

## English as the Working Language of Pharma and the BIS — overview and summary

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A visitor who walks from the railway station of Basel to the round tower of the Bank for International Settlements, continues to the Novartis Campus on the Rhine and ends the day at the Biozentrum of the university will hear German, Baseldytsch and French along the way. In the meeting rooms, laboratories and trading rooms behind the facades, however, the language of the working day is very often English. Central bankers from Brazil and Japan discuss capital buffers in English at the BIS. Chemists from India and Poland write their laboratory reports in English for Roche, while doctoral students from China and Italy defend their theses in English at the Biozentrum. The first two chapters of this Part described the German-speaking core of Basel and its French-speaking neighbour across the border. This chapter turns to the third language of the city, which holds no official status in the canton and is spoken as a mother tongue by only a small minority of its residents, yet which carries much of the economic weight that makes Basel an international centre.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter examines how English became the working language of the international organisations and the life sciences groups of Basel, how it spread into the university, the schools and the everyday life of an expatriate community, and how Swiss law has gradually opened itself to proceedings and documents in English. It begins with the legal frame of language in Switzerland and with the Bank for International Settlements, which has used English as its principal working language for decades. It then turns to Roche and Novartis, to the regulatory and scientific language of the pharmaceutical industry and to the academic life of the university. The second half of the chapter looks at the courts, at arbitration, at financial regulation and company law, at the conceptual difficulties that arise when English legal terms meet Swiss civil law, and at the political debate about English in Swiss schools and about language and power. The detailed

questions of drafting contracts in several languages are left to the following chapter.

## 1 Notes

1. See chapters I and II of this Part. On the absence of any official status for English at federal or cantonal level, see Art. 4 and Art. 70 of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999 (SR 101) and § 76 of the Constitution of the Canton of Basel-Stadt of 23 March 2005, which declares German the official language of the canton. To be verified. ↩

## 2 Conclusion

English has become the working language of the institutions that give Basel its international weight: the Bank for International Settlements and the committees it hosts, the pharmaceutical groups Roche and Novartis, the biotechnology companies of the region, the research institutes and large parts of the university. It has no official status in the canton or the Confederation, yet Swiss law has opened itself step by step to its use, from the Federal Patent Court and the revised Private International Law Act to the 2025 revision of the Civil Procedure Code and the prospectus rules of the Financial Services Act. Statutory documents, official proceedings and the law itself remain in the national languages, which forces lawyers, regulators and companies to move constantly between English and German or French.

This movement between languages involves the meeting of common-law concepts and Swiss civil law, of international standards and national transposition. The following chapter turns to the practical consequences of this encounter in the drafting of contracts in several languages.

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