

Baseldytsch: a Low Alemannic city dialect

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The Swiss German dialects belong to the Alemannic group of Upper German dialects, which extends from Alsace and Baden-Württemberg across German-speaking Switzerland to Vorarlberg in Austria. Dialectologists divide Alemannic into Swabian, Low Alemannic, High Alemannic and Highest Alemannic. Most Swiss German dialects belong to High Alemannic, while the dialects of the high Alpine valleys of the Valais and of the Bernese Oberland belong to Highest Alemannic.¹ The dialect of the city of Basel occupies an exceptional position in this classification, because it is usually counted among the Low Alemannic dialects, like the dialects of Alsace and of southern Baden.

The decisive criterion is the treatment of the old Germanic *k* at the beginning of a word. In most Swiss German dialects, this sound has become a fricative, so that the word for child is *Chind* and the word for kitchen is *Chuchi*. In the dialect of the city of Basel, the initial *k* has remained a plosive, usually aspirated or affricated, so that the people of Basel say *Kind* and *Kuchi*, with a pronunciation that some descriptions render as *Khind* or *Kchind*.² The Swiss of other cantons immediately recognise this feature, which makes the Basel speaker sound slightly northern, almost German, in the ears of a Zurich or Bernese listener. The surrounding rural dialects of Basel-Landschaft, by contrast, mostly share the fricative *ch* of the rest of the country, so that the language boundary runs between the city and its own hinterland.

A second characteristic of Baseldytsch is its uvular *r*, which is pronounced at the back of the mouth as in French and in Standard German of the north, whereas most Swiss German dialects use a rolled or tapped *r* at the tip of the tongue. The origin of the uvular *r* in Basel is disputed. Some scholars point to the influence of French as the language of the eighteenth-century elites, while others see it as part of a wider spread of the uvular *r* through the cities of western Europe.³ Further features include the lenition of many

consonants, which the Basel spelling reflects in the doubled *gg* of words such as *Schnitzelbangg*, and a vocabulary that includes many loanwords from French and from the Alsatian and Baden neighbourhood.

The name of the dialect itself illustrates its sound system. The people of Basel call it *Baseldytsch*, with the long *y* that represents the old long *i* of Middle High German *tiutsch*, which the Alemannic dialects did not diphthongise. Standard German *Deutsch*, by contrast, carries the diphthong that developed in the Early New High German period. The same vowel appears in words such as *Wy* for wine and *Zyt* for time, which the Basel spelling writes with *y* following a convention that goes back to the scholarly orthography of Swiss German dialects.⁴ For the outsider, the written form of the dialect is often more difficult than its spoken form, because conventions vary between authors and because most texts in dialect are written for readers who already know how the words should sound.

The standard reference works on the dialect were written by Rudolf Suter, a Basel philologist who published a *Baseldeutsch-Grammatik* in 1976 and a *Baseldeutsch-Wörterbuch* in 1984, both of which went through several editions.⁵ Suter described the dialect of the old city as it was spoken by long-established Basel families in the second half of the twentieth century. His works have exerted a normative influence on the writers of dialect verse for the Fasnacht. The great national dictionary of Swiss German, the *Schweizerisches Idiotikon*, whose publication began in 1881 and continues to this day, also records the vocabulary of Basel, while the *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* documents its sounds and forms in comparison with the rest of the country.⁶

Baseldytsch has always been exposed to influences from outside. Its position on the Rhine, at the meeting point of three countries, has brought into the city merchants, refugees, workers and students from the Upper Rhine region and far beyond. The dialects of Alsace and southern Baden, which are close relatives of Baseldytsch, shaped its development for centuries, since Basel drew much of its population from this region before the borders hardened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Part H showed, the Dreiland remains closely integrated economically, although the common Alemannic dialect has receded on the French side and is retreating on the German side as well.⁷ The city dialect is thus the last urban form of a regional language that once united the Upper Rhine across borders, which gives it a symbolic weight beyond its number of speakers.

Like other city dialects, Baseldytsch has changed considerably in the past half century. Internal migration from other Swiss cantons, immigration

from abroad and the influence of the media have brought into the city forms from the dialects of Zurich, Bern and Basel-Landschaft. Younger speakers increasingly use the fricative *ch* of the surrounding dialects in some words, while their vocabulary draws on a general Swiss German shared by young people throughout the country.⁸ Linguists debate whether this development amounts to the decline of Baseldytsch or to its transformation into a regional variety with new features. In everyday life, the city still sounds distinctly different from Zurich. Speakers from other cantons continue to identify a Basel speaker within a few words.

1 Notes

1. On the classification of the Alemannic dialects, see Peter Wiesinger, "Die Einteilung der deutschen Dialekte", in Besch et al. (eds.), *Dialektologie*, Berlin/New York 1983; Helen Christen et al., *Kleiner Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz*, Frauenfeld 2010. To be verified. ↩
2. On the preservation of initial *k* in the Basel city dialect, in contrast to the fricative *ch* of most Swiss German dialects, see Rudolf Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Grammatik*, 3rd ed., Basel 1992; *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* (SDS), vol. II (maps on *k*-). The precise phonetic realisation (aspirated plosive or affricate) is described differently in the literature. To be verified. ↩
3. On the uvular *r* in the Basel city dialect and the theories of its origin, see Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Grammatik*, 1992; Christen et al., *Kleiner Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz*, 2010; on the spread of the uvular *r* in European cities, see the literature on areal phonology. To be verified. ↩
4. On the Swiss German dialect orthography (Dieth-Schreibung) and the use of *y* for long *i*, see Eugen Dieth, *Schwyzertütschi Dialäktschrift*, Zurich 1938 (2nd ed. by Christian Schmid-Cadalbert, Aarau 1986); Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed., Basel 1995. To be verified. ↩
5. Rudolf Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Grammatik*, Basel 1976 (3rd ed. 1992); Rudolf Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Wörterbuch*, Basel 1984 (3rd ed. 1995), both published by Christoph Merian Verlag within the series *Grammatiken und Wörterbücher des Schweizerdeutschen in allgemeinverständlicher Darstellung*. To be verified. ↩
6. *Schweizerisches Idiotikon. Wörterbuch der schweizerdeutschen Sprache*, Frauenfeld/Basel 1881 ff. (online at idiotikon.ch); Rudolf Hotzenköcherle et al. (eds.), *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz*, 8 vols., Bern/Basel 1962–1997. To be verified. ↩

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7. On the Alemannic dialect continuum of the Upper Rhine (Basel, Alsace, southern Baden) and its decline in Alsace and Baden, see Chapter II of this part and Part H, Chapter II; on the dialects of southern Baden, see the Südwestdeutscher Sprachatlas (SSA), 1989 ff. To be verified. ↩
8. On the levelling of Swiss German dialects and the convergence of urban dialects, see Helen Christen, *Dialekt im Alltag*, Tübingen 1998; Adrian Leemann et al., studies based on the "Dialäkt Äpp" data on dialect change in German-speaking Switzerland (e.g. *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, 2014 ff.). To be verified. ↩

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