

# German Switzerland: tension between dialect and "standard" German : the decline of standard German

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **17 (1990)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **30.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906860>

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together: the Romans watch the TV programmes from France, while German Swiss watch those from Germany and Austria – the two groups seem to be sitting back to back!

Historian Herbert Lüthy has said: "Switzerland is not a sensibly designed creation – it can be reasonably defined only in terms of its history. Its image has been formed by its own long history, whose successive epochs followed one another without the 'present' ever being allowed to erase the 'past'. All

the old forms have in some way remained embodied in the new."

Switzerland has been able to hold together for centuries, despite the linguistic barriers, but perhaps even thanks to them and the diversity of tongues that they imply.

If the whole of German Switzerland were Protestant, and Romandie were entirely Catholic, or if one region were rich and the other destitute, one could wonder how could we still live together as peaceably as we do today. "Diversity within Unity" had been

praised by Gottfried Keller, who also said: "How delightful it is for us not to be obliged to put up with a single tediously humdrum type of Swiss, but instead to be able to enjoy the company of Zurichers and Bernese, of people from Neuchâtel and Unterwald from the Grisons and from Basle (and in fact from two Basles! How pleasant to be able to know the contrasting histories of Appenzell and Geneva!"

*Marcel Schwander Romandie correspondent of the "Tages Anzeiger, Lausanne"*

German Switzerland: tension between dialect and "standard" German

## The decline of standard German

*When Swiss travellers or residents abroad are asked about the language situation in their home country they get two surprises: they find that their foreign interlocutors often believe firstly that all Swiss speak at least two or even more languages, also that perfect harmony reigns between the various linguistic groups, and secondly that it is almost impossible to describe the co-existence of standard German and dialect without giving rise to the false impression that the situation in Switzerland is not very different from that in other countries in which dialects or "patois" are spoken.*

In such conversations with foreigners, it becomes clear to the Swiss partner – especially if he or she is a German Swiss – that the situation in Switzerland is rather special and is by foreigners either idealised ("All Swiss are polyglot"), or is not seen as involving any problems ("We've got dialects in our country too!"). Swiss who live in a foreign country are, out of love for their mother country, often disinclined to cast aspersions on this portrait of a harmonious state of affairs, and they may even be quite unaware of the fact that in the two last decades the language situation has undergone such a radical change that nowadays in the discussions going on everywhere in economic and political fields – primarily in the media, above all in the press – there is much talk of Swiss linguistic problems that call for solution if peace is to be restored and maintained.

### Looking back...

The present-day language situation in German Switzerland is the outcome of a long period of development towards a political and later on a cultural independence vis-à-vis the neighbouring German nation, from whose "German Reich" it could only free itself by 1648. The emphasis laid on an independent culture was a development that began in the 18th century in the lively Zurich literary scene, while during the "Romantic" era, the Swiss-German dialect was seen as a continuation of the language of the Nibelungs. Then in the 19th century more and more literary works were written in dialect,

this in turn encouraging scientific research into vernacular tongues and leading to the creation of the "Swiss-German Idiotikon", which is one of the world's most comprehensive dictionaries of dialects. But soon a threat to the existence of the dialects became evident. The period of rapid industrial expansion known as the "Gründerzeit" (sometimes referred to in English as the "era of promoterism") brought many Germans into the Swiss centres of industry, and led to a somewhat one-sided cultural, and thereby also linguistic, orientation towards the new "German Reich" so that by around 1900 it looked as though "German-German" would

soon become the colloquial language of the Swiss cultural and economic "upper classes", especially in Zurich and the north-eastern parts of Switzerland, and would before long supplant the dialects.

Already before the outbreak of the First World War ("The Great War") in 1914 the first strong counter-movement against this cultural infiltration by foreign elements (known in German as "Überfremdung" and as "noyautage" in French) started in Berne and quickly gained prominence all over German Switzerland after the defeat of the Reich. In the post-war period, with its emphasis on democracy and federalism, for both of which concepts the various cantonal dialects could be seen as symbols, this trend became stronger, and even more so in the WW II era of "spiritual defence of our country", when it was even encouraged by the State authorities as a bulwark against National Socialism. After this second pro-dialect movement, there followed a period of calm until in the early 1960's, when the German-Swiss awoke from their period of lethargy, with Frisch and Dürrenmatt again making



*During certain lessons, teachers prefer the dialect as an intimate language to the standard German with "gentrified" overtones.*



