

A fifth language in a quadrilingual country

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Switzerland describes itself as a country with four national languages, German, French, Italian and Romansh. Its Federal Constitution distributes the use of these languages carefully between the Confederation and the cantons. English appears nowhere in this constitutional order. It has nonetheless become what the linguists Richard J. Watts and Heather Murray called, in the title of a collection published in 2001, a possible "fifth national language" in the practical sense: a language that Swiss residents of different linguistic regions use with one another and with the world when no national language is shared.¹

The statistical picture supports this description in broad terms. The language surveys of the Federal Statistical Office show that English is the language most frequently used at work after the main national language of each region, and that its use is particularly widespread among employees with tertiary education and in the large cities. In Basel-Stadt, the share of residents who report English as one of their main languages is among the highest in the country, which reflects the presence of the international organisations, the life sciences groups and the university. The exact figures change from survey to survey and depend on whether respondents may indicate several languages.²

For a city whose population includes more than a third of foreign nationals, the use of English is a practical necessity. A research group at a pharmaceutical company may bring together scientists from fifteen countries, while a department of the BIS may employ economists from thirty. Such teams cannot work in Baseldytsch and rarely share French or standard German at a level sufficient for technical discussion. English has therefore become the default language of these teams because it is the second language that most of their members learned at school and used during their studies. This functional explanation, which linguists describe with the term *English as a lingua franca*, distinguishes the situation of Basel

from that of an English-speaking country: the majority of those who speak English in the city do so as non-native speakers.³

Basel has also been a field of systematic research on this phenomenon. The linguist Georges Lüdi and his colleagues at the University of Basel studied the language practices of multilingual companies in Switzerland within a European research project on the dynamics of language in the workplace. Their work showed that companies which declare English to be their corporate language do not in fact work only in English. Employees switch between English, German, French and other languages according to the situation, the interlocutor and the subject. They often use a mixture of languages within a single meeting. The official corporate language describes the language of documents, of formal reporting and of communication with headquarters, while the spoken practice remains plurilingual.⁴

1 Notes

1. Richard J. Watts and Heather Murray (eds.), *Die fünfte Landessprache? Englisch in der Schweiz*, Zurich 2001. The title is posed as a question, and the contributors take different positions on the extent of the phenomenon. To be verified. ↩
2. Federal Statistical Office, *Language, religion and culture survey* (Erhebung zur Sprache, Religion und Kultur), published in several waves since 2014, and the structural survey of the federal population census. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the share of foreign nationals in the resident population of Basel-Stadt, see the statistical yearbook of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt. On the concept of English as a lingua franca, see Barbara Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*, Oxford 2011, and Jennifer Jenkins, *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*, Oxford 2007. Figures to be verified. ↩
4. See the publications of Georges Lüdi and others on the European research project DYLAN (Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity), funded under the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Union between about 2006 and 2011, including case studies of Swiss multinational companies. To be verified. ↩

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