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Does Swiss German represent a threat to French-speaking Switzerland?

There is constantly debate in French-speaking Switzerland as to whether Swiss German is taking over and posing a threat to multilingualism in Switzerland. Iwar Werlen, professor of linguistics at the University of Berne, does not share these fears. But bilingual journalist Peter Rothenbühler in Lausanne takes a different view in his essay on the issue. Interview by Heinz Eckert

“SWISS REVIEW”: Do you understand the anxiety in French-speaking Switzerland that Swiss German is increasingly being spoken at the expense of High German and this is jeopardising Switzerland’s linguistic diversity?

IWAR WERLEN: I’d have to say yes and no. Fears are constantly being expressed that Switzerland’s linguistic diversity is under threat, but they are only justified to an extent.

But is it true that more and more dialect is being spoken?

Yes, this trend has been clearly evident since the mid-1960s. Dialect is being spoken in more and more situations where High German was previously used, such as in schools, at church and in the media, etc. Dialect has also become very popular today in pop and rock music and in the rap scene. And young people, in particular, write almost all their text messages and e-mails in Swiss German.

How would you explain this shift towards dialect?

Fashion plays a major role, undoubtedly – this sense of “Swissness” and the desire to create an individual identity and stand apart from other countries, not least Germany. There have also been general changes in society, with a shift from formal to informal behaviour, which is reflected in the loss of certain manners, social conventions and etiquette, for example. Dress codes that once applied are no longer observed, old people now have to stand on public transport as well and even in good restaurants women are no longer served before men. All these things were taken for granted in the past. These attitudes have



Professor Iwar Werlen

also had an impact on the use of language: formal and rigid High German is avoided and people express themselves verbally and in writing in the simplest way possible.

Don’t you think that it is bizarre that the news programme “iоворio” has to be broadcast with German subtitles when it is repeated on the international, joint German-language channel, 3sat, so that it can be understood in Austria and Germany?

This is probably explained by the fact that “Schweizer Fernsehen DRS” sees itself as a regional language broadcaster and produces “iоворio” as infotainment. The news programme “Tagesschau” at any rate is produced exclusively in High German. But it’s true that awareness within the SRG for maintaining Switzerland’s linguistic diversity is low. The “Idée Suisse” concept may be marketed by the SRG, but it does not do enough to meet its responsibility in this re-

spect in day-to-day broadcasting and takes the view that foreigners living in Switzerland should not necessarily speak Swiss German, but they should understand it.

Do you share this view?

Yes, I hold the same opinion actually. German-speaking Swiss speak dialect and those who want to communicate with them in day-to-day life should understand this dialect. That applies to both Swiss and foreign citizens. This should not present a problem, particularly for Germans, as there are also many dialects in Germany and Bavarians, for example, are understood everywhere.

But shouldn’t all German-speaking Swiss be able not just to read High German, but also to speak it?

Absolutely. I don’t understand the viewpoint of some teachers who always claim that the first foreign language taught in German-speaking Switzerland is High German. That’s not right. In my view, Swiss German and High German are two forms of the same language which should both be maintained. Swiss German is our spoken mother tongue and High German is the mother tongue we read and write in. German-speaking Swiss should have a good command of both.

How important is it that Swiss German is maintained and spoken as correctly as possible?

“Correctness” depends on how you look at it. I see languages as a means of communication which are constantly changing and adapting to new requirements. I don’t think it really matters whether you say “Frühstück” or “Zmorge” (breakfast), “Lunch” or “Zmittag” (lunch), “Anke” or “Butter” (butter). Just look at the language of young people and how it is forever changing. The term “geil” (cool) used to be in, then it was “mega” again, and at one time everything was “super”. The main thing is understanding.

Swiss people abroad are often asked about multilingualism in Switzerland. Are the Swiss people at home actually aware how valuable this diversity is and how important it is to preserve it?

I don’t think many of us actually realise how different our approach to languages is to that of many other European countries. Of course, not all Swiss people speak four languages, as some foreigners might think, but surveys have shown that most Swiss have

a fairly good command of one or two foreign languages, the highest figure in Europe. However, we tend not to fully exploit our potential – and that goes for both French and German-speaking Swiss.

Do you think that French and German speakers in Switzerland will one day only communicate in English?

That is already the case in certain sectors and in the sciences. But that certainly won't become a normal occurrence. The key thing is to take a more relaxed approach to languages, to experiment more and perhaps even use a combination of Swiss German, High German and French if all else fails.

