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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?

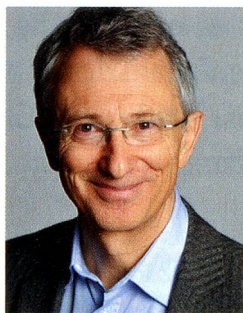
Yes, I believe it's very important that cultural exchange between the linguistic regions is promoted by the cantons and made compulsory. If French speakers spend a few weeks or months in St. Gallen or someone from Uri spends time in Lausanne, they will automatically establish a different relationship 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 "Harmonos" 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 "Zürichalbanisch", 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 "Idée 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.