

The Daig and the sociology of the dialect

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Within the city, the dialect has long been socially differentiated. The older literature distinguishes between the speech of the old patrician families, often called *Dalbe-Dytsch* after the St. Alban quarter in which many of these families lived, and the speech of the craftsmen, workers and newcomers of Kleinbasel and the industrial suburbs.¹ The patrician variety was characterised by a careful pronunciation, by a vocabulary that preserved many French loanwords and by forms of politeness that sounded old-fashioned even a generation ago. It served as a marker of belonging to the *Daig*, the network of interrelated families whose role in the history of the Basel economy Part C examined.

A sociolect of this kind fulfils functions that resemble those of the kinship network itself. It allows members of a group to recognise each other and creates a boundary that newcomers find difficult to cross. It also carries a code of what can be said and what must remain unsaid. In the patrician houses of Basel, the culture of understatement had a linguistic form: the reluctance to speak about money, the preference for indirect expressions and the avoidance of boastful vocabulary.² A banker trained in this milieu learnt the products of his house together with the language in which clients expected to be addressed, and the tact with which certain subjects had to be avoided.

The patrician sociolect has largely disappeared as a living form of speech. Its decline followed the decline of the *Daig* as a closed social formation, which Part C described: the democratisation of politics, the opening of the economy to managers from outside, intermarriage with families from other cities and countries, and the internationalisation of education. Elderly members of the old families still speak a dialect that their grandchildren regard as charmingly antiquated. Certain of its expressions survive in the vocabulary of the Fasnacht cliques and the guilds.³ The social function of language as a marker of belonging has passed to other markers:

education at certain schools and universities, membership of certain associations and the fluent command of English, which in today's financial sector signals international experience in the same way in which French once signalled the cultivation of the eighteenth-century elite.

The history of the patrician sociolect also shows that the elites of Basel have always been multilingual. In the eighteenth century, the merchants of the *Daig* corresponded in French with their partners in Lyon, Paris and Amsterdam. Many of them sent their sons to French-speaking Switzerland or to France for their education.⁴ The dialect served the intimacy of the family and the city. French was the medium of commerce and cultivated sociability, whereas Standard German served writing and scholarship. This layered multilingualism is the historical background of the present situation, in which English has largely taken over the role of French as the language of international business.

1 Notes

1. On the sociolect of the old Basel families (Dalbedytsch, after the St. Alban quarter, Dalbe) and its distinction from the speech of other social groups, see Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Grammatik*, 1992, introduction; the popular literature on Basel society. The term and its delimitation are to be verified. ↩
2. On the culture of understatement of the Basel patriciate, see Part C, Chapter II, and the literature cited there; on the connection between sociolect and social closure in urban elites, see the sociolinguistic literature following Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*, Paris 1982. To be verified. ↩
3. On the decline of the traditional patrician sociolect of Basel, see the observations in Suter, *Baseldeutsch-Wörterbuch*, 1995, and in the popular literature on Basel dialect. To be verified. ↩
4. On the use of French in the correspondence and education of Basel merchant families in the eighteenth century, see the literature on the economic history of Basel cited in Part C; on the *Welschlandjahr* as an institution of Swiss German education, see HLS, article "*Welschlandaufenthalt*". To be verified. ↩

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