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**Diglossia and Local Identity: Swiss German in the  
Linguistic Landscape of Kleinbasel**

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# Diglossia and Local Identity: Swiss German in the Linguistic Landscape of Kleinbasel

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## Abstract

The city of Basel is situated in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, in the geographic triangle of three countries: France, Germany and Switzerland. Everyday urban life is characterised by the presence of Standard German and Swiss German as well as diverse migrant languages. Swiss German is ‘an umbrella term for several Alemannic dialects’ (Stepkowska 2012, 202) which differ from Standard German in terms of phonetics, semantics, lexis, and grammar and has no standard written form. Swiss German is predominantly used in oral forms, and Standard German in written communication. Furthermore, an amalgamation of bilingualism and diglossia (Stepkowska 2012, 208) distinguishes the specific linguistic situation, which indicates amongst other things the high prestige of Swiss German in everyday life.

To explore the visibility and vitality of Swiss German in the public display of written language, we examined the linguistic landscape of a superdiverse neighbourhood of Basel, and investigated language power and the story beyond the sign – ‘stories about the cultural, historical, political and social backgrounds of a certain space’ (Blommaert 2013, 41). Our exploration was guided by the question: How do linguistic artefacts – such as official, commercial, and private signs – represent the diglossic situation and the relation between language and identity in Kleinbasel?

Based on a longitudinal ethnographic study, a corpus was compiled comprising 300 digital images of written artefacts in Kleinbasel. Participant observation and focus group discussions about particular images were conducted and analysed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and visual ethnography (Pink 2006). In our paper, we focus on signs in Swiss German and focus group discussions on these images. Initial analyses have produced two surprising findings; firstly, the visibility and the perception of Swiss German as a marker of local identity; secondly, the specific context of their display.

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## Introduction

Walking the streets of Basel – a city in the German-speaking part of Switzerland where the French, German and Swiss boarders meet, – pedestrians encounter both the official languages of Switzerland (German, French, Italian, Rumansh) and the written form of non-official languages, such as migrant languages and Swiss German. Swiss German is ‘an umbrella term for several Alemannic dialects’ (Stepkowska 2012, 202) which differs from Standard German in terms of phonetics, semantics, lexis, and grammar, and has no standard written form (Caprez-Krompák 2010, 73). Swiss German is predominantly reserved for oral interaction, while Standard German is used in written communication. Accordingly, written Swiss German, be it in literature (Caduff 2014) or in public space, is rather remarkable. Reading such texts in Swiss German is difficult, not only for persons from elsewhere, but also for Swiss native speakers. Corina Caduff, a Swiss cultural anthropologist, describes the ambiguity towards the familiar language in the unfamiliar written guise from the perspective of a Swiss native speaker: ‘The language is extremely familiar, yet the writing appears foreign; you hardly recognize the word at first sight as you usually would when reading. Instead you are thrown back into slow phonetic reading in which every word forms a sound whose meaning one only recognizes in this way. To understand it, one must recreate the sensuality of the sound in order to understand’ (Caduff 2014, 21, translation by the author)<sup>1</sup>.

The notion of linguistic landscape, which has its origin in sociolinguistics, allows us to investigate the ‘language of public road signs’ (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 25) and semiotic practices (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), and explores the ‘stories about the cultural, historical, political and social backgrounds of a certain space’ (Blommaert 2013, 41). Whereas several studies focus on the linguistic landscape of Swiss cities (Lüdi 2007; Piller 2010; Scarvaglieri 2018; Krompák and Meyer 2018; Castillo Lluch 2019), very little is known about the meaning of the public display of Swiss German. To explore the visibility and vitality of Swiss German in its linguistic landscape, I examined the signage of a super-diverse neighbourhood of Basel and investigated language power and the story beyond the sign. My exploration is guided by the question: How do linguistic artefacts such as official, commercial and private signs represent diglossia and the relation between language and identity in Kleinbasel?

