

# Toward an Orthography: The Textualization of Swiss German

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*This paper discusses the future of Swiss German. Currently Swiss German is considered a variety of the Standard German dialect because it is not a written language. The author argues, however, that Swiss German has a much larger presence currently than being a variety. In a number of examples shown, Swiss German is growing in numbers of speakers and in ways it is used. Because of this, there are more instances of written Swiss German being produced. There are currently a few online sources dedicated to standardizing Swiss German spelling, yet the future of Swiss German is uncertain.*

# An Introduction

A motif of human civilization has been to accord authority commensurate to age. Writing, however, stands out as an exception: despite being predated by spoken language by eons, it is writing that commands greater respect. For many centuries, people considered a written form to be the key determiner for languagehood, and that forms restricted to the domain of speech were merely “vernaculars.”<sup>1</sup> This particular belief prevailed in the West until about a thousand years ago when vernaculars began to slowly gain prestige and find their way onto paper.<sup>2</sup> However, traces of this former bias persist where Alemannic dialects are concerned. Swiss German—though mutually unintelligible with Standard German—is not considered a real language due to its lack of presence in writing.

Native speakers of Standard German recognize the Swiss variety as distinct, but in contrasting it with “real German,” “actual German,” and “proper German” (just to name a few monikers for Standard German given by a Berliner), their views on the subject become clear: Swiss German is not a language. But at the same time, according to a 1990 census, over ninety percent of “German-speaking” Swiss communicate in Swiss German, and seventy-six percent identify it as their preferred means of communication.<sup>3</sup> Sociolinguists have also noted that Germanspeaking Swiss will switch to French or English sooner than to Standard German when faced with someone who does not understand Swiss German.<sup>4</sup> In fact, unlike many other regional dialects, which are viewed as obsolete and oldfashioned, Swiss German is fully embraced by the younger generations of Germanspeaking Swiss, who speak it with pride—and who are even beginning to write it. This paper examines the social environment surrounding the textualization of Swiss German, the efforts towards a standardized orthography, the consequences of such, and its future as a written language.

## A History

It would be false to say that Swiss German is being written for the first time in the twenty-first century; the earliest Swiss texts were written in Alemannic dialects.<sup>5</sup> Only with the advent of the printing press in the midfifteenth century, coupled with a great deal

of variation in writing among dialects and the higher prestige of (Middle) High German, did large scale reprinting of these originals take place in the language of their northeastern neighbors.<sup>6</sup> Over the next four centuries, the dialectal versions would be systematically replaced by Standard German versions, and newly printed works would similarly be written in Standard German.<sup>7</sup>

In modern times, a domain in which Swiss German is written is the genre of dialect literature (*Mundartliteratur*) that has arisen since the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> This encompasses reasonably wellknown works (in Switzerland, at least) such as those of Kurt Marti and Jakob Stutz; however, in general, the readership is very limited, and the genre remains marginal.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, translations of certain parts of the Bible are available in Swiss German.<sup>10</sup> Finally, though the written language of German-speaking Switzerland is, for all intents and purposes, Standard German, a number of Swiss German peculiarities have successfully infiltrated. For example, several common words have received a gender-reassignment due to the influence of French, such as *der Bank* instead of *die Bank* and *die Photo* instead of *das Photo*. Certain lexical differences are also reflected in writing: *das Salär* instead of *das Gehalt*, and *der Spital* instead of *das Krankenhaus*.

Though the above point seems minor, and can easily be attributed to the written German in Switzerland really being *Swiss Standard German*, it is worthwhile to note a case where the written language of Germanspeaking Switzerland has been modeled after its speech. While spoken Swiss German exhibits the same deviances, there is evidence that writing in Germanspeaking Switzerland is not so resistant to the influences of spoken dialect as one may have thought. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of writing is conducted in Standard German—even children’s picture books and fairy tales.<sup>13</sup> According to Stephan Meyer of the Sprachenzentrum at Universität Basel, children know enough Standard German prior to primary school to understand the basics for a picture book.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, written records of fairy tales serve more as a general reminder of the story, there being an emphasis on *erzählen* (telling) rather than *lesen* (reading), so though the narration is in dialect, textual transmission is largely in Standard German.<sup>15</sup> The twenty-first century, however, is yielding written Swiss German on a never-before-seen scale.

