

Language and the labour market

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Language is a powerful sorting device in the labour market of Basel. Job advertisements for positions with direct customer contact often require "very good German skills", sometimes adding that "Swiss German is an advantage", whereas positions in the international groups and in research are frequently advertised in English with no requirement of German at all.¹ The result is a segmented labour market. In the pharmaceutical groups and at the BIS, a highly qualified international workforce can live and work in Basel for years without speaking German beyond the needs of daily life. In local banks, insurance agencies, public administration and the trades, by contrast, German is indispensable, while a knowledge of the dialect facilitates the relationship with clients and colleagues.

Economists have measured the value of language skills on the Swiss labour market in several studies. Their results suggest that knowledge of English carries a significant wage premium in all language regions, while knowledge of a second national language pays off especially in occupations with contact across the language border.² The economic value of dialect itself is harder to measure. It lies mainly in social capital. Dialect speakers are perceived as belonging to the community and understand the informal communication of the workplace, which is why local clients trust them more readily. Employers rarely state such considerations openly, which makes them all the more effective as informal barriers.

The largest group affected by these barriers in Basel consists of Germans. Since the free movement of persons between Switzerland and the European Union took effect in 2002 and reached its full scope in 2007, the number of German residents in Switzerland has grown considerably.³ In Basel-Stadt, Germans are among the largest groups of foreign residents. Many more Germans cross the border every day as frontier workers from the districts of Lörrach and Waldshut, as Part H described.⁴ Many of these Germans speak an Alemannic dialect themselves, since southern Baden

belongs to the same dialect area as Basel, which allows them to integrate linguistically with little difficulty. Germans from the north, by contrast, often find that their Standard German, however fluent, marks them as outsiders.

The integration of Germans in German-speaking Switzerland has repeatedly given rise to public debate. Around 2007, in the years after full free movement took effect, Swiss newspapers and politicians discussed the growing number of German professionals, particularly in Zurich, where the term *Deutschenfeindlichkeit*, hostility towards Germans, circulated in the media.⁵ The debate focused on competition for qualified positions in hospitals, universities and management, on the self-assured style of communication attributed to Germans and on the perception that Germans did not make the effort to understand the dialect. Studies of German immigrants in Switzerland have since shown a more nuanced picture, in which most Germans report successful integration, while many also describe a lasting sense of being perceived as foreign because of their speech.⁶

Basel has generally been regarded as more relaxed in this respect than Zurich. Its proximity to the border, the familiarity of its population with the neighbouring Germans and the international character of its economy have made the presence of Germans less conspicuous. The dialect continuum with southern Baden also reduces the linguistic distance, since the Basel ear is used to hearing the speech of Lörrach and Weil am Rhein.⁷ Nevertheless, the political debates about immigration that culminated in the popular initiative "Against mass immigration", accepted on 9 February 2014, also left their traces in Basel, although the canton of Basel-Stadt rejected the initiative.⁸ The financial sector depends heavily on foreign specialists, which explains why its associations have consistently supported the bilateral agreements with the European Union.

1 Notes

1. On language requirements in job advertisements in Switzerland and their effects, see the studies on language skills and the labour market by the Federal Statistical Office and by the Research Centre on Multilingualism of the University and the University of Teacher Education Fribourg (Institut de plurilinguisme). Figures to be verified.
↩
2. See François Grin/Claudio Sfreddo/François Vaillancourt, *The Economics of the Multilingual Workplace*, New York/London 2010; François Grin et al., studies on the economic value of multilingualism

in Switzerland conducted under the National Research Programme 56 "Language Diversity and Linguistic Competence in Switzerland". To be verified. ↩

3. Agreement between the Swiss Confederation and the European Community and its Member States on the Free Movement of Persons of 21 June 1999 (SR 0.142.112.681), in force since 1 June 2002, with full free movement for the EU-15 since 1 June 2007. On the number of German residents in Switzerland, see the FSO population statistics (STATPOP). Figures to be verified. ↩
4. Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt, population statistics by nationality; Federal Statistical Office, statistics on cross-border commuters (Grenzgängerstatistik). On frontier workers in the Dreiland, see Part H, Chapter II. Figures to be verified. ↩
5. On the debate about German immigration and alleged hostility towards Germans in Zurich and German-speaking Switzerland around 2007–2009, see the reports in the Swiss and German press of that period and the sociological literature on German immigrants in Switzerland. To be verified. ↩
6. On the integration of German immigrants in Switzerland and their experience of language, see e.g. the studies of the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies (SFM) at the University of Neuchâtel and the sociological literature on highly qualified German migrants. To be verified. ↩
7. On attitudes towards German immigrants in Basel compared with Zurich, see the survey literature and the reports in the regional press. To be verified. ↩
8. Popular initiative "Gegen Masseneinwanderung", accepted by the people and the cantons on 9 February 2014 (new Art. 121a Federal Constitution); on the result in the canton of Basel-Stadt, which rejected the initiative, see the official results published by the Federal Chancellery. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-language-and-the-labour-market