

THE STATUS AND FUNCTION OF ENGLISH IN GERMANY

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ABSTRACT

English has, on the one hand, a guaranteed status in Germany as a general school subject and as a medium of instruction in a number of bilingual schools and in the “International Study Programmes” at university level. It is also established as the official business language of larger German companies. Beyond the legally established status, it is used in numerous formal or informal international contact situations. There is, on the other hand, a growing resistance against the spread of English in the country from the side of private organisations as well as parts of the German government. Nevertheless it seems likely that English will make further inroads into Germany. It may, in the long term, become more acceptable if it can be changed into a real pluricentric global language —which I have proposed to call “Globalish”— with generally accepted specific features for each linguistic background —French English, German English, etc.

KEY WORDS: International communication, language policy, language and globalization, spread of English, English in Germany, defending international standing of own language.

RESUMEN

En Alemania el inglés posee ya un estatus garantizado como asignatura escolar y como medio de instrucción en cierto número de colegios bilingües, además de a nivel universitario en los denominados “Programas de estudio internacionales”. El inglés también se ha convertido en la lengua oficial de muchas de las grandes compañías alemanas. Junto con estos ámbitos, donde el uso del inglés ya está regulado, también se utiliza en otras numerosas situaciones de contacto internacional, tanto formales como informales. Sin embargo, en Alemania existe una creciente resistencia en contra de su expansión, tanto por parte de organizaciones privadas como de algunos sectores del gobierno. A pesar de ello, parece probable que el inglés siga difundándose en este país. A largo plazo, podría existir una mayor aceptación si se transformara en una lengua global pluricéntrica —a la que he propuesto llamar “Globalish”— con características específicas generalmente aceptables para cada uno de los diferentes bagajes lingüísticos —un inglés francés, un inglés alemán, etc.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación internacional, política lingüística, lenguaje y globalización, difusión del inglés, el inglés en Alemania, defensa del estatus internacional de la lengua propia.



1. INTRODUCTION

In a frequently quoted seminal article, Braj Kachru classifies World English, or rather World Englishes, in three circles, which can be depicted—in an admittedly simplified manner—as follows:

- 1) The “inner circle” countries with English as a first language and private function, which are at the same time the “norm-providing” countries (like Britain);
- 2) The “outer circle” countries with English as a second language and official function, which are at the same time the “norm-developing” countries (like Singapore); and
- 3) The “expanding circle” countries with English as a foreign-language and only international function, which are at the same time the “norm-dependent” countries—the English-language underdogs so to speak (like let’s say France).

There are obviously at least three variables, or sets of criteria, involved in this classification with three values, or features, apparently in rank order, namely:

- (i) Individuals’ order of learning English including, perhaps, attitude towards the language:
 - a) First, b) second or c) foreign language.
- (ii) Communicative function of English for individuals and institutions:
 - a) Private, b) official or c) international function; there seems to be an implicative order in most cases so that “private function” implies “official function”, which in turn implies “international function”, but not vice versa.
- (iii) Society’s normative capacity with respect to English:
 - a) Norm-providing, b) norm-developing or c) norm-dependent.

None of these variables is, at close view, strictly discrete but rather continuous; each feature can, in other words, vary in degree. Thus, English can be a first, second or foreign language for smaller or larger parts of the population. Similar distinctions are possible for private function and—somewhat differently—for official and international function, and similarly for variable (iii). Also, the features are not necessarily strictly parallel, depending on working definitions or operationalization. Finally, working definitions are possible, and have been used, which only loosely relate to the above criteria. David Graddol for example, defined proximity to the Inner Circle Countries by percentage of population who claim to be able to converse in English. This definition does not coincide with the features of variable (i), let alone the other variables.

Graddol hereby arrived at the highest proximity to the Inner Circle Countries for Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands among European countries.

Margie Berns used a combined but less precise working definition by which she finds that Germany, Luxemburg and again the Netherlands are closest to the Inner Circle Countries among the countries of the former European Union of Twelve.

The intersection of Graddol's and Berns' trios is the Netherlands being the only country with a place in both and which is, therefore, the country closest to the Inner Circle Countries of English.

I was astonished to find Berns putting Germany into her selection and wondered about a pro-German bias —Berns' name sounds quite German. She refrains, however, from placing Germany squarely into the Circle next to the Inner Circle, i.e. the Outer Circle, in spite of the functions the English language “serves (...) in various social, cultural, commercial and educational settings” (9). She mentions the following reasons for not doing so: Germany has not “been colonized” by the Inner-Circle countries, and English does not function as a “second (...) language for its [the country's] speakers”. English also “is not a declared official or state language, nor has it —at least not yet— developed into an institutionalized variety. Neither does it have nativized literary domains” (8 ff).

