

# Speechless in Switzerland

Avoiding situations requiring communication with the natives – in the local language – is a survival technique many expats utilise. Find out how Chantal goes from tongue-tied in Switzerland to virtual fluency abroad.



By Chantal Panozzo | “Really, Migros is the best place to buy cheddar cheese because it’s pre-packaged and therefore you don’t have to talk to anyone,” I say to a group of expat friends, stressing the word *talk* as if having to order 300 grams of cheese at a counter would really be the downfall of my day.

“Good to know, but I order my groceries via the Internet to avoid these very things,” replies my friend Jenny, clearly also a connoisseur of the anti-talk survival method.

## Art of avoidance

Lately I’d become somewhat obsessed with avoiding situations requiring communication. Secretly, I was hoping that Swiss grocery stores like Migros would catch up to American stores like Kroger and begin installing automatic check-outs so I could avoid having my *Grièzis* scrutinised, not to mention having to answer questions about *Cumulus* (purchase point) cards.

However, my recent avoidance of everything German language didn’t make much sense. After all, one of the reasons I came to Switzerland was to learn German.

I loved learning new languages, or so I thought. Heck, in high school I was

named ‘French Student of the Year’, for Pete’s sake. And now, look at me. After taking two years of German lessons, I’ve suddenly become tongue-tied and mute, far from the loquacious linguist I imagined myself becoming after living among such world-class wordsmiths.

It’s not that I haven’t learned any German. It’s just that I’ve learned enough to know that German is so complicated that anything I attempt to say will most likely end up in the wrong case or the wrong declension. And since I’m the sensitive type and don’t want to offend say, a couch, by calling it a ‘he’ when it’s actually a ‘she’, I usually stop before anything even remotely offensive can come out – with the result being a big fat silence.

Some people in my German class who still haven’t gotten the hang of conjugating the verb ‘to have’ are actually more fortunate, because they still talk like they’re fluent.

“Me has party because my birthday am 30 today,” babbles the could-care-less verb conjugator. “Comes you can tonight? When has you all birthday?”

## A case of the wrong ‘case’

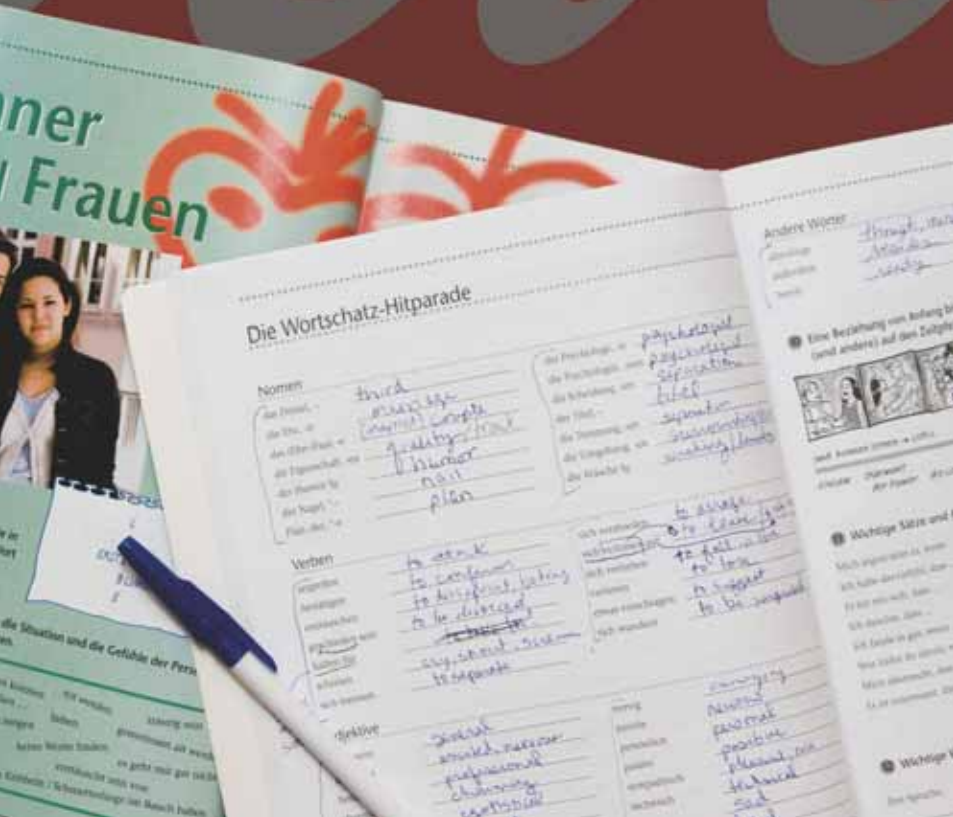
I want to reply, but I can’t get the sen-

tence out of my overly critical mind and into the air. Because for me, sadly, there’s no turning back to those pre-dative days when life was a simple collection of the articles *der*, *die* and *das*. Now, in these post-dative days, the article possibilities seem to be endless collections of *den*, *dem* and *des*, oh my.

