

French and the Alsatian Neighbour — overview and summary

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Anyone who walks from the Marktplatz of Basel to the French border at Saint-Louis needs well under two hours, and a tram covers the distance in about twenty minutes. On the other side of the boundary stone the street signs, the bakeries and the newspapers change their language, although the older people in the cafés of Saint-Louis, Huningue or Hégenheim may still speak a dialect that a native of Basel understands without effort. The French language has been part of the life of Basel for centuries. Brought by refugees, merchants and diplomats, it served the patrician families as the idiom of polite society. Today it remains one of the four national languages of the Confederation, a compulsory school subject and an everyday working language in the pharmaceutical groups, the federal administration and the financial sector. Alsace, for its part, has been German-speaking and French-speaking in turn, depending on which state governed it. Its history explains much of the linguistic situation that a Basel employer, lawyer or civil servant encounters at the border today.

This chapter follows these two threads. It begins with the place of French in the history of Basel, from the Huguenot refugees and the silk ribbon trade with Lyon to the French culture of the eighteenth-century patriciate and the special relationship with Mulhouse. It then turns to Alsace, its changing sovereignty between 1648 and 1945 and the linguistic consequences of each change, and examines the Alsatian dialect, its kinship with Baseldytsch and its decline among younger generations, a subject that the second chapter of Part H promised to treat.¹ The second half of the chapter deals with French language policy and the new Collectivité européenne d'Alsace, with French as a Swiss national language and its role in federal institutions and finance, and with the French law that practitioners in Basel meet whenever their clients own property or leave estates in Alsace, including the remarkable enclave of German-origin law known as the *droit local alsacien-mosellan*. It closes with the trinational

dimension of the canton's external relations, which earlier chapters also promised to examine.

1 Notes

1. See Part H, chapter II of this book, where the decline of German language skills among younger Alsatians was mentioned as one factor in the structure of cross-border commuting. The present chapter takes up that promise. ↩

2 Conclusion

French has been part of Basel's history since the Huguenot refugees founded their church, the ribbon merchants corresponded with Lyon and the patrician families sent their sons to Geneva. Across the border, Alsace changed sovereignty five times between 1648 and 1945, with each change leaving its mark on the language of the region. The Alsatian dialect, closely related to Baseldytsch, has lost much of its hold on younger generations, which weakens the bridge to German and shapes the cross-border labour market. Within Switzerland, French remains a national language with a firm place in federal institutions, in finance and in the schools of Basel. For legal practitioners, the neighbourhood brings French notarial practice, the *réserve héréditaire*, the SCI and the unique *droit local* with its German-style *Livre foncier*. The canton's external relations translate this trilingual reality into permanent institutions in Bern, Paris and Strasbourg.

In the laboratories, trading rooms and conference halls of Basel, however, the language that connects French, German and Swiss speakers is increasingly a fourth one. The next chapter examines English as the working language of the pharmaceutical groups, the BIS and the international academic life of the city.

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