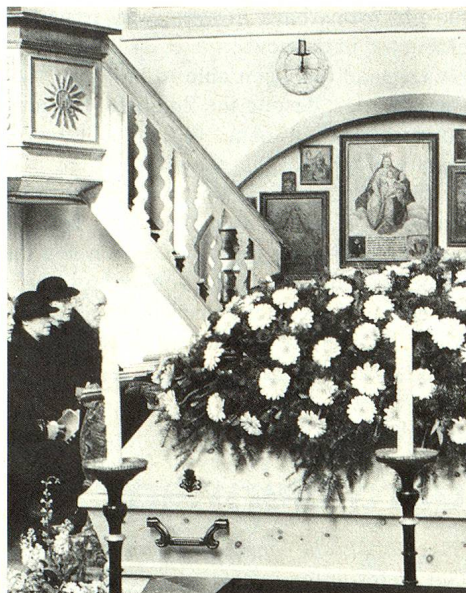


their contribution to international German-language culture, while also stressing their cultural and intellectual autonomy, and recalling their own oral and written traditions and stimulating interest for the provincial regions as the "cells" thanks to which our homeland grew. All these factors – plus the defensive attitude taken against the many foreign workers streaming in – helped the use of dialect to increase. In the 1968 "movement" dialect was employed as the weapon of protest from the "grass roots" against the "proper" German cultivated by members of the "Establishment", and later on as the language of spontaneous contact in the changing forms of social "togetherness" whose practitioners ranged from the rank-and-file associations to the working groups at the universities.

As the result of this trend, the use of standard German for everyday speech was pushed further and further into the background. School teachers wanted to instruct their pupils in as intimate a language as possible, without any "gentrified" overtones. Staff devising or speakers appearing in radio and television programmes desired to overcome the barrier constituted by the obligatory use of standard German in schoolroom lessons and other formal circumstances – as also did parsons and politicians and even heel-clicking army officers who had in former times, even on purely social occasions, proudly spoken with the intonation and delivery of Prussians giving military commands.

At the same time, the example set by the speakers in radio and TV transmissions influenced habits in other walks of life. If a Federal Councillor addressed viewers in dialect, a local politician could no longer talk to his electorate in stilted standard German, and if university readers addressed their students in dialect, those students could not be reproached for using that form of language in their oral examinations.

As what for the present seems to be the end of the process, we can note that it is still mandatory to use standard German in a few situations, when binding regulations make this compulsory (e.g., in Parliamentary debates and in University lectures, etc.), or when consideration has to be shown to persons present who do not speak or understand dialect. In addition, standard German only is spoken in an institutional or formal setting. Thus lectures to an audience are usually worded in standard German, but verbal reports to a study group in a working party will be delivered in dialect. At a funeral service, standard German will be usual, but the address given to guests at a wedding service



*At a funeral service standard German will in general still be used. (Photo: Keystone)*

will probably be in dialect. At committee meetings standard German is usually spoken among German Swiss if the number present is at least 7–10. In learned scientific gatherings, dialect is almost always used, except if persons who cannot speak German are present – but little consideration is extended to Germans who have been living in German Switzerland for a long period of time.

## Is our standard German only dormant?

From the foregoing remarks, it is clear that one can only report a decline in the use of *spoken* standard German in German Switzerland. After one has established however that it is first and foremost socio-psychological factors such as neighbourhood stress and feelings of solidarity which determine the choice of dialect, one wonders whether the fact that standard German is only spoken

nowadays on a very limited scale does not imply that the ability of Swiss persons to use it orally must also be declining, and whether a partial loss of *verbal* fluency will not bring about a deterioration in command of *written* German. The proverb "Practice makes Perfect" applies especially to language studies. On the other hand a good knowledge of a foreign language does not necessarily mean that one likes to speak it: many Eastern Europeans would sooner speak "broken" English or German than their first foreign language, which was often Russian – a tongue that they could speak far better as they had studied it for much longer. But it has often been seen in recent years that one's active knowledge of spoken standard German is not lost – it is merely dormant. Small children will rapidly and spontaneously pick up standard German, and any German Swiss who spends some time in Germany will very quickly get accustomed to the use of spoken standard German, and will hardly regard this any more as a "foreign" language. Thanks to television and to personal contact with German-speaking foreigners, he or she will have passively and without effort become completely familiar with the language. This would, only a few decades ago, have been out of the question for an average Swiss, who would have found it very difficult to understand colloquial standard German as he or she would be conversant with standard German only in its written form, or on the basis of a written text (e.g., at school or in church).

