

Enjoy! English Experiences With Language in Basel

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Memories from an Immigration

Paul Jenkins

An unexpected passion for dialect

My knowledge of German was rudimentary when we arrived in 1969. I first came on leave to translate German-language missionary reports from 19th century Ghana for Ghanaian historians, and a dose of jaundice just beforehand had given me some weeks of peace to put together a 1,000-word reading vocabulary for this very specialised field. But taking part in German conversation (or shopping in the Migros in German) was still largely beyond me. And thus when I had the job of delivering my wife to meet a friend in the Market Place very early one wintry morning in 1970 and then of hurrying back to our children who were still in bed (our neighbours knew I would be away for half an hour or so) I had no idea of what was actually happening. I found myself trying to walk back up the Spalenberg just before 4 a.m. that day and being completely blocked by hundreds of people rushing down. And then the lights went out. There was a sort of roar from thousands of voices and hundreds of drums, and two huge masked figures, dimly lit by something like candles, marched directly at me, gesturing aggressively with their large staves.

At that stage of my life I had worked in West Africa for seven years. I had heard complicated drumming going on in the distance most weekend evenings, though I had never been close enough to a group of drummers for them to want to run me down before. But in our part of Africa there were no masks. So, faced with this unexpected experience taking place in a strange city in total darkness I was seized with real panic. More important: in a split second my picture of Basel as a city following an Anglophone model like that of, say, a more prosperous Manchester or Bristol, or a city where pious sponsors of Christian missions set the tone, was shattered and displaced by a storm of impressions obviously radiating outwards from the city's real heart.

Fortunately, the skills you learn finding your way around one exotic culture serve for the next one you experience. So I hung around in the background, seeing more clearly by daylight or when the street-lights were on in the evening just what was going on when



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Basel celebrates its *Fasnacht*. And the worst of the shock of foreignness was replaced by understanding gradually that it was quite acceptable also for foreigners to join the trains of spectators 'in civilian clothes' marching behind a *Fasnacht* clique and its music. It was one way, in the worst of the crowds, to move from A to B – just look for a group moving in the right direction and tag along. It was, much more importantly, an opportunity to listen to the whole repertoire of a large or small group of *Fasnacht* musicians as they went through the streets. Some of the most lyrical experiences of my whole life have come walking along behind a small group of high quality piccolo-players and/or drummers, threading their way along the Untere and Obere Heuberg, especially on the *Fasnacht* Tuesday evening, when the excitement of the Monday morning has calmed down, and when the frenetic enjoyment of the last hours on Wednesday night and the *Ändstraich* is still far away. Indeed I have decided that *Fasnacht* Tuesday evening in the narrow streets of the old city, with hundreds of piccolo players and drummers on the march, is a true foretaste of heaven. You have a beautiful town re-echoing with music, which, though disorganised, comes together, even with the brasher sounds of *Guggemuusig*, to a great harmony. And the atmosphere is not one of disinhibition and drunkenness. Rather it is a festival with a truly heavenly happiness-with-us-as-we-are, pointed up by the irony which is at the heart of *Fasnacht* humour.

For this two-way appropriation – by me of the *Fasnacht*, and by the *Fasnacht* of my particular heart and soul – was not over yet, and was to have a strong linguistic side. Sometime during the first two or three *Fasnachts* I was in Basel I saw a short broadcast on Swiss TV of the masked carnival singers, the *Schnitzelbänggler*, individuals or small groups producing 4- or 6- or 8-line verses with enormous skill and creativity in their visual and acoustic presentation, and – judging by the huge delight of people listening to them who understood dialect – making as I now know sarcastic, sardonic, surrealistic comments on life in the city, in Switzerland and in the world. Although I had vaguely wanted to be able at least to understand conversations in Swiss German taking place around me at work, learning to understand dialect became a real existential urgency when I realised there was such a thing as *Schnitzelbängg* humour. (Later on I experienced the same passion when I heard Mani Matter, a Chansonnier, singing in the Bernese dialect.) We bought the gramophone records of the *Schnitzelbängge* each year for several years, and wore them almost smooth with repeated listening. I would ask my children (who, of course, learned *Schriftdeutsch* and Dialect much faster than I did) to explain each song – if the joke turned out to be within their horizon of understanding, of course. And that is how I learned to understand dialect. I still don't speak it – I have enough trouble keeping my *Schriftdeutsch* up to scratch. But I love the feeling that I can slip into a Swiss conversation and understand what is going on (at least, I do as soon as I have picked up what the theme is). Though there are Swiss friends who are emotionally incapable of speaking dialect to someone replying in *Schriftdeutsch*.

That is the story of a magnetic storm which smashed my presuppositions about the city, taught me (as far as I could learn the lesson) that there were accepted ways in Basel for a foreigner to move towards its unknown heart, gave me a determination to learn the people's language and enjoy the panoply of dialects which dominates spoken language here. That magnetic storm shifted my compass so far from an orientation to the 'BBC' or 'Le Monde' or 'El Pais' that nowadays I would deny passionately that I have been wasting time learning and enjoying the local dialect when, if I had time to spend on another language, I could have been learning – say – some other major European or Asiatic tongue. I am now at peace with the knowledge that it is only in the heaven up above that one will be able to speak all the languages one might want to speak. Here below for someone resident in Basel getting to understand dialect is a key step to understanding the world you are actually in – and that, as I say, can well give you a feel for a sort of heaven here below, during Basels *Drei scheenste Dääg*.