First, I introduce Swiss diglossia and the results from recent studies about low varieties in the relevant linguistic landscape. Second, I describe the method and data. Following this, the key images and the excerpts from focus group discussions are presented and analysed. I conclude by discussing three aspects of the investigation; the visibility of Swiss German, language policy and Swiss German as a marker of local identity.

## Theoretical background

### Diglossia in Switzerland

German-speaking Switzerland is diglossic, i.e. there is a duality of Standard German and Swiss German. Although the term Swiss German, usually referred to as *Schwyzertüüsch* or

<sup>1</sup> In original: ‘Die Sprache ist sehr vertraut, doch die Schrift erscheint fremd; man erkennt kaum wie sonst beim Lesen auf den ersten Blick die Wörter, sondern wird zurückgeworfen auf das langsame, buchstabierende Lesen, bei dem sich jedes Wort zu einem Klang formt, dessen Bedeutung man erst so erkennt. Man muss also die Sinnlichkeit des Klangs nachstellen, um zu verstehen’ (Caduff, 2014: 21)

Schwyzerdütsch, suggests only one specific language, in reality it includes numerous non-standard German varieties. These varieties constitute more or less discrete geographical linguistic areas, including Baseldütsch which is spoken in the cantons Basel-city and Basel-Landschaft. Swiss German differs phonetically, semantically and lexically from Standard German (Caprez-Krompák 2010, 73) and does not have an established written form.

Originally, Charles A. Ferguson (1959) used the term diglossia to describe a specific socio-linguistic situation among language communities and to distinguish the ‘High’ and ‘Low’ language varieties of Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole. Within this original framework, the ‘High’ varieties constituted the superordinate language varieties, whereas the ‘Low’ variety denoted regional dialects (Keller 1982, 71). In contrast to this original meaning, locally Swiss German has a high prestige. It ‘does not divide society into classes as in many other countries, but it is an audible token of equality among the people’ (Stepkowska 2012, 202). Moreover, Watts (1999) considers Swiss German as a marker of local Swiss identity and considers it to have a higher symbolic value than Standard German. Kolde (1981) uses the term medial diglossia to describe the division between Standard German, which is largely used in written communication, and Swiss German, which is largely used in everyday, oral communication. Correspondingly, the diglossic relationship of the ‘High’ and ‘Low’ linguistic varieties is complementary (Stevenson, Horner, Langer and Reershemius 2018, 23). However, more recently, Standard German has also increasingly been used as a medium of everyday oral interaction, while Swiss German has become increasingly visible as a medium of written communication in advertising or colloquial communication in social media (see also Werlen 2004; Lüdi 2007) as well as in literature (Caduff 2014). The symbolic and economic value of Swiss German depends on the context; in some contexts Swiss German is more appropriate and beneficial (e.g. during the oral interview in some occupations when applying for a position), whereas other situations require the accurate use of Standard German (e.g. in spoken interaction in academic contexts). Given the shared use and shared values of Swiss and Standard German, this can be described as balanced diglossia.

### Low Varieties in Linguistic Landscapes

Although numerous linguistic landscape studies investigate the public display of minority languages (see Gorter, Marten and Van Mensel 2012), research on regional languages and varieties is limited (Reershemius 2011; Blackwood and Tufi 2012; Van Mensel and Darquennes; 2012). Reershemius’s (2011) study focuses on the visibility of Low German in the linguistic landscape of the East Frisian peninsula in northwestern Germany. Low German was displayed especially in street signs, advertising and house names. Corresponding to the national and international standing of East Frisia as a tourist destination, the linguistic landscape was found to mainly address tourists and to convey tradition, heritage and general orientation toward the past. Whereas Low German mainly appears for symbolic purposes, Standard German is used to convey information. To sum up, Reershemius (2011) emphasised the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the bilingual linguistic landscape of the municipality in circumscribed contexts and, on the other hand, the mainly monolingual every-day practices: ‘This form of visibility does not, however, accurately reflect the present linguistic situation. It is rather the product of endeavours to construct a regional identity, primarily for economic reasons’ (ibid: 50).