## Dialect as the "whipping-boy"

You will have gathered from the foregoing that I have indirectly expressed my disagreement with those persons who believe that the only way to rescue the "standard" form of German, supposedly moribund, would be to denounce the use of dialect, or at least to

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demand a stop to its further growth. If one asks for more detailed information about the background to such demands one sees quite clearly that dialect is being used as a scapegoat or whipping – boy, and is blamed in reality instead of the general decline of culture and standards. The old and narrow “élite” of academics and industrialists for whom a command of standard German rhetoric – preferably in its North German form was seen as indispensable for both professional and social success – has been replaced by a younger generation for whom only those standards that they have themselves adopted should apply, and who thus want to express themselves in their “mother tongue” and cannot understand that standard German (or as the German Swiss say “Schriftdeutsch”) had for the older educated “bourgeoisie” been a form of “mother-tongue” which its members cultivated with at least the same love and affection as they gave to dialect. Still, the coarsening and brutalisation of languages is an international phenomenon: one notices it in France mainly because of poor orthography, while in the countries where standard German prevails the change is most evident in the manner in which the frontiers between colloquial speech and literary style are being eroded. The preservation and retention of a dialect as a spoken colloquial language precludes neither “European presentability” nor active participation in a universal culture. The pre-requisite for this is, however, that the German Swiss does not shut himself in the cocoon of dialect and deny himself contact with other languages and cultures. And even though recent opinion polls suggest that readiness to accept the European ideas is stronger in French-speaking Switzerland than it is in German Switzerland, they show on the other hand that the average German-speaking Swiss has a greater knowledge of foreign languages than does his Romand compatriot, and that the linking of his identity to a regional dialect makes it all more evident that a complementary extension is essential for enabling him to acquire a more cosmopolitan outlook. Outstanding Swiss with world-wide contacts and interests, such as Jacob Burckhardt, have been able, as members of a supra-national linguistic community as well as of an all-European culture, to live and act thus, without disparaging their native roots, and thereby their dialect, to the outside world. A decisive factor will be for the German Swiss to be prepared to collaborate to this end, regardless of whether he sees German Switzerland only as a cultural province of a new Germany – or at the other end of the spectrum – whether he would pre-

fer to stay completely aloof politically from Germany, and whether his cultural solidarity is limited to his own multi-cultural country or extends to the whole of Europe – and lastly, whether he regards spoken standard German as a foreign language which he has mastered as fully as the people of some other country with whom he would like to establish closer contacts.

## The “new” Europe offers us a chance...

The language problems of Switzerland that we have touched on have not arisen through lack of linguistic competence (perhaps due to unsuitable language teaching), but lie in the relationships of the various Swiss linguistic groups among themselves, and with their territorial neighbours who speak the same language as they do. The deep-lying political, economic and cultural reasons for the latent tension need to be first of all analysed objectively, instead of dismissing them after a superficial exchange of easy-going catchwords. Next one should ascertain where language problems actually occur and where the reality of the situation differs from the conventional picture of peaceful co-existence with all of one’s immediate neighbours. Only a very small percentage of Swiss have regular contact with compatriots who speak a different language. Even in academic circles, only a small minority of German Swiss talk professionally in French, and in Romandie, the number who can make active use of their knowledge of German is far smaller. The normal situation is thus one in which they live (almost always peacefully!) *alongside* one another. It is still virtually a rule that German Swiss on visits to Romandie will use French in talking to their contacts, whereas Romands in German-speaking regions of Switzerland will, whenever possible, talk in their own mother-tongue. This equilibrium – which thanks to various forms of readiness to assimilate is frequently restored anew – between partners of unequal strength, would be disturbed if equal rights for all national languages were to be established, whereby the numerical superiority of the German Swiss would become apparent. That is in my opinion the crucial point: making concessions, meeting one another half-way, accommodating and adapting will not change the situation of the “minority” partner. At the same time, a complete “regionalisation” on the lines chosen by Belgium (with which a great number of French-speaking Swiss sympathise) would imply the end of our traditional federalism. The only feasible course would in my view be to encourage and stress common interests across the frontiers: so that

thereby Romandie would not be put at a disadvantage by the German speaking majority, that in German-speaking Switzerland, a similar “rapprochement” could be achieved between commercial and industrial centres of the North and the mainly rural areas of the South, that in almost all areas of politics and industry the Western cantons of German-speaking Switzerland could collaborate very smoothly with the Romands – all such possibilities would be there, once the linguistic problems now seen as sole dividing factor had been resolved. The “new” Europe will soon to a great extent even out existing inter-state economic barriers. Thus there would at last be a chance to reforge those bonds of solidarity, based on culture and mentality, that will no longer be impeded by cantonal and national frontiers. The Romands – like the French – will be happy to learn German to facilitate communication with their powerful German neighbour and German Swiss will, one hopes, remember and revive their old associations with Francophone culture without any feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis the Romands, and without being obliged force on the latter, decisions that are no longer their own.

Roland Ris

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