# The Influence of Technology

Just as the new technology of the printing press paved the way for the adoption of Standard German in written forms, so have modern technologies of the cell phone and social media begun to usher in a revival of written dialect. Thanks, in part, to widespread communication via text messages, Facebook, Twitter and the like, Swiss German is making an appearance in digital writing. A study funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that examined Short Message Service (SMS) communication in Germanspeaking Switzerland found that over fifty percent of texts were written solely in dialect.<sup>16</sup> Such a development is hardly surprising—texts and tweets are most often informal exchanges between people who are close, and the use of Standard German gives an undesirable coloring of distance and formality. “Private correspondence is done in dialect and that which is meant for the public in High German,” claims Dr. Helen Christen, professor of German philology at Universität Freiburg, though she also notes that the user demographic is dominated by the younger generations.<sup>17</sup> The same is true across other languages. Less formal registers previously unique to speech are being appropriated by the written language of digital networks. Englishspeaking teens, for example, use *prolly* to reflect the syncope undertaken by *probably*, and French *je ne sais pas* is usually written in text messages as *chais pas*. These are what people say in their speech, and instantaneous forms of communication are a natural extension of spoken language, despite being written.

Perhaps written Swiss German is even appreciated by some younger users as a way of belonging to a clique—parents, for example, are not likely to comprehend the meaning of “Hesh xeh” (*Hast du das gesehen?/Did you see that?*) if they have not been initiated to the emerging conventions of Swiss German orthography.<sup>18</sup> The rising popularity of written Swiss German can thus be viewed as a case of language being a simultaneous tool of communication and exclusion. The latter function, however, is not expected to last—writers of Swiss German are slowly but surely entering adulthood, and many children will still communicate with their parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, in written dialect.<sup>19</sup> In fact, even those who regard writing in Swiss German as a cult privilege of

sorts are beginning to let the older generations in—writing in Swiss German offers a veritable triad of benefits in comparison to Standard German, being shorter, faster, and cheaper. To top it all off, the wide array of idioms and peculiarities belonging to each dialect of Swiss German have not proven to cause major communication problems, even given the absence of a standard orthography.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, students have even begun to send emails to their teachers in their dialects.<sup>21</sup> And when the participants of a conversation write differently, one participant usually begins to accommodate. In the case of a dialect and a nondialect writer, the same NSF project found that the latter would likely accommodate to the former.<sup>22</sup> The reason is that some feel that responding to a Swiss-German text in Standard German is “pretentious”.<sup>23</sup>

## The Effects on Advertising

What is truly remarkable is that Swiss German is even beginning to appear in the realm of public signage, namely, advertisements. Unsurprisingly, most of these advertisements are targeted at a younger audience, who are not only more likely to read and understand the written dialect, but also to view written Swiss German as a trendy development. Moreover, it seems likely that Swiss German advertising would be more effective on the Swiss, given that they hold Standard German at arm’s length. Indeed, more and more TV advertisements are spoken in dialect. In a study that sampled 488 such ads, 238 used Swiss German; it is only to be expected that written advertisements should follow suit.<sup>24</sup> Whereas a Standard German slogan might suggest the tone of a set of orders or instructions from a formal relationship or a stranger, a Swiss German one evokes the familiarity of a suggestion from a friend. Successful marketing instills a desire to buy a product in the most subtle way possible, making use of informal language and colloquialisms. Since Standard German is absent from everyday Swiss speech, with the exception of very formal environments, its presence in the casual language of advertising could create an awkward mismatch of registers.

Certain Swissbased companies may also be incentivized to use written Swiss German to convey a quality of authentic “Swissness”: Ricola, for example, launched an advertising campaign with the tagline “Berühmt für ihre Chrüterchraft” (*Famous for its herbal power*), featuring a picture of the Alps.<sup>25</sup> Instead of *Kräuterkraft*, the company substitutes the k’s for the typical Swiss German “ch.” Nestlé, too, has produced packaging in Züritüütsch.<sup>26</sup> In addition, many stands at openair markets advertise specialty regional foods in Swiss German, boasting “Chäs” (*Käse/cheese*) or “Chriesi” (*Kirsche/cherries*).

