

The decline of German among younger Alsatians

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The intergenerational transmission of Alsatian has declined sharply since 1945, with a further acceleration in recent decades. Census and survey data allow only approximate statements, because the French census does not ask about language and because surveys define a "speaker" in different ways. A survey commissioned by the *Office pour la langue et les cultures d'Alsace et de Moselle* (OLCA) in 2012 found that a little under half of the adult population of Alsace described themselves as good speakers of the dialect, with a much larger share among the oldest age groups and a small minority among people under thirty.¹ Earlier data from the family survey linked to the 1999 census showed a similar gradient by age, with the transmission from parents to children falling steeply among families formed after the 1960s.² The situation in the Haut-Rhin, the department closest to Basel, roughly follows the Alsatian average, although the dialect has held up somewhat better in rural areas of the Sundgau than in Mulhouse or Saint-Louis.³

The decline of the dialect matters for Basel because the dialect was for a long time the bridge to German. An Alsatian who grew up speaking dialect at home could learn standard German with relative ease and could follow conversations in Baseldytsch from the first day at work in a Basel factory. A young Alsatian who has spoken only French since childhood must learn German as a foreign language, often from school lessons that leave a modest command of the language. Part H described how the number of frontier workers from Alsace to Switzerland has risen in recent decades, while the number of Alsatian commuters to Germany has fallen. Among the explanations offered in the regional literature is precisely this weakening of German language skills.⁴ The Swiss labour market in Basel tolerates French more readily than the German labour market in Baden, because the large employers of Basel work in English and many departments have French-speaking staff. A German *Mittelstand* employer in the Markgräflerland, by contrast, usually expects German from its employees.

The decline has a cultural dimension as well. The sense of a shared Alemannic space on the Upper Rhine, which writers such as Johann Peter Hebel celebrated in their dialect poetry around 1800, depended on a common spoken language. Hebel wrote his *Alemannische Gedichte* in the dialect of the Markgräflerland, which readers in Basel and the Sundgau understood without difficulty.⁵ When younger Alsatians speak only French and younger people in Basel speak dialect with each other and English at work, this common space survives mainly in institutions, festivals and the memory of older generations. Several associations and public bodies in Alsace work to reverse the trend, as the following sections show, but their efforts concentrate on standard German as a school language. The spontaneous spoken dialect, which once connected the villages on both sides of the border, has become a marker of age and rural origin in much of Alsace.

1 Notes

1. See the survey on the regional language commissioned by OLCA and published in 2012 (according to the published summary, roughly 43 per cent of respondents declared themselves good speakers of Alsatian, with only around 10 to 15 per cent among the 18 to 29 age group). Figures to be verified. ↩
2. On the INSEE family survey of 1999 (Enquête Famille) and the transmission of regional languages in Alsace, see the publications of INSEE and of the Institut national d'études démographiques (INED) based on this survey. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. Regional differences within Alsace are reported in the OLCA survey and in later studies of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. Status to be verified. ↩
4. See Part H, chapter II of this book on the structure of cross-border commuting from Alsace. On the decline of Alsatian commuting to Germany and the role of language skills, see the studies of the Upper Rhine statistical cooperation and of the Infobest network. Status to be verified. ↩

5. On Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826), born in Basel, and his Alemannische Gedichte (1803), see the standard literature on Hebel. On Hebel's connection with Basel, see also Part J, chapter I of this book. ↩

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