

# I speak Swiss...

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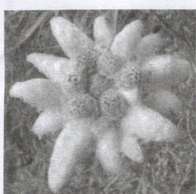
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# I speak Swiss...

*What do you say when you are asked whether you come from the 'German speaking part' of Switzerland? A friend of mine said she was quite upset whenever she had to explain that she came from the Swiss German part of Switzerland. Why German? Why not just Swiss? Why don't we say we speak Schweizerisch instead of Schwizertütsch?*



Well, the first answer is that if we said we spoke Swiss, where would that leave our compatriots

from Lausanne and Bellinzona? They are just as Swiss as we are – and they are at ease with the statement that they speak French or Italian. However, the situation of the French speaking Swiss and the Italian speaking Swiss differs from the situation of the, well, the Deutschschweizer. Their dialects are getting weaker, and they feel comfortable speaking 'just French' – or 'proper French', 'just Italian' – or 'proper Italian', depending on their attitude. Their word for dialect, patois, is slightly pejorative, patronizing, nostalgic, but apart from a few linguists the Romans and Ticinesi have no problem with their languages – mainly because they have no identity problem and don't mind being part of their wider language community.

The situation in the Swiss German part of Switzerland is more complicated. When a situation is complicated, the roots often lie in the past, so let's go back in history.

Before Switzerland existed, people in the southern part of the Germanic territory spoke an Alemannic dialect. The earliest "Swiss" literary texts date back to the monk **Notker**, who died in St. Gallen abbey in 1022. Notker translated Latin texts into the language he spoke, Alemannic,

and by doing so he standardized the Alemannic of his time.

The next phase, the Middle Ages, saw many poets in the Alemannic region. They are called **Minnesänger** and sang the praises of beautiful noble young women (or cried over unrequited love, whatever the case might have been). They wrote in the Alemannic language of their time. They were so numerous and prolific that they set the standard; their language became the generally accepted language for Minnesang, and Minnesänger in more northern regions adapted their language to the southern, Alemannic standard.

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, the German of the region, in our case the Alemannic dialect, became the language for **official documents**, mainly because farmers' corporations insisted on it. The farmers could not read them, but these official documents were read out aloud in public meetings for everyone to hear and understand and agree. The early patricians in the cities had their links to the nobility and the Minnesänger. The spoken and the written language were still the same in the region that was to become Switzerland.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, **chroniclers** wrote down important events. They wrote in the language spoken in the Eidgenossenschaft of that time. (The term 'Schweiz' came only into use much later; up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Swiss called themselves Eidgenossen and their country 'Eidgenossenschaft'). The language in these chronicles is fairly consistent, with differences that only interest linguists specialising in medieval regional differences.

## Then came Luther

The reformator Luther translated the Bible into his German,

the German spoken and written in Saxony, which was quite different from the Alemannic German.

In the meantime, printing with movable letters had been invented, which meant books did not have to be copied by hand, but could be printed more cheaply. Luther's Bible in his Saxon German was printed and sold all over, but could not be understood easily in the Eidgenossenschaft. It came with a glossary that translated words from Saxon into Alemannic German. Zurich with his own reformator, Zwingli, had the Bible translated into Zwingli's Alemannic German. The Zurich Bible could not be understood readily in the northern parts of what much later became Germany; it needed a glossary in the other direction.

As the Bible was the preeminent, dominant piece of literature, the language in the Bible became the standard, Luther's Saxon German in the North and Zwingli's Alemannic German in the South.

This would have been the moment where the language in the Zurich Bible translation could have become an independent, standardized Swiss language. But it goes without saying that the Catholic cantons resisted this heretical language to become their official language. So in the following centuries, the written language in Switzerland developed more and more towards the form that was written north of the Eidgenossenschaft. Although it had been Luther's Saxon German, which was as heretical as Zwingli's Alemannic German, it was more acceptable – and a 'Catholic German' never developed, as Catholics were not meant to read the Bible. Step by step, Luther's vocabulary and grammar was accepted into publications in the south, while the people in the Eidgenossenschaft kept their own spoken language.

Why they did so – well, that would be the topic for another story.

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