

Swiss German

For Members

# Swiss German vs Hochdeutsch: What are the key differences?

Lily Tongli-Andrews - news@thelocal.ch  
Published: 6 Dec, 2022 CET. Updated: Tue 6 Dec 2022 11:04 CET



The Swiss flag flying in Napp, Trub. Photo by [Nadine Marfurt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

**People in German-speaking Switzerland use Hochdeutsch (standard German) - but there is also a huge variety of Swiss German dialects. We spoke to experts to explore the differences between the languages.**

ADVERTISEMENT

## What is Swiss German - and what is *Hochdeutsch*?

If you live in a Swiss German speaking canton you may, or may not, be aware that you are part of a complicated language system that's called diglossia. Diglossia is a fancy linguistic term that means within a society there are distinct formal and informal languages that are utilised in different social contexts.

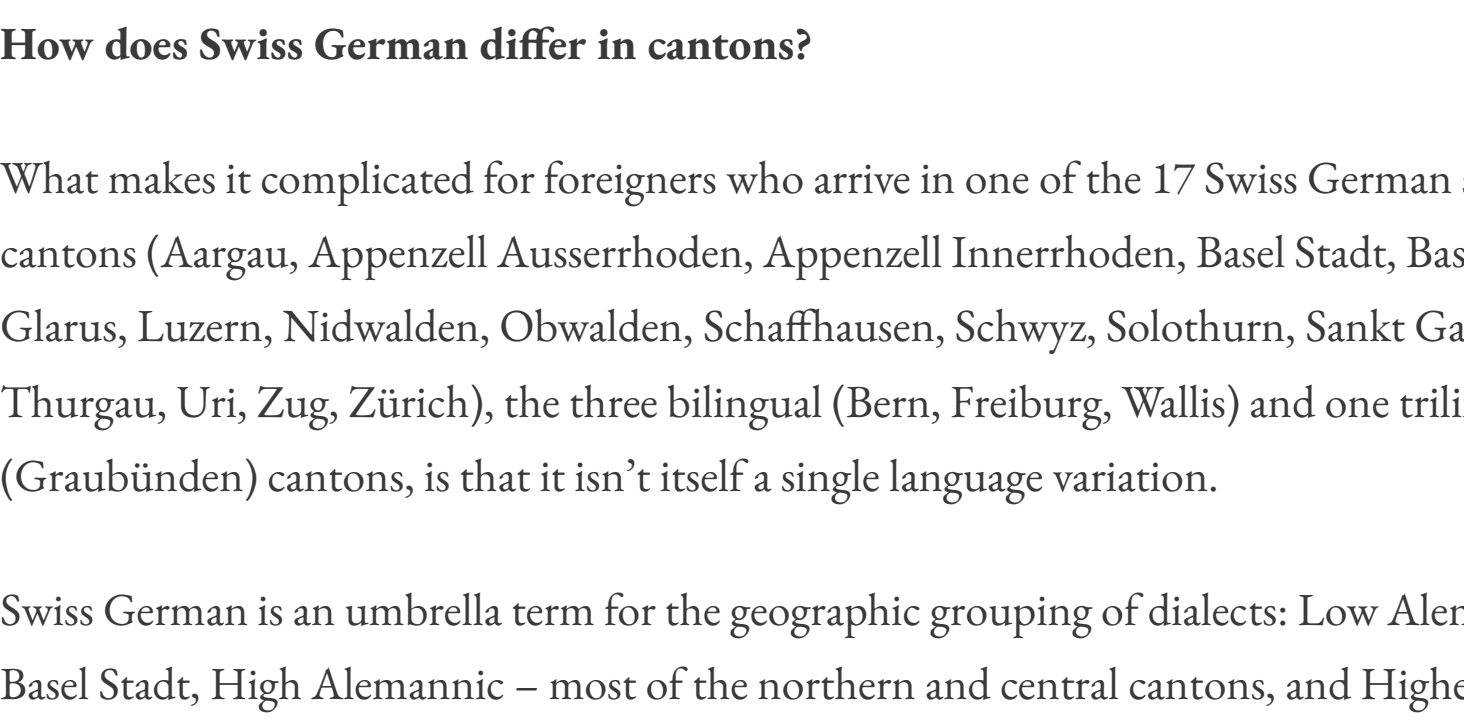
What this means in Switzerland is that *Hochdeutsch*, also known as High German, Standard German, Swiss Standard German, *Schriftdeutsch* and Written German, is most generally utilised in the workplace, education, for official documents and correspondence, most media, books, magazines, conversing with foreigners and is one of the four official languages of Switzerland.

