

# German Swiss and French Swiss : one-sided sympathy?

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one senses a growing affinity in the cultural, and to some extent in the economic sector, with their respective linguistic "hinterlands". "Siamo culturalmente Italiani e politicamente Svizzeri" ("Culturally we are Italian, but politically we are Swiss"). This trend seems likely to be reinforced in future in a Europe in which vital economic and political decisions will be taken at a supra-national level. In such circumstances the task of maintaining

Switzerland as a free and independent nation assumes new and highly topical dimensions. A look into the heart of the linguistic landscape of Switzerland shows that it has been fashioned over the centuries by a host of variegated, unique and immutable factors. The fact that our country has succeeded up to now in ensuring a reasonably smooth co-existence of differing linguistic groups is no cause for us to lay claim to its character as

a model for others to follow. What could perhaps serve as such a pattern will however be the manner in which we succeed in future in modernising and reinforcing the concept of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Switzerland to meet the new challenges. The answer lies not behind, but before us.

Romedi Arquient

Former officer for linguistic questions in the Federal Office for Culture

German Swiss and French Swiss

## One-sided Sympathy?

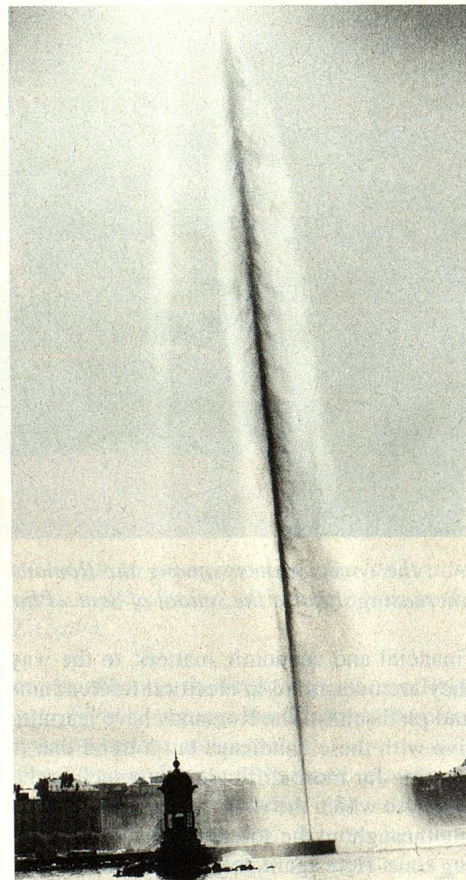
*When the train from Berne in the direction towards Lausanne emerges from the Chexbres tunnel, the passenger gets a superb view of the Lake of Geneva. A patch of bright blue water surrounded by majestic mountains offers a foretaste of the Mediterranean. The vine-clad slopes at the end of the tunnel are often referred to in jest as "Le Clos des Billets" ("The Vineyard of the Railway Tickets") as many a German Swiss, enchanted by the breath-taking landscape, is reputed to have thrown the return half of his ticket out of the window!*

The celebrated man of letters Aymon de Mestral wrote long ago that the distance from Zurich to Lausanne seems far shorter to a German Swiss than does the journey in the reverse direction to a "Romand", that is to say an individual from the French-speaking region of Western Switzerland that is often called "Romandie". Contemporary opinion polls have confirmed this view. Only one German Swiss out of six says that he (or she) feels "abroad" in Romandie, while one Romand in four feels that way in the German-speaking regions of Switzerland. And it seems that the Romands are more intensively conscious of linguistic tension than are their compatriots in the eastern part of Switzerland. 27% of the Romands – as compared with only 9% of German Swiss – sense the existence of a sort of moat or ditch forming a barrier between the two linguistic regions. Thus it seems that the people of the minority are more conscious of language problems than are those of the majority!

The affection of the members of one group for those of the other appears to be in inverse proportion to understanding of the language problems. The German Swiss have a great liking for the "Romands" but that sympathy is not always reciprocated. Journalist Roberto Bernhard has said: "It is significant that the French-speaking Swiss have lots of disparaging and abusive nicknames for the German Swiss, while the latter have none at all for the Romands!"

