

## Sociolinguistic situation



A fortified church in Hunawîhr



Expolangues

Language varieties

Education

Family transmission

Use



Català

Galego

Euskara

Cymraeg



Strasbourg cathedral

The **language varieties** spoken in Alsace are *Elsässisch* and French. Although the standard language most closely related to *Elsässisch* is German, French replaces this function. French is usually the spoken language and almost always used as a written language. According to a survey carried out in February 1997 at the request of the Regional Office for Bilingualism (in Strasbourg), from a representative sample of 1840 people of the regional population, 63% declared that they were dialectophone, that is they spoke *Elsässisch*. Spoken use of **standard German** is very rare and is limited to specific situations such as teaching, religious sermons, etc. As a written language it is found, above all in the press and literary works.





## Language varieties

From a structural point of view **Elsässisch** is rapidly being eroded away. The neutralisation of similar phonemic oppositions, the reduction of the declination system, changes in gender and name, syntactical interference, the massive influx of foreign words are just some of the most frequent phenomena which occur. There is also a large amount of code switching, particularly in urban areas, and this is something which is present both in young and old speakers.

The **French** which is spoken in Alsace is not completely the same as standard French. It is characterised, from a phonetical view point by a certain accent. In the grammatical, lexical and phraseological fields, it has several interferences. Its labelling as "regional French" is somewhat controversial because it has developed on a German substrata and words borrowed at an individual level.





The decline in *Elsässisch* is not only due to intralinguistic factors but also to a lessening of the language's presence in several use areas which are affected by extralinguistic factors such as age, sex, profession, etc. Thanks to two recent studies, there are now a certain amount of references to the **sociolinguistic situation** in Alsace: Marie Noël DENIS/Calvin VELTMAN, "Le déclin du dialecte alsacien", Strasbourg 1989 and Rüdiger HARNISCH, Das Elsass in: Robert HINDERLING/Ludwig M. EICHINGER, "Handbuch der mitteleuropäischen Sprachminderheiten", Tübingen 1996, pp. 413-457. Some of the figures are contestable (see a mention in the work of DENIS/VELTMAN by Claude OTTO in number six of the journal "Sociolinguistica" - Tübingen, 1992) but this does not alter the validity of the main tendencies in the development of the linguistic situation.



Bilingualism  
crosses borders

It is in **Alsace families**, i.e. in those families in which both parents speak *Elsässisch* that the situation of the language is most buoyant. And yet it should be pointed out that even in these families, only 20% pass on *Elsässisch* as a first language and that 36% only speak French to their children. In mixed marriages, that is those couples in which only one of the parents can speak *Elsässisch*, this percentage reaches 75%. Most adolescents speak *Elsässisch* with their grandparents. In Alsace families, for example 45% speak *Elsässisch* with their grandparents. This percentage plummets to 8% in language use with friends (53% of people never use *Elsässisch* with their friends). Only very rarely nowadays do young people from Alsace have *Elsässisch* as their first language (46% in the case of Alsace families and 13% in mixed families).





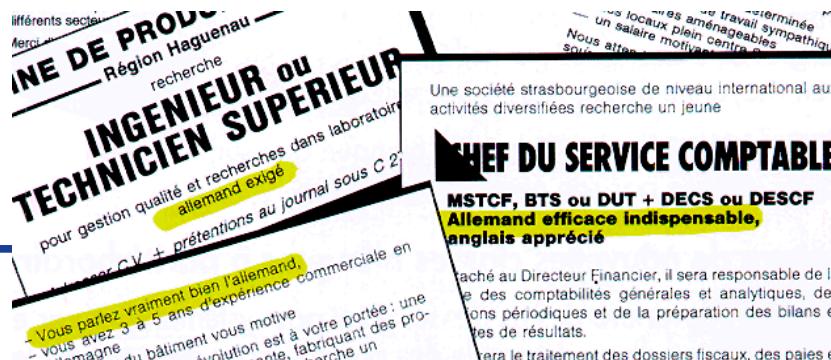
In Alsace families, the majority of children receive a bilingual education (54%), and in mixed families a monolingual French education (72%). It is amongst those Alsace people who have *Elsässisch* as their first language or who find it easier to use than French (in Alsace this is true for 27% of *Elsässisch* speakers) that the language is spoken with greatest fluency. Use of *Elsässisch* is different according to sex. Girls use *Elsässisch* a lot less than their masculine counterparts. This is particularly noticeable when we refer to language use with friends of their own age (56% of boys never use *Elsässisch* with their friends whereas this percentage is 74% for girls).





From a **geographical** viewpoint there are differences between use in the **north** and the **south** of the region and also between use in the countryside and in built-up areas. In the North of Alsace adolescents speak a lot more *Elsässisch* than those who live in the south. Over 59% of adolescents speak *Elsässisch* with their parents in the areas around Wissembourg/Weissenburg, Haguenau/Hagenau and Saverne/Zabern. However in the areas around Guebwiller/Gebweiler, Thann, Mulhouse/Mülhausen and Altkirch this figure drops to only 17%. An urban environment is not conducive to *Elsässisch* knowledge or use. Young city-dwellers have an inferior command of the language and practice it a lot less than the young people in the neighbouring countryside. The regional capital is a very French city which influences the rural periphery. The **city/countryside** opposition is very clear. Only 8% of schoolchildren in the Strasbourg city municipality speak *Elsässisch* half the time with their parents, however when you go out into the Strasbourg countryside, this figure increases to 26%.