Instead, Berns suggests “creating an area of overlap of the outer and expanding circle”, in which she places all her top-proximity countries, even the Netherlands. Berns envisions, however, the possibility of these and other European countries proceeding further towards the core of the English-speaking world in the future. Though she says nothing about the countries' chances of ever reaching the Inner Circle, she does foresee the possibility that they will eventually develop their own norms of English alongside the Inner Circle norms, so that Dutch English or German English would exist parallel to, and perhaps on an equal footing, with, British English and other Englishes of the Inner Circle Countries (10).

I will get back to this “pluricentric” vision, as I would call it, of the future English-speaking world. This vision does not seem totally unrealistic to me in the long run. There is, however, the danger of considerable conflicts before it comes true, as my following sketch of the status and function of English in Germany today will show.

2. ENGLISH IN GERMANY TODAY

English has a guaranteed status in Germany today, beyond the usual peripheral domains (like air traffic). The most important recent changes in status are the following:

- A) In school, teaching of English has recently become a general subject, starting in most of the 16 states of Germany at primary school level, while it was formerly only a subject of the more elitist streams of higher education —mainly *Gymnasium* and *Realschule*.
- B) At the tertiary educational level, so-called “International Study Programs” have recently been introduced with English as a medium of teaching, mostly a co-medium together with German. These programs are still expanding.

They are another step towards English as the working language of German scientists and scholars on the path they took years ago when they started to choose English as an additional, and often main language of publication.

- C) In business, English has become the official company language, mostly co-official with German, of large German firms, especially the global players. This development, which started decades ago, still seems to be spreading, though reliable data are hard to get at.

As to A), introducing English as a general school subject has, on the part of the responsible state governments, often been justified by the argument of preparing youngsters for the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe (“Unsere Kinder müssen auf ein sprachlich und kulturell vielfältiges Europa vorbereitet sein.” *Schulverwaltung NRW* Nr. 1/2003). This argument was valid previously, when schools were encouraged to choose those languages with which children most often got in touch, like Turkish in schools with a high proportion of Turkish migrants or Dutch along the Dutch border. Such language choice, resembling the Australian Community Languages, was, however, stopped and English was instead enforced in all schools as their sole first foreign language —with the exception of some Western border regions which offer French. Invoking linguistic plurality seems hardly compatible with this change towards linguistic uniformity. A more adequate justification would be reference to globalization, or to the growing mobility and international communication in Europe, for which English could be presented as the most generally useful language. I assume such reasoning was avoided in public for fear of objections, which have, in fact, been moderate, at least in public. The objections raised, nevertheless, have been mostly the age-old warnings of linguistic confusion when children would be confronted with a second language, or in the case of immigrant children a third language, as early as in primary school. Governments themselves seemed to be eager to channel concerns into that direction.

Yet there have been objections of a less welcome, more political nature too. They arose from concerns about the future of the German language or even the German nation. I am including fears of the growing “Sprachvermischung” or of “englisch-deutscher Sprachmatsch” (*Denglisch* or *Engleutsch*) in that category, i.e. fears that general, early-age teaching of English may result in the incompetence of speaking “pure” German (whatever that means) and may thus corrupt the German language itself. Such concerns were sometimes combined with fears, rather alluded to than expressed explicitly, of the German people’s loss of loyalty to their own language or their loss even of German national identity, seen as firmly tied up with the German language. It seems to me that fears of this sort were implied in demands like the following, which were derived from the above kind of political criticism. Thus the *Verein Deutsche Sprache* demanded: “Das Vorhaben [i.e. introducing English as a subject to primary school] durch flankierende Maßnahmen, insbesondere identitätsbildende Lehrinhalte in den Fächern Deutsch, Geschichte, Sozialwissenschaften, zu begleiten.” [i.e. to accompany the introduction of English at the primary level with additional teaching content which could stabilize students’ identity, their national identity of course] (*Verein Deutsche Sprache e.V. Re-*

gion 46 nördl. Niederrhein—westl. Münsterland, 12 August 2002, Tel. 02362/65755). How else should such a demand be motivated than by concerns about the German language, the German nation or the German language community? So far, this sort of criticism has been voiced mainly by private language organisations.

I have, however, also encountered it in discussions at the university. There, yet another related argument was brought forth, together with concerns that Germany herself undermines the standing of the German language by teaching too much English and in which reference was made to the international standing of the German language. Wouldn't foreigners, the argument went, lose interest in studying the German language if they got the impression that all the Germans were about to learn English so that communication with them would, in future, be possible in English? I must admit that I am not sure myself whether those arguing that way haven't got a point. The concern raised here must be held against the background that German is still studied as a foreign language by around 20 million people world-wide and is a school subject in over a hundred countries. Teachers and professors of German as a foreign language in particular share the above concern, for obvious reasons, and they form the bulk of the 22,000 members in 90 countries the *Verein Deutsche Sprache* boasts (cf. e.g. "Werden Sie Mitglied im Verein Deutsche Sprache!" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (30 April 2005): 47). However, teachers and professors of other foreign languages other than English, especially of French, tend to feel similarly.

