

A city at the edge of the French-speaking world

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Basel lies at the north-western corner of German-speaking Switzerland, where the Rhine turns north and three states meet. The French language border runs only a few kilometres to the west and south-west of the city. Beyond the Sundgau hills, the Belfort Gap opens towards Burgundy and the interior of France, while the Jura chain, whose northern foothills reach the outskirts of the city, has been French-speaking since the early Middle Ages in its western and central parts. The canton of Jura, the Bernese Jura and the town of Delémont lie within an hour by train. A person standing on the Pfalz terrace behind the Minster can therefore see, on a clear day, the hills of three linguistic and political spaces: the Black Forest to the north-east, the Vosges to the north-west and the Jura to the south.¹

This position has never made Basel a bilingual city in the sense in which Biel/Bienne or Fribourg are bilingual. German, in its written standard form and in the local dialect, has always been the language of the government, the guilds and the church in Basel. The previous chapter traced this history of German, Swiss German and Baseldytsch in detail.² French has nevertheless been present at every period in a particular social register: as the language of trade with France and Lyon, of diplomacy, of refugee communities and of the educated elite. Its presence was always tied to function and social position. A merchant needed it for his correspondence with Lyon, a young patrician needed it to be received in the salons of Geneva or Paris. For a refugee from Lorraine or the Dauphiné, it was simply the mother tongue he brought with him.

1 Notes

1. On the geography of the language border in north-western Switzerland and the Upper Rhine, see the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (HLS), articles "Sprachgrenzen" and "Basel (Kanton)". To be verified. ↩

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2. See Part J, chapter I of this book. ↩

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