On the other hand, the Swiss German dialects, *Schweizerdeutsch* or *Schwiizerdütsch* and its many other Swiss variations (for example: *Schwyzerdütsch*, *Schwiizertütsch*, *Schwiizertitsch* and *Mundart*), are used in other more informal social contexts. The dialects are the spoken everyday language for the majority of people in all social levels. And unlike many other countries, Swiss German dialects are an accepted and important aspect of Swiss culture.

**READ ALSO: [Nine fun Swiss German words without an English translation](#)**

Prof. Dr. Regula Schmidlin, Professor of German Linguistics at the University of Freiburg, told The Local: "Unlike in Northern Germany and the United Kingdom, for example, speaking in dialect is not socially stigmatised in German-speaking Switzerland. Moreover, Swiss dialects have adapted strongly to modern life and are fully functional everyday languages. In Switzerland, social stratification is not negotiated in terms of language varieties."

ADVERTISEMENT



Learning languages can be tricky in Switzerland. Photo by [lilarsy](#) on [Unplash](#)

## How does Swiss German differ in cantons?

What makes it complicated for foreigners who arrive in one of the 17 Swiss German speaking cantons (Aargau, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Appenzell Innerrhoden, Basel Stadt, Basel Land, Glarus, Luzern, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Schaffhausen, Schwyz, Solothurn, Sankt Gallen, Thurgau, Uri, Zug, Zürich), the three bilingual (Bern, Freiburg, Wallis) and one trilingual (Graubünden) cantons, is that it isn't itself a single language variation.

Swiss German is an umbrella term for the geographic grouping of dialects: Low Alemannic – Basel Stadt, High Alemannic – most of the northern and central cantons, and Highest Alemannic dialects – mostly alpine southern cantons, along with an Austro-Bavarian dialect in Samnaun that began spreading through Switzerland around 700 years ago.

**READ ALSO: [Five Swiss German phrases to make you sound like a local](#)**

In an effort to preserve the dialects, the [Swiss Idiotikon](#), now an online national dictionary, initiated a collection of Swiss German words in dialect in 1862 for national political reasons. The dictionary now has more than 135,000 entries in sixteen published volumes.

Ludwig Tobler from the Philological Society wrote in 1879: "For Switzerland the first objective was to collect materials for a new and comprehensive Idiotikon, and combine the scattered forces." The seventeenth collection is in progress.

ADVERTISEMENT

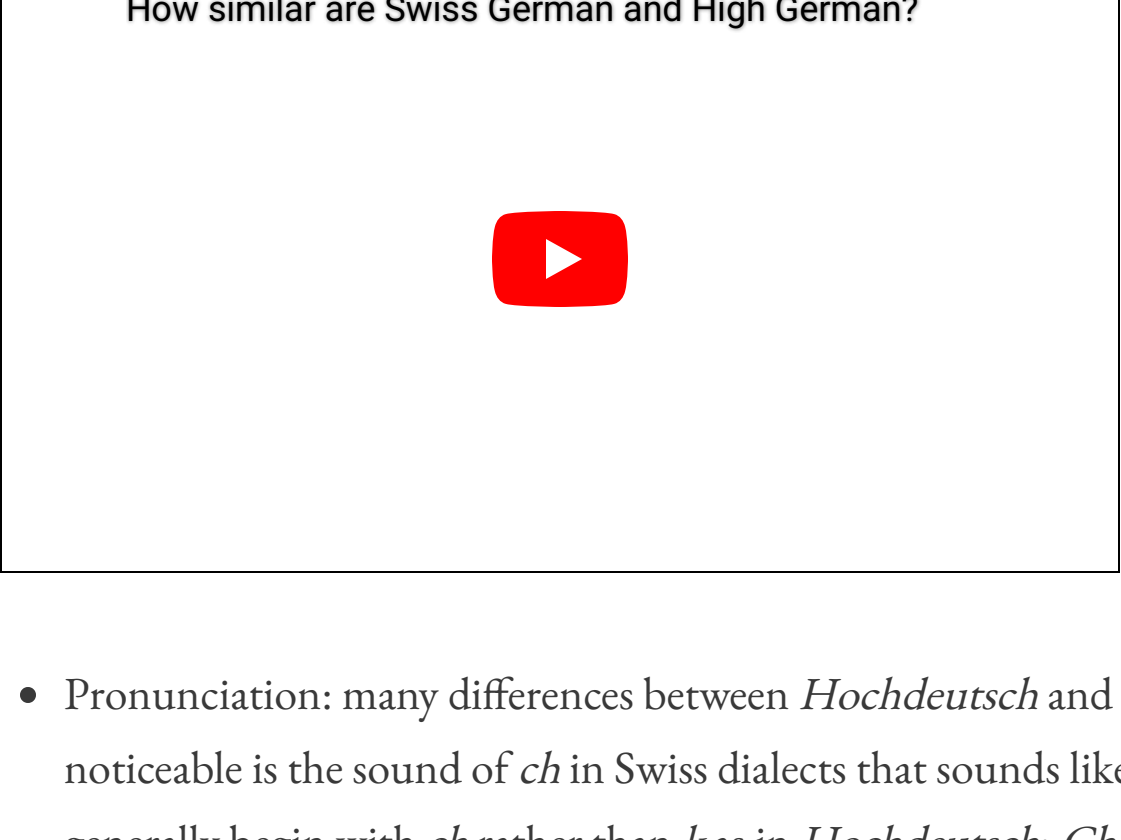
## What are the practical differences between Swiss German and Standard German?