Children, schools and real culture

The place of English among the ambient languages and dialects of Basel has changed acutely with the coming of International Schools offering both primary and secondary education in English. Before they were founded Anglophone families in Basel had only two alternatives – to send their children away to a boarding school where the teaching was in English, or to have them go to school in German in the Basel state schools. Nowadays, on the tram to Aesch, you can find yourself sitting among whole shoals of kids speaking English or American on their way to school. Something new is happening nowadays which may develop into the existence of an English-speaking Basel community like that of the Italian or Spanish immigrants, though, one suspects, speaking less German than they do.

My wife and I were determined not to be forced into sending our children away to school. And we were, in any case, no friends of 'third culture' schools – where children grow up neither in their home culture, nor in the culture of the people around them. One reason for moving away from our posts in West Africa was the difficulty of squaring that particular circle in Accra. And so we found ourselves, one fine morning in 1972, sitting in the back of a classroom on the Schützenmattstrasse watching our oldest daughter's first lesson in a Basel primary school.

My memories of that morning are still extraordinarily powerful. We found a neat classroom and a teacher who had created a framework of relationships in which the children seemed remarkably relaxed, but also ready to work. He punctuated the serious stuff by picking up his mouth-organ and getting them to sing to its accompaniment. We realised, as the weeks went by, what a good place a Basel primary school was for learning German – all the children had to be introduced to *Schriftdeutsch* and even for those from Basel families it was a semi-foreign language. But the teaching method we saw and





admired that first morning was applied to 'mental arithmetic' – *Kopfrechnen*. Instead of the barren process of listening to a teacher calling out sums whose answers were scribbled down on pieces of paper to be handed back marked the next day, the children laid their heads down on the desks and shut their eyes. The teacher called out a series of small sums – 7 plus 3, perhaps, the result divided by 2, and that result multiplied ... and so on. Perhaps there were ten calculations to do, one after the other. At the end the teacher collected all the final answers the children had in their heads («What was your answer? Who agrees with that?»). Then he went back and called up one child after another. Each had to remember a step in the calculation in the right order, and the answer was discussed till everyone had got it right. I was astonished at this combination of a friendly atmosphere and a real, but unthreatening, mental discipline at a level the children could manage, and indeed enjoyed. Rightly or wrongly I felt the ghost of Pestalozzi was not far distant ...

Naturally, our experience of Basel schools was mixed – like that of parents everywhere. One thing we saw at first hand impressed us with its rightness – the way the schools would wait till children showed a real readiness to learn to read, so that reading as a skill was mastered very quickly, and few of them were left, disappointed and frustrated, by the wayside. But we tended to feel, as the years went by, that creativity was not stressed enough, and my wife – a scientist – was astonished that in our experience in those days pupils were learning science from the blackboard and so little in the lab. But looking back I feel that a Basel education, complemented by my wife's excellent sense for what children at different ages would want to read in English, was as good a recipe as you will find anywhere. There was the school education providing a real command of basic skills. And there was the Anglophone family, offering alternative and broader systems of knowledge and thought. One major point which I see now but which I did not anticipate at the time was that education in German in Basel gave our children when they grew up the advantage of strong, developed social networks among people living here, rather than scattered round the globe.

So we are happy our children went to Basel schools. (What they themselves think is another question, of course.) And if we were to go through that phase of life again under the conditions which prevailed then there is only one thing I would do differently – I would invest much more effort than I did in making sure that at the beginning my children had someone they liked, who met them regularly to talk one-to-one about learning German. It turned out later that our oldest daughter had had more of a struggle than we realised, and that at 7 or 8 she no longer had the full spontaneous facility of her younger sisters to learn a language by listening and having a shot at imitating it. But that morning in her first Basel primary school classroom remains etched in my memory. A neat classroom, the teacher's clear but non-intrusive organisation, his friendly conviction that what they were doing together was important and done in a way that the children could enjoy and appreciate. And not least the delightful music. Although her German was only very

rudimentary at the beginning, we remember our daughter going to school willingly day by day. Attracted, I would say now, by a classroom and a teacher which, together, made up true *Kulturgut*, an expression of a real, humane, grass-roots Basel culture.

And our children's English nowadays? It is more or less impeccable, though one or two small things – voice melodies, especially – mark them out in Britain as not quite indigenous. What we saw as the experiment of a bilingual childhood seems to have worked out. We were probably too much aware that the experiment might fail, in which case we thought we would have to break off our own histories in the city to spread a linguistic safety-net in Britain under whichever child was involved. But, of course, millions and millions of children grow up bi- or even multilingually in the world, and it was mainly our massively monolingual background which prompted us to think about contingency planning for the worst case.

Now we watch with interest the developments in our next Anglo-Swiss generation. Our two married daughters speak English to their children, while their Swiss husbands use dialect. So far so good, and I must admit we have a thinly concealed delight at the smiles around us when we show off, travelling in buses and trains in Switzerland with our younger grandchildren. We do not moderate our voices as they speak to us in dialect, and we speak to them in English, and it is clear that each side has almost perfect comprehension of what the other is saying.

As for our own linguistic future: modern neurology has, it seems, found out that you have special 'language centres' in your brain for languages you learn as an adult and really practise in daily life. So we will probably end our lives in Basel. If I am in England, lose my English 'language centre' and speak only German, people will, I am afraid, think I have lost my marbles. But if we stay in Basel and I lose my German 'language centre' I am sure there will be enough people around to understand the simple needs of an old man expressed in English – and perhaps younger friends who like visiting us to practice mordant English humour ...