

The Swiss seen by a Swiss : "Oh, You speak English?"

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The Swiss Seen by a Swiss . . .**"OH, YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?"**

When the British made the touristic discovery of Switzerland in the last century, they soon found out that successful holidaying was largely dependent on being understood by the natives. But how on earth was it possible to cope with three languages at once, especially as they all sounded so totally different from what stood in the dictionaries? Much to the visitors' relief the Swiss believed in the fact that the customer is always right, and so English became the current language in our holiday resorts.

Beginnings were difficult. Many may remember their first go at pronunciation, which invariably resulted in wondering why *tomb* was pronounced like *boom*, and why *cough* was not pronounced like *bough*. But somehow our forefathers seem to have overcome those set-backs, and more and more people took interest in that "mad" language, which, if not strictly logical, was at least useful.

The belief abroad that the average Swiss speaks English fluently grew slowly and steadily into a myth, and was only strengthened when the following news was spread in London circles. Two English tourists, who were caught in a thunderstorm somewhere in the Bernese Alps, sought refuge in a nearby chalet. In the doorway stood what they thought was a mountaineer, who, much to their surprise, welcomed them in perfect English. They spent the evening conversing on all sorts of subjects, and when the two left the following morning, they muttered under their breath: "Well, I'm blown!" It is only fair to add that this mountaineer was, in fact, a well-known Federal Councillor, who had met with the same misfortune as the two Englishmen, and had exchanged his wet clothes for an alpine outfit.

Nowadays, English is taught all over the country, from the colleges right down to grammar-school, and the attendance of evening-classes is ever-increasing. (I reserve my opinion as to their effectiveness!). For those who do not like the idea of going back to classrooms, there is always "English by Radio", a B.B.C. programme gaining daily in popularity. May I, at this stage, express my thanks and admiration for our own "Kurzwellsender Schwarzenburg", whose transmissions are appreciated the world over, as much for its homely touch as for its unprejudiced news.

Whenever you come across words like *smoking* or *dancing* in Swizerland, please do not forget that the former stands for "evening-dress" and the latter for "night-club", otherwise there might be some unnecessary confusions. And that brings us to the end of our linguistic survey, but before I go I must say that since the Yankees flooded our country there have ben many changes. *Colour* has become *color*, and *programmes* have turned to *programs*. For the customer is always right . . .

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