For people leaving in one of the afore-mentioned German speaking cantons, the differences between the vocabulary, pronunciation and syntax of Swiss German dialects and *Hochdeutsch* is noticeable. Even people from Germany can have difficulties understanding some of the Swiss German dialects.

Here are some key differences between *Hochdeutsch* and Swiss German that you should know:

- Orthography: Swiss German has no one standardised spelling of dialects, therefore, there isn't a standard written form
- There is no genitive case in Swiss German
- There is no past tense of verbs in Swiss German, only forms with the past participle in the perfect tense are used
- The diminutive suffix *li* is used for nouns and adjectives and indicates smallness. *Hochdeutsch* uses *-chen* or *-lein*. Examples: *Chätzli* – *Kätzchen* – kitten; *Tischli* – *kleiner Tisch* – small table
- *Hochdeutsch* uses the eszett symbol ß whereas Swiss German and Swiss Standard German use double ss
- Swiss German infinitive verbs don't have the n at the end: *laufê* – *laufen* – to run
- Swiss German has many double vowels: *gaa* – *gehen* – to go; *Huus* – *Haus* – house; *Lüüt* – *Leute* – people
- There are no diphthongs (double vowel sounds) in Swiss German and if there are two vowels each vowel is pronounced
- Many French words are used, for example: *merci* – *danke* – thank you; *Billet* – *Karte* – ticket; *Velo* – *Fahrrad* – bike; *Portmonee* – *Geldbeutel* – purse/wallet; *Coiffeur* – *Friseur* – hairdresser
- Italian words have also been integrated into the dialects: *ciao* – *auf Wiedersehen* – goodbye
- Swiss German has adopted more English words than *Hochdeutsch*: Computer, Handy, Penalty, Shooting, Mobbing and Rowdy are some

The below video by *Easy German* displays some of the differences of Swiss German and *Hochdeutsch*



- Pronunciation: many differences between *Hochdeutsch* and dialects. One of the most noticeable is the sound of *ch* in Swiss dialects that sounds like the Scottish *ch*. Words generally begin with *ch* rather than *k* as in *Hochdeutsch*: *Chind* – *Kind* – child
- The many different variations of words. For example, from the *Kleiner Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz*, the word kiss, *Kuss* in *Hochdeutsch*, is spoken in varying dialects as: *Kuss*, *Chuss*, *Chüssli*, *Schmatz*, *Trüütli*, *Schmutz*, *Schmütz(e)li*, *Müntschli*, *Müntsi*, *Muntschi*, *Muntsi*, *Bussi*, *Knutsch*, *Muts*, *Mütsi*, *Schmuus(i)*
- Swiss German is a phonological language learnt by immersion with no standard written language
- The Swiss dialects are written in certain social circumstances: texting between friends, subtitles on movies. However, as there is no standardised phonology, spelling can vary from person to person, canton to canton

