

English in the pharmaceutical groups

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The two large pharmaceutical groups of Basel both work in English at the level of their global management, although they reached this position along different paths. Roche, founded in 1896 by Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche, grew from a Basel family business into a global group with operations in more than a hundred countries. As Part G described, its acquisitions of Syntex in 1994 and of Genentech, in which it held a majority from 1990 and which it acquired fully in 2009, brought large American research organisations into the group. English became the language of global research, development and management. The group's corporate communication and annual reports are published in English and German. When exactly the group formally adopted English as its corporate language is difficult to fix, since the transition appears to have taken place gradually during the 1980s and 1990s.¹

Novartis was born in December 1996 from the merger of Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz, which was at the time one of the largest corporate mergers in history. The new group chose a name derived from Latin, *novae artes*, that belonged to neither of the predecessor companies and could be pronounced in any language. According to accounts of the merger, English was adopted as the corporate language of the new group from its creation, which helped to overcome the separate cultures of the two predecessors and to integrate the American, British and other subsidiaries. The group's annual reports, its internal communications and its scientific work have since appeared in English, with German versions of statutory documents for the general meeting.²

The decision to make English the corporate language has practical consequences that reach deep into the organisation. Global management meetings, board materials, internal policies, intranet pages and performance reviews are written in English. Job advertisements for positions in Basel are mostly published in English. Many positions

require no knowledge of German at all. The Novartis Campus in the St. Johann quarter, whose transformation from an industrial site into a campus of buildings by internationally known architects began in the early 2000s, became a visible symbol of a group that sees itself as global in outlook. The Roche towers on the Grenzacherstrasse play a similar role for the other group.³

The use of English as corporate language does not remove German from the life of the groups in Basel. Both companies remain Swiss stock corporations with their registered offices in Basel. Their articles of association, the invitations to the general meeting and the minutes of the general meeting are drawn up in German as required by Swiss company law and by the practice of the commercial register. Employment contracts for staff in Switzerland are often bilingual. The works councils, the health and safety organisation and the communication with production workers in Switzerland use German. The groups therefore operate on two linguistic levels: a global English layer for management, science and finance and a local German layer for employment, statutory company law and the relationship with the authorities of the canton.⁴

Smaller life sciences companies in the region follow the same pattern. Biotechnology companies founded in Basel and Allschwil, such as the companies that emerged from the research of Actelion and later Idorsia, use English from the first day because their founders, investors and scientific staff come from many countries and because their aim is to licence or sell their products to global groups. The Switzerland Innovation Park Basel Area and the life sciences cluster in Allschwil present themselves in English to attract investors and researchers from abroad. In these companies, English is simply the language of the business from the outset.⁵

1 Notes

1. See Part G, chapter I of this book. On the history of Roche, see Hans Conrad Peyer, *Roche: Geschichte eines Unternehmens 1896–1996*, Basel 1996, and the company's own historical publications. The date of the formal adoption of English as corporate language is to be verified. ↩
2. On the merger of Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz and the creation of Novartis in 1996, see Part G, chapter I of this book. On the choice of the name and of English as corporate language, see the company's historical publications and contemporary press reports. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Novartis Campus and the Roche towers (Building 1, completed 2015, and Building 2, completed 2022), see Part G of this book. On

recruitment practices, see the career pages of both groups. Dates to be verified. ↩

4. On the language of the articles of association and of the commercial register filings, see the section on company law later in this chapter and Art. 20 et seq. of the Commercial Register Ordinance (HRegV, SR 221.411). On the language of employment relations, see the collective labour agreements in the Basel chemical and pharmaceutical industry. To be verified. ↩
5. On Actelion, acquired by Johnson & Johnson in 2017, and Idorsia, see Part G of this book. On the Switzerland Innovation Park Basel Area and the Allschwil cluster, see the publications of Basel Area Business & Innovation. To be verified. ↩

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