As to B), in the winter semester 1997/98, so-called "International Study Programs" with English as the language of teaching began at German universities, with the support of the Federal Ministry of Science and Education, and have been expanding since then. The main reason given for their introduction was to make German universities more accessible to foreign students by letting them begin to study in the language they already knew: English. Other European countries introduced English for teaching at their universities even earlier for the same reason, especially the Netherlands. The "International Study Programs" in Germany are also offered to German students, who, as well as the German professors involved, should benefit by improving their English language skills and international competence (cf. for a comprehensive analysis of such programs in Europe Ammon and McConnell). In turn, the foreigners studying in these programs are expected to learn the German language alongside their studies: to survive in their German-speaking surrounding, of course, but also to deepen contacts with Germany and to mitigate the programs' potentially damaging effects on German studies abroad. Making sure that foreigners also study German in these programs was not an objective from the beginning, but was added later. It has to be seen as part of the German government's more comprehensive attempt to bolster the international standing of the German language.

In spite of these counter-measures in favour of the German language, or its international standing, the programs have been under heavy fire especially from departments of German as a foreign language. There has been criticism of linguistically estranging the institutions of higher education from the rest of the society and heightening the Ivory Tower surrounding the universities. The main argument,



however, has been linked to objections against the growing inclination of German scientists to publish in English, which began decades ago but may have gained momentum in recent times.

The central argument against the study programs in English has basically been the same as against publishing and researching in English. It amounts to the proposition that researching or studying in a foreign rather than one's own language inhibits, or bars, scientific and scholarly progress. One version of the argument stresses the need for linguistic diversity for scientific progress and is based on the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It claims that the cognitive potential of as many languages as possible should be utilized for science and scholarship rather than reducing linguistic variety to English only. Another version of the argument holds that using a foreign language is a serious handicap for German scientists. The President of the *Verein Deutsche Sprache*, Walter Krämer, stated bluntly in public that using English instead of German is the main reason why German scientists no longer win Noble Prizes. I have not heard him comment on scientists of other linguistic background.

Among scientists, there seems to be only a minority, mostly of the older generation, who openly object to the use of English. Their motivation seems to be partially practical, having not acquired sufficient English language skills, or they are applied scientists, for example in medicine, who have to use German with their clients. Behind the public protest though, there seem to linger wide-spread, latent feelings of dissatisfaction, even of national humiliation. They are fostered by the ubiquitous knowledge that German once also counted among the important international languages of science. I do not know whether, or to what extent, such feelings could function as a barrier against the spread of English among German scientists and scholars.

As to C), English has become the official company language of most large German firms, in some cases the sole company language, such as for BMW, in other cases co-official with German, such as for VW. Smaller firms have often kept up German as their sole company language, even firms the size of Porsche —to follow the rest of the automotive industry. Choice of company language has mostly been seen as a matter of practicality. There have, however, been politically motivated objections against the choice of English as the company language too, which have kindled conflicts of various sorts. Examples are law cases like that by Lufthansa against an employee who refused to use English in a German company at Frankfurt Airport, on German soil, as he pointed out, but lost his case. The choice of company language has even sometimes been eyed as a significant language-policy issue by the German government. Thus, the federal ministry of economics has recently considered commissioning an investigation into the advantages or disadvantages of maintaining or re-introducing German as a company language.

Generally speaking, there seems to be a growing incompatibility between a language-policy of maintaining German as an international language on the one hand and the more comprehensive use of English on the other hand. A major objective of the former is the German government's attempt to stabilize German as a working language in the institutions of the European Union. An example of the

latter is the introduction of English as a general school subject. To balance both objectives appears difficult and it will be a challenging sociolinguistic task to closely accompany these developments with research and language planning.

It seems likely that English will make further inroads into Germany. I have proposed elsewhere to support the development of a pluricentric world language in order to make it more acceptable to the non-English-speaking world. Others, with sounder linguistic background, have made similar proposals, for example Jennifer Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer (e.g. “Standard”). They refer to the language they have in mind by the term “International English” which has been used before in various contexts. It seems to me, however, that such a pluricentric world language should, at the same time, be renamed more radically, as something like “Globalish”, to indicate more equality, especially similar norm setting capacity —between the Inner Circle Countries of English and the rest of the world (cf. Ammon 2003). This might be a small consolation, though no compensation, for the non-English-speaking countries. I am aware of the enormous difficulties of ever arriving at such a compromise. I would, however, not rule it out in the long run; there are already some indicators, as Margie Berns pointed out, that seem to point in the direction of pluricentricity, and even —one should add— of renaming the world language (cf. e.g. the article by Mary Blume “If you can’t master English, try Globish”, *International Herald Tribune* 22 April 2005 <http://www.ihf.com/bin/print_ipub.php?file=/articles/2005/04/21/features/Blume22.php>).

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