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Sapperlot! Swiss Dialects

Switzerland is not just a nation with four official languages, it is also one of countless dialects. The National Library has dedicated an exhibition to these dialects - some have died out while others are very much alive. Tales from French-speaking Switzerland can be heard there along with folk songs from Grisons, satire poems from Basel and anecdotes from Malcantone. Below are a few examples; we recommend you read them out loud.

By Miriam Hutter

*Sägid was iär wend.
Ich ha es Rächd uf my Sprach
uf my Redensart
uf mys Word -
won ich bruich wiä nä Hegel
oder wie ne Zärtlichkäit
won ich verwennä
wiä nes Mäitli.
Ich ha Sorg zuänerä
wi zu me ne Bätti
vo der Muätter sälig.
Sägid was iär wend.
Ich ha es Rächd uf my Sprach
uf my Redensart
uf mys Word.*

(Julian Dillier, *Ds Rächt uf d Sprach*, 1992. Text: Emma Dillier, Basel)

*Nus esitain
sco'l vent
ed il nvel
tranter gnir
e partir
Spetgain
ch'il tschiel
ans regalia
ses blau engulà*

(Clo Duri Bezzola, *Gedichte*, 2002. Text: Gertrud Bezzola-Müller, Stäfa)

*Ora, mè, m'in vé prèlyi... Mè rèkemando ou
Bon Diu, a Nouthra Dona, a Chin Dsojé, a
me n'andze agrdyin.. dè mè touadè le krou-
lyo... è indremidè mè... dè vouthra man.*

(Joseph Yerly, *Der gutmütige Arme*, Gruyère, 1964. Text: University of Zurich's phonogram archive)

*E vi altri se la nova sassofoništa e la nova
bassista?*

*Sí sí... hé... mi a sum la Daafne e questa
l'è la... hé... la Jósefine!*

*He! Vegin deenta deenta, mi ma ciami
«Zúcar candi».*

Salve! «Zúcar candi»?

*Ho cambia nom, a ma ciamávi «Zúcchero
Kandinski».*

Polacca?

*Sí! Sum nassüda in una famiglia da sonadò.
La me mam l'eva pianista e l'me pa il diri-
geeva.*

Ab si? Chell'urcheštra?

No il dirigeava il tráfic!

(Teatro popolare della Svizzera Italiana, 2011.
Dubbing in dialect of the movie "Some Like It Hot".
Text: University of Zurich's phonogram archive)

Dialects are part of the Swiss identity. In French-speaking Switzerland, where the *patois romands* have practically died out, they have been consigned to history whereas they are a living part of cultural heritage in other parts of the country. They are also a cause of dispute in some places. In Grisons, for example, 40 years after its introduction as a common written language for the five Romansh dialects, *Rumantsch Grischun* is still not accepted as such by everyone. Dialects attempt to outdo one another in German-speaking Switzerland. The most beautiful, popular or attractive *Mundart* is chosen using surveys that are not always very well-founded.

The question as to whether small children at kindergarten should be expected to use High German has increasingly caused a stir in recent times. And, if so, how much should be used? Many German-speaking Swiss clearly do not like speaking High German, the standard form of the language. There is a much more relaxed approach to standard Italian in Ticino. The *dialetti* are spoken at home and among friends, while the standard

form of the language is naturally used in school, at work and in public life.

Local dialects

Communication is not always easy in tiny Switzerland with its four national languages and three cultural regions. This issue is exacerbated by the diglossia of the German-speaking Swiss, their special form of bilingualism. High German is recognised as the single valid written language but dialect is used almost exclusively in conversation. The dialects are in fact so different within German-speaking Switzerland that people can sometimes hardly understand one another. This great diversity in such a small

area is primarily explained by the fact that movement was extremely restricted in the alpine region until 100 years ago, which is why no larger linguistic communities were formed. Growing mobility has since brought gradual harmonisation.

Hardly anyone now speaks dialects in French-speaking Switzerland but that does not mean that the French-speaking Swiss do not have anything to contribute to the debate on dialects. Many of them find it disappointing and frustrating that their knowledge of German acquired at school can barely be used in conversation with their compatriots in German-speaking Switzerland. The calls by politicians from French-

LANGUAGES IN SWITZERLAND

The results of the 2000 census also reveal in which parts of the country and how often the Swiss still use a dialect as their family language today:

German-speaking Switzerland: 96.2 %

French-speaking Switzerland: 1.3 %

Ticino and Grisons: 44.6 %

The same survey also asked participants about the language "they have the best command of and in which they think". The main languages break down as follows:

German: 63.7 %

French: 20.4 %

Italian: 6.5 %

Romansh: 0.5 %

Non-national languages: 9 %

speaking Switzerland for the use of more standard language in public life and in particular in German-language national television and radio programmes were buried without a trace this spring - by the mainly German-speaking parliament.