## Dialects and Lexicons

But how is the textualization of Swiss German being performed? How do advertisers decide how words are spelled? How do writers settle on conventions? To further complicate matters, the individual dialects have differing articulations, giving rise to differences in choice of letter. Linguist Beat Siebenhaar notes that dialectal writing is subject to diversity due to a number of additional factors, including individual interpretation of phoneme-to-grapheme rules, individual interpretation of orthographic principles, and the extent of influence of Standard German orthography.<sup>27</sup> Though he claims that “this extensive variation does not generally impede comprehension or communication,” some large scale efforts toward standardization are well underway.<sup>28</sup>

The “Swiss Idioticon” (*Das Schweizerische Idiotikon*), for example, is a project funded by the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences as well as the governments of all the German-speaking cantons.<sup>29</sup> It endeavors to document Swiss German from the late Middle Ages to the present, boasting “16 volumes with more than 150,000 entries [that] amount to the most comprehensive German dialect and regiolect dictionary.”<sup>30</sup> The Swiss Idioticon uses a variety of sources, combining nineteenth- and twentieth-century Swiss German fictional literature and submissions from individuals, with scientific literature, and internet chat transcripts.<sup>31</sup> The website does not explain how they arbitrate

between conflicting spellings, but notes that they strive for consistency and choose many spellings via analogy to other spellings. Another organized effort surrounds the spelling of place names exclusively. The Weisungen 1948 is a set of instructions that governed the writing of local names in Germanspeaking Switzerland following an increased use of dialectal forms after the Second World War.<sup>32</sup> After continuous revision and addition of articles, the Weisungen 2011, published sixty-three years later, provided guidelines for the transcription of Swiss German toponyms into written text.<sup>33</sup>

There are also individuals not belonging to organizations who are working hard to reach a consensus for Swiss German spelling. Naturally, many of these individuals are linguists and other language professionals who conduct corporabased analyses.<sup>34</sup> But laymen, too, are playing an active part, using online locales to exchange their thoughts on dialect words.<sup>35</sup> For example, the Facebook page “Schwiizerdütsch,” which has garnered over 270,000 likes since its creation in 2009, has a comment thread where users discussed and collected dialect words for *puddle*, with over 1,400 comments.<sup>36</sup> Occasionally, the administrators also conduct polls, asking people to vote on alternative spellings.<sup>37</sup> There seems to be a strong tendency towards a phonetic orthography. As a reflection of the devoicing of syllablefinal obstruents, for example, preference is given to *Kebap* over *Kebab*, the *gs* cluster is often written as *x*; and in place of *sch*, Swiss German uses *sh*.<sup>38</sup> In general, the same correspondences between Standard German and Swiss German phonology show up as correspondences between their orthographies.<sup>39</sup> However, writers of dialect do not always adhere so closely to the patterns posited by linguists; rather, they switch back and forth or mix them, sometimes even for the same word.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Twitter is acting as a host to similar movements, under various hashtags.<sup>41</sup> However, it is doubtful that these grassroots ventures will be very effective at even a cantonal level without the support of a governing body. In addition, given the apparent lack of communication between different efforts, it seems more likely that a standardized Swiss German orthography will cement organically through usage.

# The Road to Standardization

Supposing, then, that Swiss German achieved a standard orthography and a place in writing, what would the consequences be? One probable consequence is the emergence of a standard spoken language through the process of *koineization* (the mixing, leveling, and simplifying of dialects to form new languages)—dialects of Swiss German more on the peripheries might find themselves accommodating to more widely spoken dialects that would have a higher representation in the wouldbe writing. The dissemination of a chosen variety of Swiss German in the most popular media would contribute to such a process, and a positive feedback loop of this sort would further marginalize these peripheral dialects. To draw on the example of Luxembourgish, ever since the language became established as the national language in 1984, linguists have noticed the gradual development of a “Standard Luxembourgish”—though this is also attributable to an increased mobility of the population.<sup>42</sup>