ADVERTISEMENT

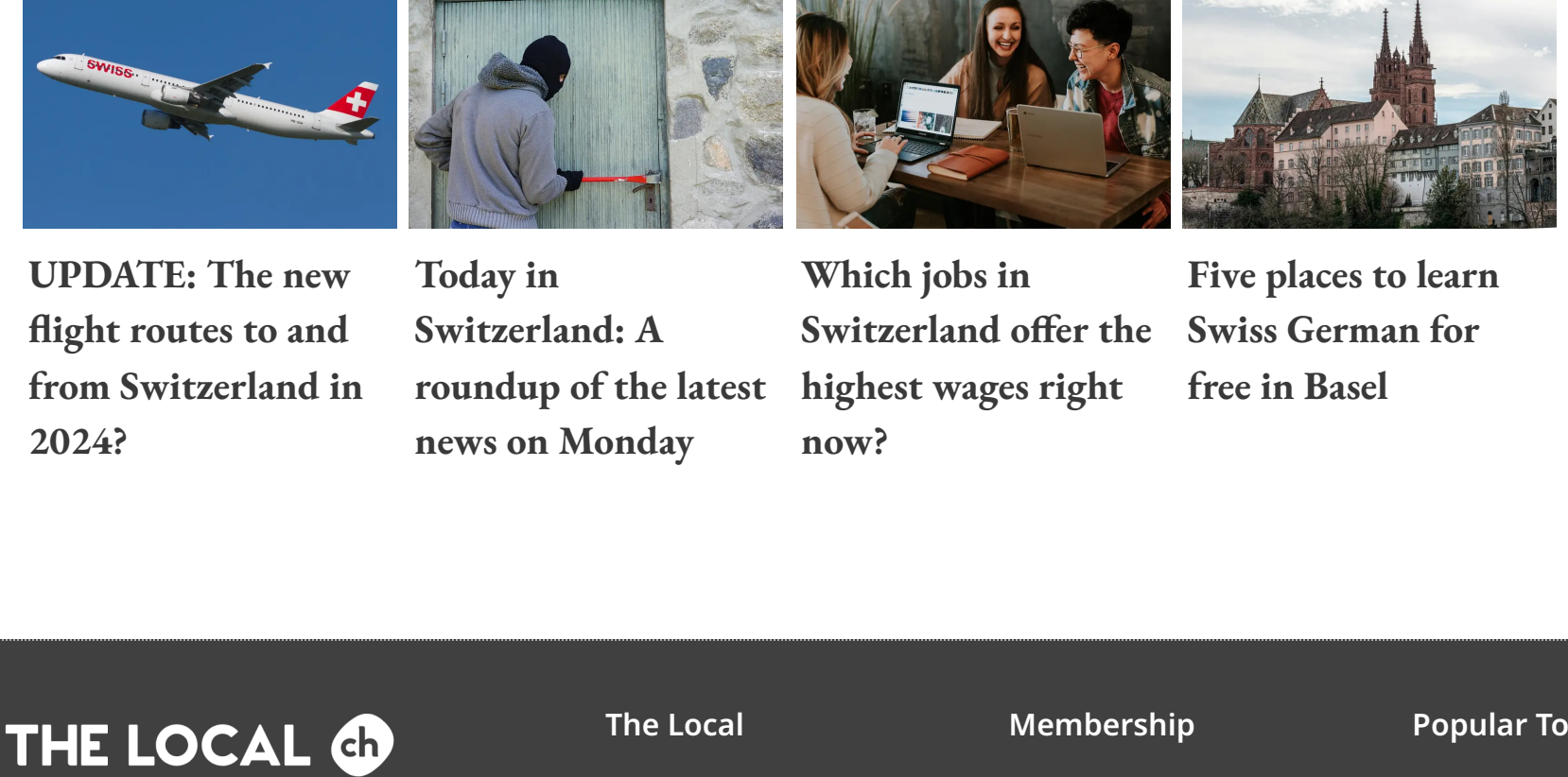
You may find you begin to have a level of understanding of the dialect spoken in the canton you live, and then when you visit another canton find it difficult to understand a word they say. But don't despair, even the Swiss themselves can find the dialects difficult to understand, most notably those from Wallis and Graubünden.

Want to know more? Check out this link [here](#) for an archival collection of spoken dialects throughout Switzerland.

**MORE** [#SWISS GERMAN](#) [#GERMAN LANGUAGE](#)

**COMMENTS** [SHOW](#)

SEE ALSO



**UPDATE: The new flight routes to and from Switzerland in 2024?** **Today in Switzerland: A roundup of the latest news on Monday** **Which jobs in Switzerland offer the highest wages right now?** **Five places to learn Swiss German for free in Basel**

**THE LOCAL**  The Local Europe AB  
Västmannagatan 43  
113 25 Stockholm  
Sweden

[Download on the App Store](#) [GET IT ON Google Play](#)

**The Local**  
About us  
Contact us  
Find jobs in Switzerland  
Find a rental in Switzerland  
Post a job ad  
Advertise with us

**Membership**  
Login  
Become a member  
Newsletters  
Help Centre  
Gift Vouchers  
Educational access  
Corporate access

**Popular Topics**  
Latest News  
Zürich  
Geneva  
Basel  
Lausanne  
Switzerland explained  
Living in Switzerland

**Get daily news straight in your inbox**  
By signing up you agree to our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). We will use your email address to send you newsletters as well as information and offers related to your account.