

Swiss Standard German and its Helvetisms

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The written language of German-speaking Switzerland is Standard German, but it is a Standard German of its own kind. Linguists since the 1990s have described German as a pluricentric language, with national standard varieties in Germany, Austria and Switzerland that are equally correct within their territories. The *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen*, first published in 2004 under the direction of Ulrich Ammon, records thousands of words, meanings and forms that are standard in one of these countries and unusual in the others.¹ Swiss Standard German, *Schweizerhochdeutsch*, is thus a full standard variety, which Swiss writers and editors use with confidence.

The most visible feature of Swiss Standard German is the absence of the letter ß. Swiss schools gradually abandoned it from the 1930s onwards, starting in the canton of Zurich. The Swiss newspapers followed in the decades after the Second World War. The orthographic reform of 1996 confirmed the Swiss practice, which writes *Strasse* and *Busse* where German orthography writes *Straße* and *Buße*.² For a German lawyer, the point has a practical edge. The word *Busse* in Swiss law denotes a fine, whereas the German *Buße* in criminal law has mostly been replaced by *Geldstrafe* and *Geldbuße*, so that a contract or a memorandum must be read with an awareness of both the spelling and the institution behind it.

The vocabulary of Swiss Standard German contains numerous Helvetisms, many of them borrowed from French or preserved from older forms of German. The Swiss ride a *Velo* where Germans ride a *Fahrrad*, walk on the *Trottoir* instead of the *Bürgersteig*, *parkieren* their cars and *grillieren* their sausages. In the office, they keep a list of *Pendenzen*, the open items, and place a *Traktandum* on the agenda of a meeting.³ Grammatical differences exist as well, for instance in the gender of some nouns, in the use of prepositions and in the formation of certain verbs. Most of these differences are harmless, although some of them change the meaning of a

sentence in ways that matter in legal and financial texts, as the second half of this chapter shows.

The Swiss federal administration has codified its own conventions for Standard German. The Federal Chancellery publishes guidelines for the drafting of federal acts and for German spelling. Its central language services work on a principle of linguistic equality between German, French and Italian.⁴ These conventions have influenced the language of the cantons, including Basel-Stadt, whose legislation follows the federal model in most respects. Swiss Standard German is therefore a living standard, maintained by public institutions and taught in schools, which should not be confused with a written imitation of the dialects.

The pronunciation of Standard German in Switzerland also has its own characteristics. Swiss speakers stress many loanwords on the first syllable, pronounce the *ch* after front vowels as a velar sound in some positions and keep the vowel lengths of their dialects when they speak Standard German.⁵ Germans tend to hear in this pronunciation a sign of provinciality, while many Swiss regard the German pronunciation of the north as cool and self-assured. These mutual perceptions have little to do with linguistic facts, yet they influence how speakers judge each other's competence and trustworthiness, a theme to which this chapter returns in its discussion of the labour market.

1 Notes

1. Ulrich Ammon et al., *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen. Die Standardsprache in Österreich, der Schweiz und Deutschland sowie in Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Ostbelgien und Südtirol*, Berlin/New York 2004; 2nd ed. Berlin/Boston 2016. On pluricentricity, see Ulrich Ammon, *Die deutsche Sprache in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz. Das Problem der nationalen Varietäten*, Berlin 1995. ↩
2. On the abandonment of ß in Switzerland (Zurich schools from 1935/1938, general practice of newspapers and publishers later) and its recognition in the official orthographic rules, see the rules of the Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung, § 25 E2, and the guidelines of the Swiss Federal Chancellery (Schreibweisungen). To be verified. ↩
3. On Helvetisms in Swiss Standard German, see Hans Bickel/Christoph Landolt, *Schweizerhochdeutsch. Wörterbuch der Standardsprache in der deutschen Schweiz*, Duden, Mannheim/Zurich 2012 (2nd ed. Berlin 2018); Ammon et al., *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen*, 2nd ed. 2016. To be verified. ↩

4. Swiss Federal Chancellery, Schreibweisungen. Leitfaden zum deutschen Sprachgebrauch in Erlassen, Botschaften und weiteren Texten des Bundes, current edition; Federal Chancellery, Gesetzestechnische Richtlinien des Bundes (GTR). To be verified. ↩
5. On the pronunciation of Standard German in Switzerland, see Ingrid Hove, Die Aussprache der Standardsprache in der deutschen Schweiz, Tübingen 2002; Ammon et al., Variantenwörterbuch, 2016. To be verified. ↩

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