

In Swiss German, two main types of r-sounds are distinguished: the front, apical /r/ and the back, uvular /r/. Historically, the *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* (SDS) documented the apical /r/ as dominant across most of German-speaking Switzerland. However, the uvular /r/, probably influenced by French, was also present in certain urban centers, such as Bern, Fribourg, Zurich, and Brig. Notably, Basel stood out as a region where the uvular /r/ was the sole variant. We hypothesized that the regional distribution of /r/ articulation has shifted over time. This study investigates the articulation of /r/ in word-initial position, specifically in the word *Rad* ('wheel'), across German-speaking Switzerland as part of the Project *Dialäktatlas*. Data from 1,016 speakers - 508 aged 60+ and 508 aged 18-35 - originating from 127 localities were analyzed auditorily. By comparing three time points (SDS data, the older cohort, and the younger cohort), we observed a significant spread of the uvular /r/, particularly in northeastern Switzerland (for maps, see here: https://www.dialektatlas.ch/pdfs/Dialäktatlas_2025_214-215_Lautung_Konsonanten_Rad.pdf). In this region, the uvular /r/ is now the dominant variant in the cantons of Schaffhausen and Thurgau, and its influence continues to extend southward into St. Gallen and Appenzell. Furthermore, the uvular /r/ is present in the Senseland region. In Basel, this variant has not only remained stable but has also expanded into suburban areas surrounding the city. These findings suggest a noteworthy geographical shift in the distribution of /r/ articulation. The spread of the uvular /r/ in northeastern Switzerland is likely driven by linguistic contact with Baden-Württemberg in Germany, where the uvular /r/ is the most frequent variant. Proximity to this German region appears to have facilitated cross-border linguistic influence, resulting in its adoption in areas near the border. This diffusion is somewhat surprising, given that prior research has demonstrated that the uvular /r/ can be perceived negatively. Despite this, it has gained ground in certain regions, potentially due to increased exposure and linguistic convergence. In conclusion, our analysis reveals an evolution in the articulation of /r/ in Swiss German over time. While the apical /r/ historically dominated much of German-speaking Switzerland, the uvular /r/ has become increasingly widespread, particularly in northeastern regions. The findings underscore the influence of cross-border contact in shaping phonetic trends. In the talk, we will further explore the sociolinguistic factors contributing to this change, such as speaker attitudes or migration patterns.

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Title

Front or Back? The Changing Landscape of Swiss German R-Sounds