

An opinion from the Romandie : all out for mutual understanding

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An opinion from the Romandie

All out for mutual understanding

«Wie bitte?» The Suisse Romand, the francophone from French-speaking Switzerland, sometimes asks this little question of his German-speaking compatriot who addresses him in dialect. The whole problem of communication between Romans and their Alemannic opposite numbers stems from this misunderstanding: the French-speaking Swiss learn «good», i.e. standard, German at school, whereas the worthy people beyond the River Sarine tend to speak «high German» with bad grace; confronted with a *Welsch*, a Suisse-Romand, they prefer to speak a little broken French or their particular shade of dialect. Indeed, there has always been a language barrier in Switzerland due to the fact that the French speaker seems to have a congenital difficulty in learning *schwyzerdütsch*, especially since there is not only one, but many, dialects. None the less, the two main linguistic communities have managed to live together and to safeguard the unity of the country.

Arduous apprenticeship

From this standpoint, however, the situation today appears less good. There is much

*Fading polyglotism
of the Swiss?
Junkerngasse in
Berne (photo:
Peter Studer).*



evidence to show that the German Swiss are less prepared than formerly to speak high German with the French Swiss. In addition, French, in the schools of German-speaking Switzerland, has become a bone of contention. The introduction of French in the fourth or fifth primaries, although recommended as long ago as 1975 by the conference of cantonal directors of public

education, was rejected by Schaffhausen and Basle-Land. The people are voting on this issue in Zurich on 25th September, in Thurgau in November and in St. Gallen at the end of this year. One fears rejection in each case.

Retaliation has not been slow in coming. On June 1st this year the Geneva Independent Party announced that it would launch an initiative to replace the teaching of German by that of English in the Geneva schools. Luckily, the two existing separatist movements of Geneva are minuscule; they number hardly 200 to 300 members. The Genevise authorities are nevertheless in an embarrassing situation.

The media stand accused

Radio and television are supposed to play their role of links, of linguistic cement. In this connection, however, the dialectal wave that is breaking over German Switzerland is disastrous. This constant recourse to the dialect prevents the French-speaking Swiss from following broadcasts from German Switzerland which would contribute towards a better understanding between the communities.

This grievance is clearly relevant to the radio. In 1970, the proportion of dialect in the Radio DRS programmes was 33%. In 1979 it had risen to 50%. Today, Swiss-German dialect is used for two-thirds of the broadcasts from this transmitting station. Things are rather better in so far as television is concerned. The statistics of the



Friendly chat between two fellow-countrymen, French-speaking Swiss Lovà Golovtchiner (left) and German-speaking Swiss Emil Steinberger, on the occasion of «Die Grenze/La Frontière» («The Border»), a joint broadcast by the German-speaking and the French-speaking Swiss TV on 21st April 1988 (photo: DRS Television).



Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) state that in 1980 the dialect had «invaded» 31% of transmissions while «good» German continued to command in 69%. But it should be added that Swiss-German is used in a host of broadcasts (interviews, surveys, *précis*) which support the television news bulletins. This constitutes a great loss of substantial information and material for the francophones who would like to know what people on the other side of the Sarine are thinking and talking about. However, the SBC has stated that it does not want the proportion of dialect to exceed one third of the total transmission time.

Poor relations

The Romans, already a minority (18.4% of the total population in 1980, against 65% of German speakers and 9.8% of Italian-speaking Swiss), also have greater trouble in learning German. A survey mounted by a Lausanne institute in May 1987 showed that 35% of Romans do not speak a word of German and that 25% of their Alemannic counterparts not a word of French. Further, 65% of Romans know nothing whatsoever of «Schwyzerdütsch». A minority which hardly makes itself understood, is tempted to do as the turtle does: withdraw into its carapace and let others try.

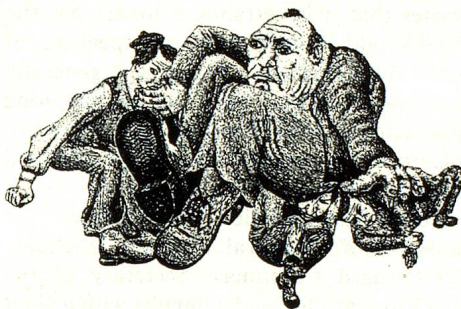
We must avoid this. Good, standard German, a true, universally-accepted common tongue for our country, helps German-speaking Switzerland not to cut itself off from the rest of the world. A taste for one's own vernacular should not hide this fact. Even if it sometimes happens that there is uneasiness that the thrust of Swiss-German creates tensions, it still remains for us to be conscious of the wish, discernible almost everywhere, not to burn our bridges behind us. We must encourage this sign of goodwill at every slightest opportunity.

Roland Brachetto

The situation in Ticino

Threatened «Italianità»?

The mother tongue of most Swiss is a dialect. Whereas, in Ticino, a slow Italianisation of the dialects and their characteristics, which are kept up mainly among elderly people and in the mountain valleys, can be observed, the Swiss-German vernacular is an autonomous and strongly regionalised system vis-à-vis the official language. A further fundamental difference lies in the fact that today the Ticinese accept the use of Italian without prejudice as an alternative to their dialect, while the high German plays the role of a foreign language in German-



speaking Switzerland. Whoever is not convinced of this should once listen to the limited linguistic abilities of the people in this language, i.e. standard German, north of the St Gotthard or, as the French-speaking Swiss would say, the other side of the River Sarine.

After these preliminary remarks, let us look at some statistical data: there are 165,000 Ticinese in the Ticino, which corresponds to about 60% of the population of this southernmost canton; a further 35,000 Ticinese live outside the canton. Just as numerous are the other Swiss who have settled in the Ticino and, in addition, there are about 3,000 citizens of the German Federal Republic. And, of course, every day from Easter to late autumn a mass of German-speaking tourists floods into or through the Ticino. It is hard to guess how many, but certainly not fewer than 10,000-15,000. Their presence, which is concentrated in a few popular areas, particularly around Locarno, brakes the mechanisms of the self-defence of «Italianità». The finest example of this was provided by the Cantonal Department for Social Services which, in an advertisement for the post of children's psychiatrist in the Neuropsychology Hospital in Mendrisio, specified that «Knowledge of Italian is a precondition». Such an example gives cause for misgivings, and there are further small

oddities which typify the cultural unease, and which the Ticinese perceive in their own homes. A political party in the Sottoceneri last April published an appeal to find native-born candidates for elections to the municipal council. And where the participation of non-Ticinese applicants is large, the local sections of the party will even translate their programme and leaflets.

If you go through the list of people over 95 years of age in the area of Locarno, you no longer find any Ticino names, which is also an expression of the Germanisation of Italian Switzerland.

Time and time again, Flavio Cotti, the Federal Councillor from the Ticino, has deplored the tendency of the linguistic groups to ignore each other. He has promised to try to do something about this growing indifference, since we cannot speak highly of our multilinguality if the whole is diminished – if there is a constant dwindling to a passive life of cultures and mentalities which mutually disregard one another. The essential thing is that people should not be saying one day that the Swiss get on well together because they do not understand each other. Therein lies the commitment that Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti has taken upon himself.

Alfredo Cioccarei



More «Eis» than «gelati» in Morcote? Advance of the German language in Ticino. (photo: Felix Widler)

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