

SWITZERLAND:
AN EXAMPLE OF
WORKING MULTI-LINGUALISM

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Located at the crossroads of European languages, Switzerland is a country known for its chocolate, cheese, neutrality, banks, skiing, William Tell, and the Red Cross. The Swiss are proud of their heritage. They are descended from four different groups. As a result, they are one of the few remaining old, but modern nations which is multi-lingual. There are many ideas as to how Swiss multi-lingualism began and has managed its continued existence. There are also many problems associated with multi-lingualism.

Three major languages are spoken in Switzerland. These are French, Italian, and a dialect of German. Also spoken is Romansch, which is considered a dialect of Latin. The German dialect, French, and Italian were recognized by the Swiss government on June 7, 1874, and Romansch was recognized on February 20, 1938 (Kohn 1956:118). The numerical relationship between the three major languages has not altered much in the last one hundred years (Kohn 1956:116). German dialects are spoken by about 74 percent of the population. French speakers represent 20.6 percent and Italians constitute 4 percent of the population. Of the total population of this tiny country, 1.4 percent speak Rhaeto Romanic, or Romansch (von Salis, in Chopard 1963:25). Romansch is spoken in only one of the 25 cantons and half cantons in Switzerland. In canton Graubunden, in southwestern Switzerland, 67,000 people speak German dialects, 17,000 speak Italian, and 39,000 speak one of the two dialects of Romansch. Kohn (1956:117) defines these two as Ladino, spoken by the Protestants in the Engadine Valley, and Surselva, spoken by the Catholic peasants along the upper Rhine River. French spoken in Switzerland is different from Standard French in France, but

the differences are not great enough to be defined. The same is true for the Italian spoken in Switzerland. Swiss German, however, presents its own problems.

Although the standard language in German-Switzerland is High German, it is not normally spoken in informal conversation. There are three major dialects of Swiss German. These include the city and surrounding areas of Bern, Zürich, and St. Gallen. Bern is the western dialect, with Zürich as the central, and St. Gallen as the eastern. There are differences between each of these, but none of them are great enough to pose a problem of intelligibility (Keller 1961:11).

Bärndütsch, Bernese German, is spoken by 750,000 speakers with minor differences between the upper and lower classes (Keller 1961:87). Class differences in the speech of this area might be explained by the fact that Bern is the capital of Switzerland, as well as being the international headquarters for many groups and organizations. In this type of situation, class distinctions tend to become more important.

Höchstalmanisch, the dialect spoken in the high Alpine valleys by less than 100,000 people, is not as easily understood by the rest of the 3 million people speaking Swiss German, but it is still not necessary to adopt a standard language to communicate (Keller 1961:31).

Through the years, certain phrases and words from French and Italian have become part of the Swiss German repertoire. Examples include the use of the French word for "thank you" with the German word for "very much" resulting in the Swiss "merci vielmal".

Another example is the Italian informal greeting "ciao" meaning "hello" or "so long" combining with the Swiss German

"tzamma" (author's own spelling) from the German "zusammen" meaning "together", making the phrase "ciao tazamma" to say hello or goodbye to a group of close friends.

A controversy exists as to whether or not Swiss German should be considered a separate language, or just a dialect of High German. To the German Swiss, their written language of High German is a foreign language (Reich in Chopard 1963:168). Trudgill (1974:122) states that Swiss children "must learn standard German in addition to acquiring literacy." However, the standard German used in Switzerland is not the same as the standard German of Germany. High German is used as a spoken language in parliament, courts, churches, universities, and higher schools, but is "spoken with Swiss phonology and phonetics and contains a number of regionalisms, and is therefore markedly different from the spoken standard German of Germany" (Trudgill 1974:121).

Trudgill (1974:16) describes the differences between Swiss German and Dutch in their relationship to German. Dutch and German are autonomous, because, even though Dutch was originally a dialect of German and is still much like the Northern German dialects, the Dutch have adopted their own written language and declared theirs a language on its own. Swiss German and High German are, on the other hand, heteronomous, because even though spoken Swiss could be a separate language, the Swiss look to High German as their standard written language.

