

School policy, media and digital communication

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The school system reproduces and modifies the linguistic situation of the canton. Swiss German children learn Standard German at school as the language of reading and writing. The question of when and how intensively Standard German should be used in the classroom has been controversial for decades. Supporters of early Standard German argue that it improves the language skills of all children, in particular those whose parents speak neither dialect nor Standard German at home. Supporters of dialect fear that it will lose its place in the lives of children if the school does not cultivate it.¹ In the canton of Zurich, voters decided in 2011 that dialect should be the main language of the kindergarten, a rule that Aargau adopted in similar form in 2014. Basel-Stadt has followed a more mixed approach, in which both varieties have a place in the kindergarten.²

Foreign language teaching in Basel follows the model of the cantons along the language border. In the intercantonal project *Passepartout*, the cantons of Bern, Basel-Landschaft, Basel-Stadt, Fribourg, Solothurn and Valais introduced French as the first foreign language from the third year of primary school, followed by English from the fifth year.³ Most cantons of central and eastern Switzerland, by contrast, teach English first. The choice of French in Basel reflects both the national cohesion policy and the proximity of Alsace and French-speaking Switzerland. The didactic approach of *Passepartout*, with its textbooks *Mille feuilles* and *Clin d'œil*, nevertheless met with criticism, and several of the participating cantons, Basel-Landschaft among them, revised their approach in the years after 2018.⁴ The national debate about whether a second national language must be taught at primary level revived when several eastern cantons moved to postpone French, which led the Federal Council to consider intervention under the Languages Act.⁵

The media landscape of Basel shows the division of labour between the varieties with particular clarity. The two daily newspapers, the *Basler*

Zeitung, part of the TX Group, and the *bz Basel*, part of CH Media, are written in Standard German, as are the online publications that have appeared in recent years.⁶ Radio and television, by contrast, speak mostly dialect. The regional television station Telebasel, the private radio stations and the regional programme of Swiss public radio, SRF's *Regionaljournal Basel Baselland*, broadcast their news and discussions in dialect, with Standard German reserved for certain formats.⁷ A banker who wishes to follow the public debate in Basel must therefore read Standard German and understand spoken dialect, which in practice requires several years of residence for someone who did not grow up in the region.

Digital communication has given the dialect a new written domain. Young Swiss Germans write text messages, chat contributions and social media posts largely in dialect, using spellings that follow no fixed rules and often mix features of different regional varieties. Research on Swiss German text messages and WhatsApp chats has documented this practice in detail and shown that dialect writing has become normal in informal digital communication across all age groups.⁸ Financial institutions have adjusted their communication accordingly. Banks address their younger clients on social media in a tone close to spoken language, sometimes using dialect expressions, while contracts, statements and regulatory information remain in Standard German.

The spread of speech technology and artificial intelligence raises a further question. Systems for speech recognition and automated client service have been developed mainly for standard languages. For a long time they struggled with the variety of Swiss German dialects, which lack a standard spelling and differ considerably from region to region. Research groups in Switzerland have built corpora of Swiss German speech to close this gap, while several providers now offer recognition systems that transcribe dialect speech into Standard German text.⁹ For the banks of Basel, whose client hotlines and digital assistants must understand callers from the city as well as from the surrounding countryside, the ability of machines to understand Baseldytsch is becoming a practical matter. Part K returns to the role of artificial intelligence in the financial centre of 2035, where this question will reappear.

1 Notes

1. On the debate about Standard German and dialect in Swiss kindergartens and primary schools, see the research of the School of Education of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) and the report of the Swiss Conference of

Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) on language teaching. To be verified. ↩

2. Popular initiative "Ja zur Mundart im Kindergarten" in the canton of Zurich, accepted on 15 May 2011; similar initiative in the canton of Aargau, accepted on 18 May 2014; on the rules of Basel-Stadt for the use of dialect and Standard German in kindergarten, see the cantonal curriculum (Lehrplan 21 Basel-Stadt) and the guidelines of the Erziehungsdepartement. Status to be verified. ↩
3. On the intercantonal project Passepartout (Bern, Basel-Landschaft, Basel-Stadt, Fribourg, Solothurn, Valais) with French from the 3rd and English from the 5th year of primary school (counted without kindergarten), see the documentation of the project and the EDK. To be verified. ↩
4. On the criticism of the Passepartout textbooks Mille feuilles and Clin d'œil and the subsequent changes in Basel-Landschaft and other participating cantons, see the decisions of the cantonal parliaments and education departments. Status to be verified. ↩
5. On the renewed debate about early French teaching, the decisions of several cantons (including Zurich) to postpone French to secondary level and the Federal Council's consideration of intervention under Art. 15 para. 3 of the Languages Act in 2025, see the reports of the Federal Council and the EDK. Status to be verified. ↩
6. On the media landscape of Basel: Basler Zeitung (owned by Tamedia/TX Group since 2018), bz Basel (CH Media), online publications such as Bajour and Prime News; on the history of the Basler Zeitung and its ownership changes, see the Swiss media literature and the annual Jahrbuch Qualität der Medien (fög, University of Zurich). Status to be verified. ↩
7. On the use of dialect in Swiss regional radio and television, including Telebasel and the SRF Regionaljournal Basel Baselland, see the concession requirements of the Federal Office of Communications (OFCOM/BAKOM) and the literature on language use in Swiss broadcasting. To be verified. ↩
8. On written dialect in digital communication, see the research projects "sms4science" and "What's up, Switzerland?" (Universities of Zurich, Bern and Leipzig, led by Elisabeth Stark and Christa Dürscheid, among others); Beat Siebenhaar, "Varietätenwahl und Code-Switching in Deutschschweizer Chatkanälen", Networx 43 (2005). To be verified. ↩

9. On speech recognition for Swiss German and the development of dialect corpora (e.g. the Swiss Parliaments Corpus and the corpus STT4SG-350 published in 2023 by researchers of FHNW, ZHAW and other institutions), see the proceedings of the SwissText conferences. Status to be verified. ↩

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