In their comparison of the visibility and vitality of regional languages in Italy and France, Blackwood and Tufi (2012) noticed a significant difference in the public display of Sardinian, Genoese, Neapolitan, Catalan and Corsican. Whereas Corsican is relatively visible in the linguistic landscape, the other regional languages were limited to much fewer signs. The authors conclude that the regional languages contribute to the public display in different ways and ‘independently of policies or non-policies’ (Blackwood and Tufi 2012, 124).

## Methodology

This paper reports selected data from the longitudinal linguistic ethnographic study ‘Local and ethnic identities in superdiverse Kleinbasel’, conducted between 2015 and 2018 by the author. The overall study combined mainly qualitative approaches such as analyses of photographs of signs in four districts of Kleinbasel, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews. Additionally, focus group and expert interviews were conducted to investigate networks of translanguaging in the linguistic landscape (Krompák and Meyer 2018; Meyer and Krompák 2018).

To determine the visibility of Swiss German in the linguistic landscape, I firstly systematically codified the images and secondly selected four key images for the main analysis presented in this paper. The visual data was enriched with verbal and written materials (Pink 2016, 134). I followed Pink’s (2016) visual ethnography which complements the image with discourses, because it is ‘important that ethnographers seek to understand the individual, local and broader cultural discourses in which photographs are made meaningful, in both fieldwork situations and academic discourses’ (Pink 2016, 68). In the present study, the verbal data included a focus group interview with three students from the University of Basel about the key images. The interview was conducted in collaboration with Stephan Meyer, on 29 May 2017 and lasted 1.03.02h (Krompák and Meyer 2018). Applying Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory, I identified open codes and interpreted the material based on these significant codes.

## Results

### Visual data from the linguistic landscape

The visual data of the overall project comprised 300 signs in 21 languages: Albanian, Amharic (Ethiopia and Eritrea), Arabic, Bosnian, Croatian, Czech, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swiss German, Tigrinya (Eritrea), Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese. There were 25 images in Swiss German. They included permanent signs (on shops), and event-related signs or ‘noise’, like flags (see Blommaert 2013). The signs were associated with three contexts: (1) local tradition (such as the carnival, the autumn fair and the local football club), (2) geographic affiliation (as a names of Kleinbasel (Gleibasel) and the river Rhine (Rhy) and (3) advertisements for local companies (e.g. the Cantonal Bank of Basel) or for local events.



Figure 1 Poster advertisement in a window of a local bank in Swiss German, Standard German and English © Edina Krompák, (27.03.16)

The first key image is a poster advertising asset management by the local bank – ‘Basler Kantonalbank’ (Figure 1). Three languages are involved in written translanguaging: Swiss German, German and English. In the middle of the window the reader encounters the main message of the bank in Swiss German ‘Vermögensverwältig scho ab 10 000 Stutz [Asset management already from 10 000 bucks]’. Using the local Basel dialect, the bank directly addresses locals familiar with the local variant of Swiss German. Further, the colloquial expression in Swiss German ‘Stutz [bucks]’ loosens up the usually serious style associated with banks. While the local dialect indicates belonging to the community who speaks the local dialect, it can also exclude. Potential exclusion is offset by the official Standard German appears in the standardized poster of the bank and informs costumers about asset management in Standard German. Integrated into the standardized poster, the bank’s logo with the English ‘Basler Kantonalbank fair banking’ signals the bank’s international orientation.