R. E. Keller (1961:6) describes dialect characteristics in the following passage:

"Dialects have no fixed norm, no rules which command respect and which are deliberately applied by the speakers. Dialect is a free-and-easy, expressionistic form of speech without censure from desk or pulpit and without attempt at correct imitation on the part of the speakers. Naturally there is linguistic tradition of right and wrong, but it is natural and makes no demands on the speakers".

According to this description, Swiss German is more a dialect than a separate language. When the language is written, a phonetic spelling is used, because there is no tradition to back up a standardized spelling (Keller 1961:18).

Ferguson (in Hymes 1964:434) notes that "in Swiss German the phonological differences between high and low are very great and the normal lexical pairing is regular cognation ("klein" of High German equals "chly" of Swiss German, meaning small)". To the untrained ear, these differences give the impression of Swiss German being a distinct language by itself.

Rules for daily use of Swiss German follow general rules for high and low varieties of a language. The dialect is used widely in radio and some on television, but there is no attempt at an agreed standardization. Personal letters are not written in Swiss German, but some local dialect literature does appear in a non-standardized form of Swiss German (Trudgill 1974:120-121). It is generally agreed that those dialects of German known as Swiss German are only dialects of Standard German. They do not constitute a separate language, and are, therefore, dependent on High German for a written language.

The situation of Swiss multi-lingualicity raises a question: does each language constitute a separate culture? Denis de Rougemont (in Chopard 1963:70) comments:

"... a language by itself cannot define a culture, for it is but one of the elements of culture, generally speaking, however essential it may be. All of the other elements -- religion, philosophy, ethics, and fine arts, folklore, science, technology, and architecture -- are largely or even totally independent of the modern languages, and, according to all evidence, are not reducible to national frameworks."

In other words, it can be concluded that each language group brings into Switzerland aspects of the culture associated with that language, but the people are "Swiss" first and then language

distinctions are made.

One theory as to the origin of Swiss multi-linguicity comes from Mario M. Pedazzini (in Chopard 1963:183). He believes that multi-lingualism originated when the community building function of language was practically ineffective.

Kohn (1956:16) gives a history of the development of Switzerland and says that Swiss descended from the Celtic Helvetians, who were "a heroic mountain race". He also explains that, "a part of the Helvetians, however, had remained in antiquity subjected to the Romans, as a result they spoke French; rightfully, however, they belonged to the German-Swiss, their happier racial brethren".

According to Olivier Reverdin (1964:10), a group of people known as the Alemans of Germanic descent settled, between the fifth and seventh century, in the area south of the Alps where they spoke a dialect of Latin. Eventually, two dialects known as Ladin and Romansch were formed. During the Reformation, these dialects were written. The Burgundians, who also spoke a dialect of Latin, replaced it with French.

According to Ferguson (in Hymes 1964:438), Swiss German diglossia developed as "a result of long religious and political isolation from the centers of German linguistic standardization".

Multi-lingualism has remained a part of Switzerland because, as Reverdin explains (1964:45), the Swiss have a "passion for freedom, personal responsibility for the State and its administration, determination to maintain national unity by making concessions and respecting minorities, and conviction that Switzerland would cease to exist if any majority (linguistic, political, social, religious) became all powerful." Feelings of Swiss nationalism are so strong, that it is almost considered disloyal to the

community to speak Standard German instead of the dialect (Ferguson in Hymes 1964:435).

Switzerland exists "as a cultural community and as a political idea above the diversity of race and language" (Kohn 1956:128). Kohn also states (1956:115) that Switzerland is dedicated to "the spirit of tolerance, restraint, and good will towards minorities." The main reason for the preservation of multilingualism in Switzerland is the people's feeling of unity. They have no common descent or language, but do share common political traditions and institutions (Kohn 1956:17). Chopard (1963:7) sums up well by stating that "Switzerland aspires to a unification conceived in such a way as to safeguard, as fully as possible, these characteristic diversities..." of language, race, and religion. This has been proven through time. For example, in the nineteenth century, Romansch seemed to be doomed to extinction. However, the proud Swiss restored it in the twentieth century as proof of Swiss linguistic nationalism (Kohn 1956:117).