According to a study by the Zurich sociologists Fischer and Trier, the German Swiss see themselves as having such qualities as "strength, ruggedness, seriousness and diligence", and regard their French Swiss com-

patriots as being "relaxed, cheerful, jolly and likeable". The study shows the Romands as "not far short of their own ideal standard and model of perfection", but the



*The fountain in the bay of Geneva: symbol of the spiritual aspirations of this city-republic.*

German Swiss regards himself as the "typical Swiss", while the Romand confirms him in that view of himself. But the Romand regards himself as belonging first and foremost to the French Swiss domain, and only as a consequence thereof as a Swiss.

### Territorial and linguistic frontier

When returning to Switzerland from a foreign country, the traveller will sense, behind the greeting "Grüezi", "bonjour", "buon giorno" or "allegra" that he hears in Kloten, Cointrin, Chiasso or Scuol, the existence of a basic Swiss unity. The frontier guards and customs officials wear the same respective uniforms (alongside of a host of local uniforms!), the same chocolate is to be found all over the country, and the political institutions in the various cantons, although not identical, always follow a common basic pattern. But as soon as the linguistic barrier inside Switzerland is crossed, all sorts of differences at once become evident. The coffee has a different taste depending on how the beans are roasted, the cheese-maker in Romandie produces a form of Gruyere with *little* holes, while his counterpart in German Switzerland makes his Emmentaler with *big* holes – and of course, the favourite dishes differ too.

The passage from one linguistic region to the other gives rise not only to gastronomic contrasts, but also to problems of everyday speech and mentality. Each language has its own "architecture", its special quality and inborn laws, its possibilities of expression. Because of their country being one of many languages, the Swiss themselves – without necessarily being accomplished polyglot linguists – have to live with this multiplicity of tongues and to cope with the problems arising therefrom. And in this context, one should bear in mind that in 1991, the year in which the 700th anniversary of our country will be celebrated, a revision of the present wording of the article in the Federal con-



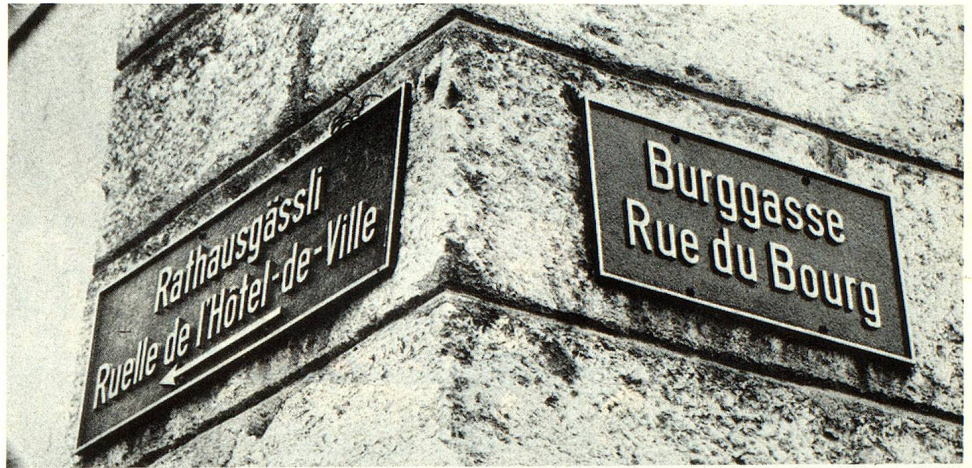
stitution dealing with the national languages is scheduled to be debated.

Most Swiss nowadays learn a second of the national languages, as well as their mother-tongue. The media tend to make us all more conscious of the problems of communication. We tune in to a Swiss radio or television programme – and fail to understand what is being said, either completely or in part. So it is not surprising that people are asking themselves more and more often whether we Swiss are living *together* with one another, *alongside* of one another, *opposed* to one another – or even completely *estranged* from one another. Is there really a “ditch” separating German-speaking Swiss from the Romans? Ought we to fill the ditch up, jump over it, or build a bridge over it? Or should we just disregard it? Perhaps the ditch doesn’t exist at all! But what has created the will-power that has politically held our nation together politically for centuries? So many questions! But one thing is certain: in the words of Swiss Nobel Prize winner Carl Spitteler: “To understand one another, we must approach far closer to our neighbours in order to get to know them”.