Multimodal semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) connects the following key images (Figure 2 and 3). Insiders recognise the combination of red, blue and white from the official logo of the Football Club Basel (FCB) (Figure 2) in the signage above the wine merchant’s shop, and associate it with belonging to the local community of Basel. This is reinforced by the use of the local variety of Swiss German ‘wyhuus am Rhy’ [wine house/merchant on the



Figure 2 Sticker of the local football club below a street name



Figure 3 Wine merchant ©Edina Krompák (21.12.15)

© Edina Krompák (25. 06.16)

Rhine]. The geographic affiliation in Swiss German ‘am Rhy’ [on the Rhine] indicates also the geographic boundaries of dialect. Similar to the first key image (Fig. 1), the local dialect in this sign dominates as a marker of local identity. Moreover, the geographic location ‘am Rhy’[on the Rhine] and the interlaced semiotic note in the colours in the shop sign constitute the multiple semiotic indexicalities of local identity.



Figure 4 Shop for carnival costumes © Edina Krompák (18.11.15)

Translanguaging (see also Figure 1) and multimodal semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) combine in the window of the shop selling costumes and gear for the Basel the carnival shown in the fourth key image (Figure 4). As in the advertisement for the local bank (Figure 1), translanguaging takes place on the linguistic level between Swiss German, Standard German and international English. In addition, on the semiotic level, language and image complement each other. Swiss German dominates in the name: ‘Jap’s Fasnachtskische’ [Jap’s carnival chest]. Below this are expressions in Standard German ‘Kostüme’ [costumes], Swiss German ‘Larven’ [masks] and English ‘second hand’, and lower down in Standard German ‘Grosse Auswahl im Keller’ [big selection in the cellar]. The window is framed in the diagonal black and white stripes which echo the design of the specific Basel carnival drum. Further, the traditional character of the jester and confetti in the typical design embody the highly esteemed Basel carnival.

#### Discursive Relations to the Linguistic Landscape

Complementing the visual material, I conducted focus group interviews about selected key images, to explore the discourses of persons who are familiar with the linguistic and other symbols in the local linguistic landscape. In Excerpt 1, the participants discussed the key image of the shop for carnival costumes (Figure 4). Whereas Speaker 3 was a student with a German background, Speakers 1 and 2 were Swiss from the Italian and German parts of Switzerland respectively. All three speakers were multilingual; collectively they were familiar with Swiss German, Standard German, English, French, Italian, Dutch, Turkish, and Spanish. Speaker 2 started the conversation stating her novice status regarding the carnival ‘I don’t know the

carnival in Basel.’ Then, she described the contradiction she perceives between the shop window and her knowledge of the carnival conventions: "You're not actually allowed to dress up for the carnival in Basel." Speaker 3 qualifies the statement of Speaker 2 by describing the scope of the rule: "Well you're not allowed to dress up if you're just watching." Speaker 2 concludes that theoretically you are allowed to dress up ("in theory yes"), which Speaker 3 acknowledges with "yes, in theo-." Adding a new aspect, Speaker 1 formulates the condition of the convention: "But if you take part you can." To which speaker 3 responds, strengthening it with the modal verb "have to": "Actually you even have to."

#### Excerpt 1

Speaker 2: I have to say I um um have seen (xxx) so far and (..) I have not actually myself don't know Basel carnival but somehow I find it because you're not actually allowed to dress up for the carnival in Basel I thought it was strange that there are costumes now but (.)

Speaker 3: Well you're not allowed to dress up if you're watching

Speaker 1: ah

Speaker 2: //in theory yes//

Speaker 3: //yes, in theo- //

Speaker 1: but if you participate you can (0.6)

Speaker 3: actually you even have to (21.06.2019, 00.00.19–00.00.41)

In Excerpt 2 the participants combine the semiotic message of the shop with their local knowledge of the carnival. Speaker 1 recognises the traditional carnival drum of Basel and makes a statement in this regard, which Speaker 2 affirms. Then, Speaker 1 continues to explain the carnival convention by explaining the language conventions according to which the local word 'räppli' replaces the standard 'confetti.' Speaker 1 tells a story about her boyfriend, who lives on the border of Basel and uses the word confetti. Her laugh points out the absurdity of the invisible language border. Also, in Excerpt 3 the participants discuss further linguistic conventions of the carnival. Similar to the expression 'räppli [confetti]' the Basel carnival masks are called 'larve [mask]'. Speaker 3, who has some expertise regarding the carnival, states that the 'High' variant word 'mask' is frowned upon.

