responsibility must work against this polarization with determination. The issue today is that the one must not displace the other. Instead, the two forms of expression should complement each other in a realistic and productive «symbiosis». The aim is a relationship between high German and dialect appropriate to the significance and power of enrichment of each in their preservation and use in society, in the public sphere, above all in the electronic media – which serve as «examples» – and in particular in the schools.

Even if statistical comparisons are lacking so far, it is nevertheless clear that within the relatively short period of at most 10 to 20 years the use of dialect in the public sphere, by the state, the churches, associations, institutions of all kinds, in the electronic media and in the schools at all levels has in-

creased considerably and the use of spoken high German has decreased to the same extent.

«Small language revolution»

Dialect has taken over in areas where spoken high German used to be considered the appropriate form of expression. Swiss Germans are less and less often in the situation where they have to speak high German. The relationship of dialect to high German common earlier has totally shifted. Dialect has displaced high German.

The cause of this language shift, which many concerned observers have termed a «small language revolution», is complex. Summed up very briefly, the regionalism observable in Europe, the escape to small places which can be easily surveyed, the yearning for a sheltered home, for undisturbed nature, the search for a safe place, the desire for freedom with no standardization in a modern, mass society with superabundant norms are said to play a role.

Arbitrary barriers

The unintentional side effects of this language shift are considerable. Swiss radio

Forum Number 1

Authors from all four language regions of Switzerland as well as a Swiss abroad express their views on issues of verbal communication in our country. The contributions from French-speaking Switzerland, Ticino and the Rhaeto-Romanic realm were written by journalists especially for this forum. The article on the increased use of dialect in German-speaking Switzerland is a highly praised essay by the former Director of Education of Lucerne, Walter Gut, which has been published several times and which appears here in a very shortened version. A point which is clearly made in all the contributions: language problems – particularly in Switzerland – involve not only issues of everyday communication, but also the preservation or endangering of a delicate cultural and political balance.

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and television – national institutions set up for the whole country and with transmission far beyond the national borders – have shortened their range internationally, since our dialects are far from being understood by all German-speakers everywhere. Inside Switzerland the drastic decline in the use of high German in the media as well as the less frequent use of high German when address-



From the Lake of Geneva
(our picture: the famous vineyards of Lavaux) ...



ing a group of people – earlier an automatic gesture of politeness – have resulted in arbitrarily raised barriers, according to many French- and Italian-speaking Swiss.

Even if the rift between German-speaking and western Switzerland – which the French-speaking Swiss complain about bitterly – can only be attributed partly to this language difficulty or this refusal to make contact, nevertheless the extra consideration which the majority owes the minority calls for overcoming this language and contact barrier which is highly disadvantageous for mutual understanding. Our language problem is in fact of great political as well as cultural significance in view of the undisturbed living together of the language regions and language groups in our multilingual country. The cry of alarm which can be discerned more and more clearly in Romance Switzerland is an emergency signal which German-speaking Switzerland must not ignore. The possibility of communication using that form of the German language which is understood on both sides is the elementary prerequisite for living together.

«Unified dialect»?

A further side effect, less often mentioned, of the radio and television media in the area of dialect should be borne in mind. Swiss Germans who live in smaller dialect regions and who value and love their way of speaking risk losing the natural, spontaneous assurance of finding the sounds, vo-

cabulary and intonation of their inherited tongue if they very often hear the dialect of the large regions. The danger arises that the local character, the identity of these dialects

becomes blurred through long-term effect. This is a disadvantage considering the enriching variety of Swiss German dialects, discussed at the beginning. *Walter Gut*

The opinion of a Swiss Abroad

Against provincialism

As a Swiss citizen I have been teaching at a German university, the University of Tübingen, for nearly 30 years. Not only have I kept up contacts with my homeland in all those years, but I have the possibility here in Tübingen of receiving the radio and TV programmes of the German-speaking Swiss station. And particularly as a Swiss abroad I am increasingly concerned about a situation which has arisen in the past few years in so many areas of Swiss public life, not least of all in the area of radio and television. It is the increased use of dialect in the Swiss media with simultaneous repression of spoken high German.

In short: I speak a pure Lucerne German, and have not the slightest prejudice against our Swiss dialect. As a Swiss abroad, Swiss German is especially dear to me, and I use it wherever I can in private contacts with my relatives and friends in Switzerland. For me

dialect is also a symbol of cultural identity and personal ties to my homeland.

But it is something else when dialect takes over in the public media to such a disproportionate extent. This leads to a dangerous isolation of the German-speaking Swiss both internationally as well as within Switzerland.

A representative survey by the Tourist Marketing Research System (TOMAS) only confirms what one knows only too well as a Swiss abroad: Switzerland is popular as a holiday resort, the Swiss themselves less; not least of all because of their language they are considered (except of course where there is something to be gained) as encapsulated, not very friendly toward foreigners and egocentric. When even classical music is announced in Swiss German (just imagine the same thing in Bavarian), one cannot be amazed at such judgments. I would therefore like to encourage the German-speaking Swiss station to resist this trend towards provincialism and cutting oneself off, and to return to a justifiable level of use of dialect in radio and television.

Prof. Hans Küng (Tübingen)



... to the Lake of Constance (refectory of the former Cistercian Monastery in Steckborn, Thurgau): Multilinguality creates problems. (photos: Keystone)

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