What kind of usage will Swiss German as a written language experience in the future? One extreme situation is that Swiss German’s status will gradually increase to the point of supplanting Standard German and occupying the media currently belonging to the domain of Standard German. Indeed, it already experiences the critical advantage of being the language of everyday communication, and it stands out also as an exceptional case of dialect as a source of pride. In 2013, popular referenda even led to a ban on Standard German instruction in the kindergartens of many parts of Germanspeaking Switzerland.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps Swiss German will go on to take a route comparable to the one taken by Luxembourgish, with the then-called “MoselFrankish dialects” becoming recognized as Luxembourg’s national language.<sup>44</sup> Ever since, the presence of Luxembourgish was felt in writing as well as in speech, alongside French and Standard German.<sup>45</sup> Even before 1984, Luxembourgish was used as a written language, and just like Swiss German, Luxembourgish exists in several varieties.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Swiss German, Luxembourg saw the 1946 adoption of the *Ofizjel Lezebuurjer Ortografi* (OLO), a standardized transcription method. However, this method was not popular due to its blatant overturning of certain elements of the Standard German



orthography (capitalization of nouns, the use of umlauts) that the people of Luxembourg were already familiar with.<sup>47</sup> A more successful effort was a dictionary, the *Luxemburger Wörterbuch*, which was published in five volumes between 1950 and 1977 and is regarded as instrumental to Luxembourgish being established as the national language.<sup>48</sup> Swiss German already has several dictionaries in the works, and unlike the proposals of the OLO, its orthography has retained a Standard German basis wherever possible.<sup>49</sup> And if the Frenchspeaking population of Luxembourg was able to accept Luxembourgish alongside French as a language of administration and the national language of their country, it is conceivable that the French-speaking *Swiss* may someday accept Swiss German as theirs, too.

## The Future of Swiss German

However, the future of Swiss German as a written language is still rather nebulous. A substantial force, namely immigration, is restraining its paper presence. Few people coming in to Swiss Germanspeaking parts of Switzerland bother to learn Swiss German.<sup>50</sup> For starters, the dearth of material written in Swiss German presents a big challenge.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, why learn Swiss German when one would have to learn Standard German anyway, in order to understand the majority of written texts, radio programs, and television broadcasts? Besides, knowing Standard German is far more useful than knowing Swiss German, since the former belongs to a larger culture. Even in Switzerland itself, Standard German, and not Swiss German, is used as a vehicular language, for it is Standard German that the French, Italian, and Romanschspeaking cantons learn. As economic opportunities in Germanspeaking parts of Switzerland prosper, immigration rates will be on the rise, thus complicating the passage of Swiss German into the written media.

Finally, in spite of all the efforts geared toward the development of a standard, a large part of the attractiveness of the written dialect stems from its lack of rules. Dialect author Pedro Lenz, for example, reports that absence of rules allows “a lot of freedom to experiment.”<sup>52</sup> But it is only the informal nature of digital communication, some advertisements, and the creative element of fiction

that have room for fluid conventions—the texts of administration and public functions require strict conformity to rules. Unless written dialect undergoes standardization, it will be unsuccessful in completely replacing Standard German. But if it does become standardized, then its characteristic flexibility will be lost.

Perhaps what is ultimately changing for the Swiss is how their language fits in with the media of communication: what was formerly a simple distinction between “spoken” and “written” is now complicated by new technologies that straddle both oral and textual forms. Though people continue to talk through spoken language over the phone, they communicate through text messages increasingly often in the form of everyday small talk, which twenty years ago was exclusively spoken. In this way, digital communication has more in common with speaking, even though it is physically more similar to writing. Furthermore, writing in Facebook statuses and in Twitter tweets is still a long shot from writing in the text of administration and even semiofficial writing: imagine how jarring it would be to see a sign erected by the sidewalk reading “don’t park here. u will b fined,” or even a note left on the kitchen counter that reads, “bring cat in cuz its supposed 2 storm l8er.” Though writing is no longer exclusive to Standard German in Germanspeaking Switzerland, Swiss German is still a long way from taking over. Perhaps the real future of a textualized Swiss German is to complicate the medial diglossia, as it is already doing, rather than to bring it to an end.

# In text citations

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- 4 Werlen, "Receptive Multilingualism in Switzerland and the case of Biel/Bienne," 147
- 5 Stefan Sonderegger, "Deutsch" (Bern: Scwabe S.A., 2006)
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- 10 Sonderegger, "Deutsch."
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- 32 Stieger, "'Laien'Verschriftlichung von Dialekten"
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- 47 *Ibid.*, 12
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- 49 Stieger, "'Laien'Verschriftlichung von Dialekten"
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