#### Excerpt 2

Speaker 1: um a Basel drum

Speaker 2: yes

Speaker 1: And then there are also räppli [confetti in Swiss German] er that's also really important everywhere everywhere else these shapes are otherwise called confetti but räppli in Basel ((laughs)) but even people from Baseland my boyfriend comes from Allschwil that's on the border he says (.) er confetti ((laughs))

Speaker 3: yes

Speaker 1: Now he lives in Basel here you say räpli and there I correct him no you must say räpli ((laughs and has a drink)) (21.06.2019, 00.04.35–00.04.59)

Excerpt 3

Speaker 3: I think the thing with the larve [mask in Swiss German] is simply because at Basler Fasnacht it's actually frowned upon when one speaks about mask

Speaker 1: //hm//

Speaker 3: //instead//

Speaker 1: //hm//

Speaker 3: you have to speak about larve [mask in Swiss German] (21.06.2019, 00.01.35–00.01.44)

## Conclusion

Swiss German is visible in the linguistic landscape – in translingual combination with other languages.

That there is no standard written form of Swiss German does not constitute an obstacle to its frequent use in the linguistic landscape of Basel. Swiss German appears in translingual signs, in combination with other languages (mainly Standard German and English) and along with multiple semiotic resources (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Swiss German was visible in the following categories; (1) local tradition, (2) geographical affiliation, and (3) advertisements. Signage in Swiss German primarily addresses Swiss German speakers and the local population who know this dialect.

Swiss German in the linguistic landscape is inversely related to the covert diglossic language policy

Swiss German in the linguistic landscape underlines the relationships between overt and covert language policy (Shohamy 2006). Whereas overt language policy includes 'those language policies that are explicit, formalised, de jure, codified and manifest', covert language policy is 'implicit, informal, unstated, grassroot and latent' (Shohamy 2006, 50).

There is a discrepancy between the visible but limited number of signs in Swiss German and the principally balanced diglossic situation in which Swiss German and Standard German are characterized by shared use and shared value. This is an inverse situation to the one described by Reershemius (2011) where the diglossic signs in 'Low' and 'High' German do not correspond to the monolingual situation in North-Frisia.

Swiss German in the linguistic landscape marks local identity

The regional variety of Swiss German in the linguistic landscape is a marker of local identity (see also Blackwood and Tufi 2012) with diverse aims. In the context of local traditions, Swiss German underlines the shared history of a certain community. The focus group interview showed that each individual reconstructs the meaning of the sign by combining its semiotic meaning with their own life experiences. Based on their status as novices and experts, they negotiate the shared history – in this case language and behavioural conventions of the carnival. The geographic affiliation in Swiss German indicates the geographic boundaries of dialect. Local companies use Swiss German in their advertisements to address local customers by underlining their belonging to a community who speaks the local dialect. Again, the specific language choice can lead to both inclusion and exclusion (see also Krompák and Meyer 2018).

This analysis suggests that the linguistic landscape of Kleinbasel only partly corresponds to the everyday diglossia. Although Swiss German is clearly visible in the linguistic landscape, it does not reflect the quantity and the quality of diglossic practices. Further, Swiss German has an indexical function; it operates in the linguistic landscape as a marker of local identity.

#### Transcription notation

(.) (..) (...)	pauses (1, 2, 3 seconds)
(6)	pause of 6 seconds
((laugh))	para- or nonverbal act
hmmm	holding of consonant, according to intensity
I just-	abortion of utterance
[ ]	commentary
// //	overlap
[...]	suppressed text
[xxx]	unintelligible speech

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