Now, I know expats who don’t even try to learn another language while they’re living in Switzerland, and just do English all the way. But now that I’ve gotten so far with German, I can’t make myself go back to doing that either. It just doesn’t seem right to let two years of expensive German lessons waste away.

## Reflexes gone wild

So instead, I do the much nobler thing of saying nothing, or I attempt to speak German and brace myself for the sure-to-come English retorts, reminding me that my accent will always stand in the way of getting any further in my German progress than about a sentence. I don’t know if these English-as-a-third-or-fourth-language people are trying to be nice, or showing off to put me in my place. Either way, it really doesn’t do much for confidence building, not to mention motivation.



**Switzerland through the ages**

**1971:** Klaus Schwab founds the World Economic Forum (WEF), which has met every year since, in Davos. This year, heads of state, government officials, business leaders, non-governmental organisations and trade unions will gather in search of the best ways to 'shape the post-crisis world'. For more, see page 16.

**Expat encyclopaedia**

**Bad English:** Since coming to Switzerland, my English has gotten worse and worse. So far, I've found three reasons for this:

1. When explaining anything in English to non-native speakers, I tend to simplify my speech. The result is that I sound something like a non-native speaker myself: "It coming. I go to market. You too?"
2. I hear and see bad translations of German into English and somehow my brain seems to soak them up like a sponge. For example, my speech patterns now tend to follow what I see in the emails I get at work, like: "Hello, together" or, "No, she cannot just translate this. Her German is yet too young."
3. Word order. The German word order is often opposite from English. While English speakers would say, "They will get a translator now," German speakers say, "Now get they a translator."

**Germany:** When crossing the border from Switzerland into Germany, you would think I'd breathe a sigh of relief since finally, the language I've been studying will actually be spoken to me. But instead, I stress out and really have to concentrate hard not to greet people with *Grüezi*, not to mention thanking them with *merci*. It's quite an exhausting process.

**Scary:** Swiss kids and why they're scarier than the adults. I've been pondering this question for a while, and here are my conclusions:

1. They can speak Swiss German and I can't.
2. They can ski down an Alp like they were born to, while I can barely conquer the bunny slope.
3. The very young ones don't speak English so there's no way to communicate with them, thus my fear that I'll be helpless if I find myself in a situation requiring communication.

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So while I remain tongue-tied in Switzerland, I travel to France and can't stop speaking German.

"Would you like mineral water with that red wine?" the waiter asks me in French.

And I'm so excited about my comprehension (or maybe it's just the relief that the waiter's finally decided that I really am worthy of placing an order) that I can't help but sputter out an enthusiastic "Ja, bitte" before realising it should have been an "Oui, merci".

In fact, my German's been used in pretty much every place in Europe that it has no place. I've spoken German to bus drivers in Provence. I've spoken German to waiters in Prague. And through all of this, I've realised how useless my German really is if I can't even speak it to those it was meant for.

**Victory**

But then I went to Greece for vacation, where I had no hope of communicating in anything but English. As I sat innocently on a park bench in Athens enjoying 70-degree temperatures (21°C) in early March, two women approached, babbling at me in Greek and gesturing wildly

at images of Jesus. I stared back, speechless.

Obviously seeing through my silence, they switched to English.

"We is Jehovah's Witnesses and we to spread the word. Do you believe? You must believe. We helping you believe. We helping now!"

I was about to answer back in English, but then I had a better idea. "I don't speak English so this is too complicated," I said in German, trying my best to look confused as I hid the English-language magazine I was reading.

"Oh, oh ... you from, from the Germany," one said, rolling each 'r' in 'from'.

"Deutschland," the other Witness corrected.

"We has only 'the Word' in Greek or English," the other woman said, looking at her partner and pamphlets in defeat. She shrugged, and they moved on.

As I watched them go, peddling Jesus to the next unsuspecting soul, I thought, 'forget the Olympics, speaking German is all the victory I need in Athens'. Then I picked up my magazine, resumed my sunbath, and couldn't help but smile at the fact that my German was actually good for something after all.