**Bilingualism: an advantage when job-seeking**

## Social and professional status

The **social and professional status** which speakers attach to a language plays an important role and to a large extent determines the language variety used. Those who use more *Elsässisch* in their **work** are those who belong to specific social and professional categories such as farmers (men: 78%, women: 67%). labourers (men: 49%, women: 39%). The more French-speaking professions are the intellectual professions (men: 8%, women 6%). Children generally follow the linguistic behaviour of their parents.





A typical sign

## Public places

Linguistic behaviour in **public places** varies according to a series of factors, such as familiarity with the place, the degree of knowledge, the official nature of the place, etc. People over the age of 50 use more *Elsässisch* in a local shop near to where they live (80%) than in a large supermarket situated further away from their homes (18%). This same phenomenon applies to those under the age of 35, where the percentages are 18% and 2% respectively. In the banking sector, 70% of *Elsässisch*-speakers over the age of 50 use *Elsässisch* at the bank whilst only 40% use it with civil servants at the post office. This behaviour is identical amongst those under the age of 35: 32% speak *Elsässisch* at the bank, whereas only 20% use it at the post office.



A signpost





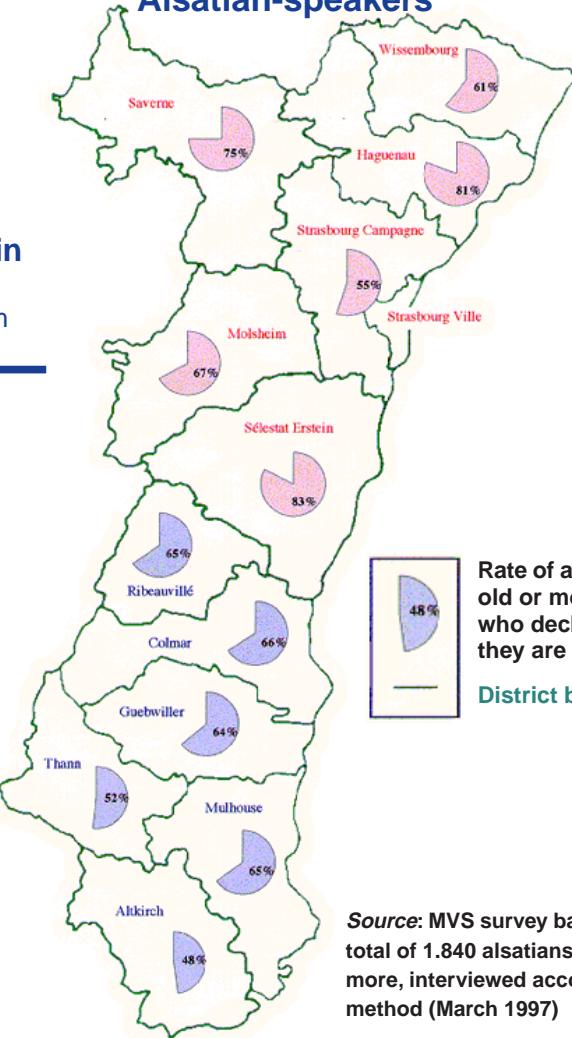
Bilingual education is available at secondary school level

## The education system

As far as **education** goes, we must bear in mind that the majority of adolescents go to normal secondary schools where they have French as their main language, although in vocational training schools there is a predominance of pupils who use *Elsässisch* (they account for 49% of the school population, whereas children of migrants do not even account for 44% of this same population). Those children who use primarily *Elsässisch* have difficulty meeting the linguistic requirements and learning conditions of schools in Alsace, and this is true during the whole of their school life. These pupils' language knowledge is not truly taken into account by the schools. It is above all knowledge of French which determines success at school. 75% of adolescents who had French as their first language or as their dominant language (80%) go to normal secondary schools and thus have the possibility of going on to university. However those who have *Elsässisch* as their mother tongue remain more often to follow shorter higher education courses.



## Alsatian speakers who declare themselves Alsatian-speakers



## Rate of Alsatian speaking people in each district

(taking into account Alsatian population from age 18 or above)

## Family population in each district according to the latest census (INSEE 1990)

Low-Rhin:	931.982
Hauguenau	108.537
Molsheim	78.917
Saverne	84.402
Sélestat Erstein	121.539
Strasbourg Campagne	237.593
Strasbourg Ville	541.412
Wissembourg	59.582
High-Rhin:	656.976
Altkirch	56.036
Colmar	127.334
Guebwiller	68.518
Mulhouse	286.652
Ribeauvillé	45.002
Thann	73.434

Source: MVS survey based on a sample of a total of 1.840 alsatians from 18 year old or more, interviewed according to the quota method (March 1997)