Could and should the government do more to promote understanding of linguistic diversity?

Yes, I believe it's very important that cultural exchange between the linguistic regions is promoted by the cantons and made compulsory. If French speakers spend a few weeks or months in St. Gallen or someone from Uri spends time in Lausanne, they will automatically establish a different relationship with the other language and learn it with greater enjoyment and commitment. The state-funded media should also meet their responsibilities more.

And what would you say to the anxious French-speaking Swiss?

I believe one of the problems between the two language communities lies in how they regard the dialect. Many French speakers find it inconceivable that educated people can use such a "barbaric" form of language. It is the task of German teachers in French-speaking Switzerland to change this perception. German as it exists in German-speaking Switzerland also needs to be recognised. This involves addressing the issue of dialects in teaching. Antonio Hodgers, the Green National Councillor from Geneva, has come to share this viewpoint. After being elected to the Federal Parliament, he moved to Berne where he soon discovered that the High German he had learned in school was not much use to him. He recommends that French-speaking Swiss learn Swiss German. On the other hand, it would also stand German-speaking Swiss in good stead to improve their French in greater numbers. The efforts of the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, within the framework of the "Harmos" project, are aimed in this direction. They just need to be put into practice.

The linguistic defiance of the German-speaking Swiss

By Peter Rothenbühler*



French-speaking Swiss complain from time to time that it is difficult for them to learn German correctly while people in Berne and Zurich constantly answer them in Swiss German or in English, when it would be easier to use a national language, such as High German or French, in such situations.

It adds up actually. Dialects are wonderful but should be used privately. When conversing with people from other parts of the country or indeed other countries or when communicating using electronic media, a generally acceptable lingua franca should be used, just like everywhere else in the world.

Unfortunately, it would seem that this is not possible of all places in a country known worldwide for its multilingualism. The problem is not so much the difficulties that French-speaking Swiss have with Swiss German.

The problem is more that the German-speaking Swiss have a major issue with High German and refuse even to speak the first national language. This phenomenon is globally unique. It constitutes a real defiance which is now being supported by linguists. In the interview opposite, Professor Iwar Werlen explains that the German-speaking Swiss use two forms of the same language: "Swiss German is our spoken mother tongue and High German is the mother tongue we read and write in." However, anyone wishing to communicate with German-speaking Swiss has to learn Swiss German, or at least learn to understand it. According to Professor Werlen, there are two half-mother tongues, one for verbal communication and one for written use. He makes no mention of High German being spoken. You might find it extremely cool or "u-geil" that Zurich's youth (including people up to 60) speak "Zürialbanisch", a form of Zurich German with Albanian intonation, but that's not a new dialect, it's more of an ethnolect. Yes, that's the best term for it linguistically.

Of course, it is interesting to observe the trend where German-speaking Swiss today write text messages in anything but German and automatically switch to English in an exchange, not because the other person (a French-speaking Swiss, for example) would understand this better, but because they would lose face if they were to use High German.

The growing refusal by German-speaking Swiss to use their cultural language verbally also has significant consequences. Not for the French-speaking Swiss, but for the German-speaking Swiss themselves. They no longer have a proper command of their own language and they are also losing the ability to write correctly. Over the long term, this will inevitably lead to English emerging as the main lingua franca. This would undermine the importance of two national languages, German and French. Question for the politicians: Is that what we really want?

The SRG, which until recently was still called "Idee Suisse", has also contributed enormously to this trend. Dialect is still spoken on key information programmes (contrary to the licence), encouraging the linguistic regression of the population.

Yet miraculously a salvation is on the horizon, once again from abroad. Of all people the large numbers of German immigrants, from whom we have tried to differentiate ourselves by clinging onto our dialect, are reintroducing the spoken use of our "mother tongue", High German, in Switzerland. A little tip for the French-speaking Swiss – there are cafés in Zurich where everyone speaks High German. And "Arena" will soon be subtitled, not in English or Russian, but in German!

*Peter Rothenbühler, 61, a bilingual journalist who grew up in Biel, today lives in Lausanne. He was editor-in-chief of the "SonntagsBlick" and "Schweizer Illustrierte" from 1984 to 2000 and editor-in-chief of "Le Matin" until 2008. He is currently the deputy editorial director of Edipresse and a columnist.