

Dialects : the dialectics of language

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **30 (2003)**

Heft 6

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907405>


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high German with a distinct Swiss accent is Swiss German.

The rule of thumb is: if the vowels are roughly the same length as in high German, then what you are hearing is Swiss high German, not Swiss German. *gk* 

From the free Web-based encyclopaedia "Wikipedia"

Translated from German.

RELATED LINKS

www.schweiz-in-sicht.ch: Discusses topics such as communication and national language under federalism and multilingualism.

www.hallo-schweiz.de: A light-hearted German website that discusses the problems and embarrassing situations encountered by Germans in German-speaking Switzerland.

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schweizerdeutsch: The evolution of dialects, attitudes to

high German. Link to the Swiss-German Dictionary. **http://nzz.de/2003/07/01/se/page-article8XRLB.html:** Allan Guggenbühl, youth psychologist, discusses "Swiss German as an emotional homeland."

http://dialects.from.ch: Do you speak your father's or mother's dialect? This site allows German-speaking Swiss to test their dialect.

www.dialektwoerter.ch: List of Swiss-German dialect words

The dialectics of language

"German is hard enough to learn, but 'Schwyzerdütsch' is well nigh impossible. I could never get the pronunciation right!" This comment, overheard on a Lausanne bus, proves that the cliché is still alive and well.

ACCORDING TO GERMAN LANGUAGE

teacher Sabine Aquilini, such admissions of helplessness are "not a cliché, but a reality. German is a difficult language to learn. And the fact that dialect (which one?) is not a written language (even though there is a grammar based on the Zurich dialect) makes it all the more tricky."

François Grin, an educational scientist and professor at Geneva's School of Translation, qualifies this statement: "It's wrong to say that French-speaking Swiss do not like German. Since the days of pop star Nina Hagen, German has been regarded as cool. And as borders gradually disappear, this trend is growing. It's different with dialect, which is virtually impossible to learn because it cannot be taught."

Needs must ...

The problem also has geographical roots. The closer western Switzerland gets to the River Saane, the more compelling the need, according to Sabine Aquilini, head of the Migros Club School in Fribourg. Lots of people in this region need high German for work but immediately switch to dialect for verbal communication. "Although students of Swiss German are in the minority here in Fribourg, they are far more numerous than in Geneva. They are highly motivated to learn high German because they want to integrate as fully as possible in the workplace;

or else they are married to someone from a German-speaking region."

Most French-speaking Swiss living in Zurich have opted to immerse themselves completely in the German language. Take Marine Heitz, who works in an insurance office in Zurich: "At work I speak high German, but I understand dialect. Lots of my colleagues and friends appreciate not being obliged to speak high German to me."

François Grin describes this field of personal communication as a "comfort zone": "Since they are not speaking their mother tongue, many German-speaking Swiss feel uneasy speaking high German. So when they communicate in this language it sounds artificial." French-speaking Swiss for their part sense this inhibition (some people even talk of a complex), which can project a feeling of exclusion, particularly in group situations: unless, says François Grin, the French-speaking Swiss shows himself or herself to be particularly adaptable and, like Marine Heitz, demonstrates a willingness to integrate.

But that's not always enough. "My children go to the local school, and the high German spoken by some of the teaching staff there is pretty poor. I've lost count of the mistakes I have found in official school documents," complains Ticino-born Mariano Masserini, who has been living in Berne for years. "Dialect is so rooted in everyday life that it is often recognised by

intellectuals as the official language. Even in the Ticino there are various dialects, but that doesn't prevent us from learning Italian in order to make ourselves understood to non-Ticinese. It's a matter of courtesy."

Difficult relations

There is no denying the existence of a language barrier in this country. Yet paradoxically it is also a source of enrichment. "Although the use of dialect helps people to integrate locally, it makes relations more difficult with other communities," reflects René Knüsel*, a professor at the University of Fribourg. For this reason he believes that "Italian and French speakers have a right to demand the use of a language other than dialect when communicating with German-speaking Swiss." The expert even goes so far as to call for French or Italian to be given priority over German, since a large number of German speakers in Switzerland have difficulty with high German.

Although they have not gone quite so far, the Swiss federal authorities in Berne have banned the use of Swiss German in parliamentary sessions: a laudable gesture, yet it makes virtually no difference to the linguistic balance of power. A French-speaking member of parliament who cannot communicate in German has no chance of making his mark on the German-speaking side of the Saane. While the same is true for a German-speaking politician, it is far less important the other way round.

Isabelle Eichenberger 

* René Knüsel: "Plurilinguisme et enjeux politiques", Payot, 1994.

Translated from German.