Listening to old and new

Dialects can be heard and experienced at the National Library's "Sapperlot! Swiss Dialects" exhibition. Visitors are put in the mood with old and new quotations from the realms of media and culture, which cover the wall opposite the entrance. Visitors can walk over a giant map of Switzerland above which audio units dangle from the ceiling. The 20 historical and 20 current recordings that are played from them are explained in the exhibition guides handed out at the entrance - in all the national languages, of course. The more recent sound recordings show that the intention is "not just to bathe in nostalgia", as the curator Peter Erisman put it. There are also examples of current ethnolects and sociolects. For example, a discussion among young people from Zurich on the 2009 "youth word of the year": "sbeschtwosjehetsgits" (the best there's ever been).

Recordings of songs and literature in dialect as well as spoken word art show that dialect is more relevant culturally than ever before. While dialect in music and literature was restricted to folk and the rural idyll until a few decades ago, it is today also used in pop, rock and rap, and verse is composed on topics such as politics, sport and society at *poetry slams*.

The "Voices of Switzerland 2012" project is also an important part of the exhibition. Visitors to the exhibition can record their own voices in two small sound studios and listen to the recordings of previous visitors. The University of Zurich's phonogram archive is collecting this new material for research. This project goes beyond the exhibition itself. Anyone can participate online (see box). The phonogram archive, which is heavily involved in the production of the exhibition, is also exhibiting historical and modern recording devices in the main hall.

Unusual lexicons

The exhibition also presents the four national dictionaries "Schweizerisches Idiotikon", "Glossaire des patois de la Suisse Romande", "Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun" and "Vocabolario dei dialetti

della Svizzera italiana". They all date back to between 1860 and 1910, and none has yet been completed. The "Idiotikon" (from the Greek *ídos*: idiosyncratic) is set to be completed in 2022 with its 17th volume. All published articles can already be accessed at www.idiotikon.ch. This work also reveals the meaning of the title of the exhibition,



Sound recordings were made on wax discs with the "Vienna Phonograph" from 1909

"Sapperlot". This euphemistic form of the religious term "Sakramänt" is an "expression of affirmation, annoyance, astonishment or admiration". It is quite possibly a word that might slip out when confronted with the bewildering diversity of Swiss dialects.

MIRIAM HUTTER is a volunteer at "Swiss Review"

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

When: from now until 25 August 2012, Mon-Fri 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Sat 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Where: Swiss National Library, Hallwylstrasse 15, 3003 Berne; Entry: free; www.nb.admin.ch/sapperlot

PARTICIPATION

It is also possible to take part in the "Voices of Switzerland 2012" project remotely. You can record your own dialect online and listen to recordings that have already been collected.

www.stimmen.uzh.ch (German)
www.voix.uzh.ch (French)
www.voci.uzh.ch (Italian)
www.vuschs.uzh.ch (Romansh)

RESEARCH

[At <http://dialects.from.ch>, 10 terms, which have to be translated from High German into dialect, are used to determine the region from which speakers come.](http://dialects.from.ch)

PUBLICATION

The panorama of Swiss dialects that was published at the national exhibition in Zurich in 1939 under the title "Stimmen der Heimat" is now available in a new edition: "Stimmen der Schweiz", Verlag Huber, Frauenfeld 2012. Two audio CDs + phonetic transcription. ISBN 978-3-280-1559-5

The reflections of a "Romand"

I'm unwinding on the terrace of a pub in Brienz. At the table opposite, the guests are discussing their respective weeks on this Friday evening in complete tranquillity. As a "Romand", a French-speaking Swiss, straddling the divide between the two linguistic regions, I have difficulty understanding the distinctive dialect of the Bernese Oberland. I recall my school days when we were taught High German. The language of Goethe. What an extraordinary act of altruism on the part of the education system in French-speaking Switzerland. But what is the point of force-feeding these poor pupils with grammar destined to be forgotten? Dative, genitive and accusative - now I'm the one pointing the finger of accusation. Sleep-inducing declensions. And not for one moment amid this mass of German grammar did a teacher draw parallels with Swiss German. That's, the height of absurdity for the Swiss. It's so simple. Abend - Abig, zusammen - zäme, ich habe - i ha. Or "i bi z'Brienz gsi!": I've been to Brienz. I left this inoculation with written German behind at the school desk at the age of 18. I'm now twice that age and nothing has changed. There seems to be a lethargy hanging over cantonal education - "Why change? We've always done it this way!" Young French-speaking and German-speaking Swiss converse in English. That's globalisation for you. But the solution seems so simple, oral and progressive. I often hear critics of teaching Swiss German at school say they would not know which cantonal dialect to use. That's just an good excuse. The canton of Zurich has a population of over 1.2 million. The answer appears very obvious. A real linguistic injustice is essentially being done as my neighbours in the Oberland have learned French at school - the language currently spoken in the Romandie region - while the French-speaking Swiss have not learned the language used east of the Sarine river. And whose fault is that?

ALAIN WEY