

The linguistic situation of German-speaking Switzerland

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Visitors who arrive in Basel from Germany expect to find themselves in a German-speaking city. In a formal sense they are right. Newspapers, street signs, laws, court judgments and bank statements are written in German that a reader from Hamburg or Munich understands without difficulty. As soon as the visitor listens to conversations in the tram, in a shop or in a meeting room, however, the impression changes. The people of Basel speak among themselves a language that a German from the north understands only in part. When they address the visitor, they switch to Standard German, often with a slight hesitation that betrays the effort of the change. This coexistence of two forms of the same language, each with its own domains, is the fundamental fact of language in German-speaking Switzerland.¹

Linguists describe this situation with the term diglossia, which the American linguist Charles A. Ferguson introduced in an influential article of 1959. Ferguson used German-speaking Switzerland as one of his four classic examples, alongside Arabic, Modern Greek and Haitian Creole. In each of these cases, he observed, two varieties of one language exist side by side: a "high" variety, which is learnt at school and used for writing, formal speech and religion, and a "low" variety, which is acquired at home and used in everyday conversation.² For a reader who knows Greek, the comparison has a particular interest: the Greek distinction between *katharevousa* and *dimotiki*, which Ferguson also described, was settled in 1976 in favour of the spoken language, whereas the Swiss arrangement has proved remarkably stable.

The Swiss case nevertheless differs from Ferguson's model in an important respect. In classical diglossia, the low variety carries lower prestige and is regarded by its own speakers as a corrupted form of the high variety. Swiss Germans do not see their dialects in this way. Dialect is spoken by all social

classes, in parliament as well as on the building site, by the president of a bank as well as by the apprentice. Its speakers regard it as an expression of national and regional identity. Several linguists have therefore spoken of a "medial diglossia", in which the choice between the varieties depends primarily on whether a text is written or spoken.³ Since dialect is the normal spoken language of every Swiss German, a speaker who uses Standard German in a private conversation with another Swiss German would sound stilted or even hostile.

The domains of the two varieties have shifted over the past century. In the nineteenth century, educated Swiss Germans often spoke Standard German in formal settings, while some families of the urban elites even cultivated it at home. The rise of National Socialism in Germany produced a reaction that linguists call the *Mundartwelle*, the dialect wave. Under the programme of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung*, the spiritual defence of the country, dialect became a marker of distance from the northern neighbour. Its use spread into domains that had previously belonged to Standard German.⁴ A second dialect wave followed from the 1960s, when radio and television, popular music and later advertising increasingly used dialect. Today it is spoken in most programmes of the regional broadcasters, in sermons, in many university seminars and in the debates of most cantonal parliaments, while the Federal Assembly debates in Standard German, French and Italian.

The importance of the spoken dialect is confirmed by the federal statistics. The structural survey of the Federal Statistical Office, which asks respondents which languages they regularly speak at home and at work, consistently shows that a large majority of the population of German-speaking Switzerland speaks Swiss German at home, while a much smaller share reports Standard German as a home language.⁵ In the canton of Basel-Stadt, the share of Standard German as a home language is higher than in rural cantons, which reflects the large number of residents from Germany and the international character of the city. The picture in Basel is therefore more varied than the national average suggests.

1 Notes

1. On the language situation of German-speaking Switzerland, see Walter Haas, "Die deutschsprachige Schweiz", in Bickel/Schläpfer (eds.), *Die viersprachige Schweiz*, 2nd ed., Aarau 2000; Felicity Rash, *The German Language in Switzerland*, Bern 1998. To be verified. ↩

2. Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia", Word 15 (1959), pp. 325–340. Ferguson's four "defining languages" were Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole. ↩
3. On the concept of "mediale Diglossie" for German-speaking Switzerland, see Peter Sieber/Horst Sitta, Mundart und Standardsprache als Problem der Schule, Aarau 1986; Rudolf Kolde, Sprachkontakte in gemischtsprachigen Städten, 1981; Rash, The German Language in Switzerland, 1998. To be verified. ↩
4. On the Geistige Landesverteidigung and the strengthening of dialect in the 1930s, see HLS, article "Geistige Landesverteidigung"; on the "Mundartwelle" after 1960, see Haas in Bickel/Schlöpfer (eds.), Die viersprachige Schweiz, 2000. To be verified. ↩
5. Federal Statistical Office (FSO/BFS), Structural Survey (Strukturerhebung), annual results on main languages and languages spoken at home and at work; see also the FSO survey on language, religion and culture (Erhebung zur Sprache, Religion und Kultur, ESRK) of 2014, 2019 and 2024. Figures to be verified. ↩

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