#### The variegated Romandie

Rhaeto-Romansh, the fourth of our national languages, is spoken only in certain districts of the Grisons. 95% of the Swiss whose mother-tongue is Italian live in the Ticino canton. But the linguistic region where the language most widely spoken is French is spread over several cantons. Although it is a minority language, that minority is of considerable importance: it is the mother tongue of 20.1% of the Swiss population (in 1910, the figure had been 22.1%). And out of the total number of inhabitants, including foreigners, the percentage is still 18%.

French-speaking Switzerland is made up of various and widely differing sectors. Every canton in the region has its own history, its distinctive individual character. Thus in the Valais, the dominating factor is the geography, with its high mountains and deep valleys. The locality with the highest annual rainfall lies cheek-by-jowl with the driest district in Romandie (and in the entire country for that matter). Throughout the whole of the Jura, one senses the living consciousness of the region’s chequered past history. And in the Neuchâtel countryside the spirit of technical inventiveness is ever present: already in the 18th century Pierre Jacquet-Droz built automata in near humanoid form, the precursors of the robots of today. A famous son of the same canton was Le Corbusier, born in La Chaux-de-Fonds.



In the bi-lingual town of Biel/Bienne, even the types of syllabus and the dates for the holidays are different. (Photos: Jean-Paul Maeder)

And Fribourg, once a bastion of Catholicism, is becoming a sort of bridge between German Switzerland and Romandie.

The important centres of decision are located outside of Romandie – politically in Berne, economically in Zurich, culturally in Paris. The historian David Lasserre once came to the conclusion that: “There is no such entity as the ‘Suisse romande’, apart from its being the geographical part of Switzerland where French is widely spoken: in other words it does not constitute any specifically integrated whole”. And the journalist Alain Pichard actually wrote a book with the paradoxical title “La Romandie n’existe pas” (“Romandie doesn’t exist”). Several other authors, such as Professor Michel Bassand, of the Lausanne Institute of Advanced Technology, agree that Romandie does in fact exist, but “only as the location of a linguistic minority dominated by German-speaking Switzerland”. And this view seems to be gaining ground in certain quarters.

#### Romandie is different from Paris, but it has a strong affinity with ‘La Ville Lumière’

French is the language of Romandie – but it is a different French from that of Paris, in spite of the fact that the various forms of Franco-Swiss patois have become almost extinct. As a linguistic region, Romandie belongs to the Franco-Provençal category which emerged from between the ‘langue d’oc’ of Provence and the ‘langue d’oil’ of more northerly regions. (These designations stem from the ancient differences of pronunciation of the affirmative ‘oui’, ‘oc’ having come from the Latin ‘hoc’ and ‘oil’ from the Latin ‘hoc ille’). The inhabitants of what is nowadays the Canton of Jura originally spoke French dialects, and they are still

in their contemporary patois the “most French” of the cantons of Romandie.

Admittedly, most of the dialects have died out. In the Protestant cantons, the Reformation sounded their death-knell: the Bible had to be translated into “good” French, while for the preachers, who often hailed from France, the colloquial speech of the populace was a foreign language. Supporters of the Revolution aimed at “raising” the level of popular speech to that of the royal courts, and even well into the 20th century, some school teachers tried to drive out the last remnants of dialect by rapping the knuckles of any pupil who dared to lapse into patois!

But the people of Geneva still sing what they regard as their national anthem in dialect, thus with the line ‘Cé què l’ainô’ instead of the “proper” French ‘Celui qui est là-haut’ (‘To Him who is above’), in celebration of the anniversary of the successful repulse of the “Escalade” (attempted scaling of the city walls) in 1602. Likewise, the people of the Vaud enjoy hearing at the annual wine festival of Vevey tough Alpine dairy-men yodel as they sing the “Ranz des Vaches” for calling the cows home, in dialect: “Venidè totè, blyantsè, nairè...” (“Come on, all of you, black and white...”). But except in a few isolated villages and hamlets of the Valais, the patois is no longer the spoken language for everyday use. Nevertheless it is possible that more attention will be paid in future to preservation of these ancient dialects: in our youngest canton, that of Jura, protection and furtherance of dialects is specifically mentioned in the cantonal constitution.