Another theory as to why Swiss people speak four different languages is that each of the major languages of Switzerland is also the language of an important culture of equal value. Neither German, French, nor Italian is weaker than the other on the world scale (Pedrazzini, in Chopard (1963:185). Therefore, no one language can become powerful enough to conquer the others.

Pedrazzini (1963:176) defined the three major areas where language problems arise in Switzerland. These are in communications between the individual and the confederation, the individual and the canton, and the canton and the confederation. Problems on the individual-confederation and individual-canton levels are handled according to the individual's own language. Generally, communications are conducted trilingually for debates and

negotiations, drafts on the constitutional and legislative level, wording the ballots for elections, and all confederal official records (Pedrazzini in Chopard 1963:180). Labels on food, signs, and even traffic tickets are written in all three major languages.

On the canton-confederation level, for example, canton Aargau of north-central Switzerland is German speaking. All canton-confederation matters between canton Aargau and the federal government are handled in German. In this case, standard German is used. On the other hand, canton Geneva speaks French, and communications are in French. In the case of canton Freiburg, where both German and French are spoken, business is conducted in both languages. Because Romansch is only a spoken dialect, Standard German is used as its written language.

Individual communication is more trial-and-error. Language boundaries between the German and French areas are so distinct that they are often marked with highway signs, and some towns speak German on one side of the street and French on the other. In Freiburg, for example, a taxi driver must speak fluent Swiss German, High German, French, and some Italian. Many times English is also required. Italian presents fewer of these problems because it is isolated by the mountains.

The influx of foreign workers has caused some problems, but these are being taken care of through a system of language schools to help the workers learn the languages of their new country. The Swiss are very aware of each of their language groups. There is a radio and television station for each of the major language groups, in spite of their small numbers. The Swiss have successfully avoided national discrimination against any one group of people.

According to Pedrazzini (in Chopard 1963:182), the solution to the problems created by Swiss multi-lingualism depends "on the attitude of the individual to the language in its dual significance; namely, as a personality-building factor in the relations with one individual, and as a community-building factor in the relations with many individuals". He also believes multi-lingualism is not a real problem in Switzerland, because it is not recognized or felt to be a problem by the Swiss people. The Swiss are proud of their languages, and see them as an example of Swiss individuality. Reverdin (1964:13) believes that German dialects in Switzerland are "an essential factor of the people's awareness of their originality." This is especially true of the Swiss German dialects. Keller (1961:30) explains:

"All Germanic-speaking Swiss use their dialect habitually among themselves irrespective of social rank or position or regional provenance. Standard German is employed only for writing and as the language of public lectures, sermons and tuition."

However, unlike the Dutch, for example, the Swiss Germans do not suffer from "linguistic isolation", because they write in High German (Mikes 1962:44).

De Rougemont (in Chopard 1963:71) lists five major differences between the Swiss and Germans, French, and Italians, which help to explain why Swiss multi-lingualism has continued to work, while other nations have remained mainly uni-lingual. These same reasons explain why Switzerland has not been involved in a war for so many years, while other major powers have. First, de Rougemont says that culture is not linked with the state. Second, culture exists within small natural or historic compartments, never having been unified or standardized by a certain power. Third, Swiss groups are old republics founded upon a large measure of local autonomy. Fourth, religion plays a major role in the

unification of Switzerland. And, fifth, the Swiss are in an osmotic relationship with their neighbors. These are five of the reasons that Switzerland is unique.

Swiss are proud of their multi-lingualism. Quoting Richard Reich (in Chopad 1963:175):

"...the more we believe ourselves sheltered in this condition against the confusion that surrounds us on every side, the more we believe to recognize round about us the dreamy weakness of the grey national memories based on language and color of hair, the more stubbornly we cling to our own Swiss way of life."

Swiss multi-lingualism has been a part of Switzerland for all of its history. Linguistic boundaries within Switzerland have remained basically unchanged for more than one hundred years. German-speaking Swiss are in no hurry to give up their dialects and, according to Ferguson (in Hymes 1964:437), the prognosis for Swiss German over the next two centuries is "relative stability". Swiss are proud of their multi-lingualism and intend to protect it.

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