

Dialects : Grüezi, do you speak Swiss-German?

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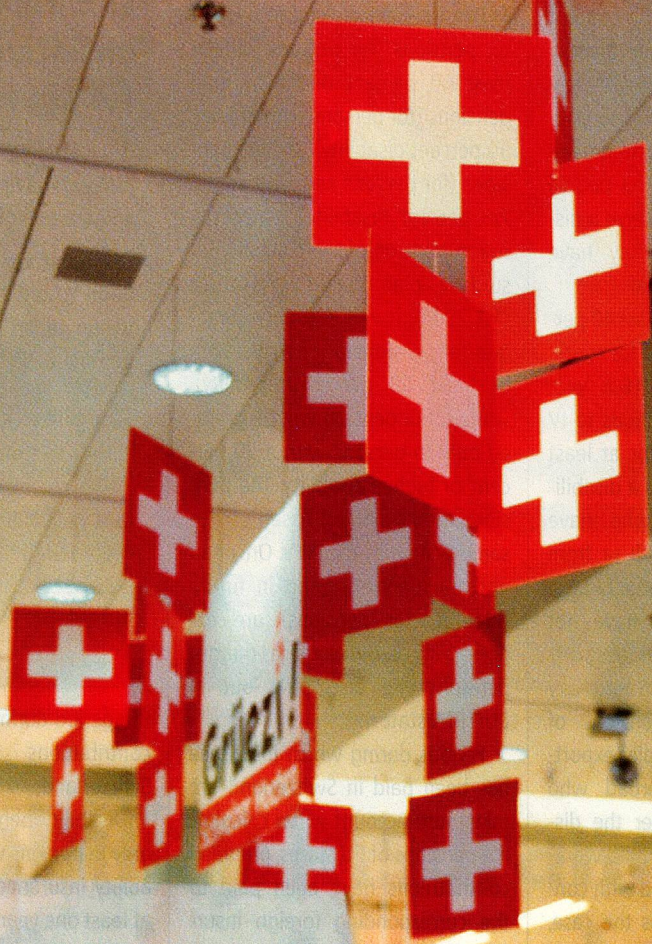
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Grüezi!
Schweizer Wochen



Grüezi!
Schweizer Wochen



GROS LOERRACH WILK

CD SHOP

Grüezi, do you speak Swiss-German?

More and more Swiss-German is being spoken on the radio and TV. While this may project a very patriotic image, neither Swiss in French-speaking Switzerland nor those in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino understand the language. Not to mention Swiss Abroad.

CHRISTINE AMRHEIN LOOSLI*

"HOW CAN THE MEDIA of a multilingual country allow the majority of news and information programmes on television and radio to be broadcast in dialect?" asks Gerhard Wagner, editor-in-chief of the north German "Dithmarscher Landeszeitung". How are Swiss in other regions of Switzerland, let alone tourists and foreigners, expected to keep abreast of the news?

The Swiss radio and television broadcasting corporation (SSR SRG idée suisse) has a government-financed information mandate. Article 26 of the federal law on radio and television states that "the SRG must take the particular characteristics of the country and the needs of the cantons into account across the entire schedule." One of the characteristics of the country is its multilingualism.

Living with bilingualism

The linguistic situation of Swiss-Germans is peculiar. Their mother tongue is not a written language, and from a very early age they are obliged to learn an official written language that is distinctly different from dialect. For most of them, the written language remains a foreign language throughout their lives - and one that they avoid whenever possible. Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote: "I speak Berndeutsch and I write German (...) I am continually having to abandon the language I speak to find a language I cannot speak."

The reluctance to speak high German is on the increase. More and more radio and televi-

◀ Migros in Lörrach, Germany, accentuates its Swiss origins with a traditional "Grüezi!".

sion programmes are broadcast in dialect, and even major daily newspapers unabashedly use dialect expressions in their articles and headlines. And the content of informal e-mails and SMS messages sent between young people is almost exclusively in dialect.

Language is not just about communication; it is also about identification. "The way we speak expresses our ties with a region or a nation and signals a special identity," says Zurich-based youth psychologist Allan Guggenbühl. So by showing unwillingness to speak a particular language, a person is expressing his alienation from a group.

Léon Huber, a lover of cultivated language, has reached the same conclusion. Active in the theatre, he was also a newsreader for Swiss TV for 33 years. "The Third Reich is still in people's memories," he says. Films on that era deliberately feature a clipped, Prussian-sounding German, with the result that the language sounds hostile and is avoided.

Promoting dialect

"A good speaker does not speak with a pronounced German accent - neither Prussian nor Berliner," says Léon Huber. The language must sound harmonious and achieve a level that is universally acceptable and intelligible. Huber firmly believes that radio and television moderators have an obligation to speak the official language. Speaking colloquially, says the professional moderator, often incorporates words and usages that detract from the quality of high German and are merely embarrassing. Such speakers risk not being taken seriously by other nationalities. "But I've nothing against dialect," adds Huber, whose Swiss German sounds less practised

than his high German. He believes that dialect clearly has its place, but programmes in dialect should be labelled as such by the media. Highly distinctive dialects such as Valais German, according to Huber, are difficult even for other Swiss Germans to understand.

If even German-speaking Swiss have problems understanding certain dialects, think how much more difficult, if not impossible, it is for Swiss in other regions, not to mention foreigners. In Huber's view this is precisely why the official language should be promoted "because we depend on tourists and should be proud to have them."

For a country that sits at the crossroads of three major European language cultures, this growing trend towards dialect in German-speaking Swiss media is a questionable development that is by no means helping to improve communication. Editor-in-chief Wagner questions whether German-speaking Swiss media are fulfilling their national information mandate. Léon Huber's answer - with all due respect to dialect - is a resounding No.


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How it sounds to the German ear

Swiss German is a term applied to any of the High Alemannic dialects spoken in Switzerland. Linguists have identified hundreds of different Swiss-German dialects. Due to relatively restricted mobility up until the beginning of the 20th century, some of these dialects exhibit marked regional differences, to the point where even the Swiss themselves have trouble understanding each other.

When the Swiss speak high German, they often do so with a distinct Swiss accent (suppressed "a", harsh "ch", lilting tone) which they do not regard as incorrect. Swiss tend to be sceptical about any compatriot who speaks perfect "stage German". German nationals often mistakenly assume that this

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.