The colloquial language spoken in Western Switzerland always has a strong “local” flavour. If a customer in a café orders “un



*In fact there is no such barrier as the "Rösti Ditch"; it is just a pertinent picture of the different mentality between German Swiss and French Swiss.  
Photo: St. Ursanne (Canton of Jura). (Photo: Jean-Paul Maeder)*

demi", hoping, as in Paris, to get a glass of beer, he will be surprised to be served a half-litre carafe of white wine. If one speaks of a "gymnase", which in France would mean a gymnasium for physical jerks, his interlocutor in Lausanne will think he is talking about a classical secondary school (which is anyway called a 'lycée' in the Jura and a 'collège' in Geneva!). For expressing the numbers 70, 80 and 90, most Romands will say "septante", "huitante" and "nonante", which are a lot simpler than the "French-French" versions. The word "poutzen" for cleaning evidently comes from the German "putzen", and is said to have come into everyday use in Romandie via the army!

The Romand from Geneva or Delsberg or Lausanne can communicate in his (or her) mother-tongue with interlocutors from Haiti or Tahiti. French is spoken every day in many parts of the world apart from France and Romandie: one needs to think only of countries like Belgium and Canada, and those in Africa and Polynesia. Altogether, there are more than a hundred million French-speaking individuals scattered all over the world.

**A minority, politically and linguistically ?**  
In spite of all the differences between the various groups of French-speaking persons, the Romands often show considerable unity and solidarity in taking a different line from that adopted by their Swiss German compa-

triot, who form the majority of the Swiss population. At the end of November of last year, when citizens were called upon to vote in connection with speed limits in road traffic, the six cantons of Romandie – Geneva, Vaud, and Neuchâtel, all with a Protestant tradition, together with the predominately Catholic cantons of the Valais, Fribourg and Jura voted solidly in a direction quite contrary to that of the rest of the Confederation! The Romands wanted to drive faster! On that Sunday, the electorates of Geneva and Jura even voted in favour of the initiative for abolishing the army (they were the only cantons to do so!). Earlier on, the cantons of Romandie were often out-voted by the rest of the electorate, as for instance in the case of the compulsory wearing of safety belts in

motor vehicles, legislation to protect tenants of rented property, housing policy reform, banning of arms exports and initiatives for opposing nuclear plants. The Romands are often more cosmopolitan in their outlook than their German Swiss counterparts, and less inclined to adopt a sort of "hedgehog" mentality. This attitude will be important in regard to the ongoing process towards European unification, which is seen in German Swiss quarters as possibly endangering Helvetic sovereignty. Does this all mean that the French-speaking section of the Federation – as shown on most maps! – stands politically too on the left? Sometimes there is a defensive reflex on the part of the cantons, directed against "Berne" (when the conservative parties of German Switzerland will even side with the Romands). And sometimes, as in the case of the traffic regulations, it is the Romands who act as they do as the result of an urge towards greater individual freedom.

In spite of the occasional differences between the reactions of German Swiss and Romands, there is no longer any cause to speak of a "ditch" constituting a barrier between the two regions. But even so, some observers warn us of certain factors that could endanger Swiss unity and solidarity:

- The increasing use of dialect in German speaking Switzerland, especially in radio and TV transmissions, is felt by many Romands as a deliberate refusal or rejection of contact.
- The spread of the English language among young people and in many technical contexts discourages Romands from studying a second national language.
- Television is strengthening in Western Switzerland the concepts of "identité romande" and "identité francophone", rather than that of "national" identity. The media of today often tend to separate the linguistic groups instead of bringing them closer

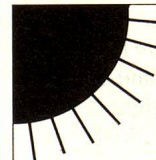
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together: the Romans watch the TV programmes from France, while German Swiss watch those from Germany and Austria – the two groups seem to be sitting back to back!

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.*