

German: Product recall?

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Languages come and go, and so do those languages which a society chooses to learn in addition to its own. It is a striking and remarkable fact that the massive Soviet military presence in central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War was not reflected in the linguistic behaviour of the countries it occupied. Anyone familiar with the history of the former German Democratic Republic will know of the antipathy of most East Germans towards learning Russian. School syllabuses and the obligation to pass exams in Russian in order to progress through the system made little difference. And once the Berlin Wall collapsed, so too did the position of Russian in the German educational system. By contrast (American) English was quickly embraced by West German society after 1945. Competence in English became a *sine qua non* for successful businessmen, scientists and academics, and it was also embraced unquestioningly by teenagers as the language of entertainment.

Today German's own position as a second language represents something of an enigma. As the largest linguistic community in Europe, and the sovereign language of a cluster of the Continent's most economically successful and prosperous states, the German language ought to exert a massive attraction upon its neighbours, yet teachers of German at both secondary and tertiary level in western Europe report a sharp decline in interest. Departments of German in universities in the United Kingdom, for instance, are being closed for alleged lack of take-up, whilst at school level German is struggling to maintain its position against languages such as Spanish or alternative subjects such as media studies or law.

It might be tempting to apply crude Darwinian concepts to what is happening and many explanations have certainly been offered. These range from changes in children's learning patterns, which make a relatively highly inflected language such as German difficult for second language learners with little formal comprehension of language structures, to the sheer omnipresence of English, which discourages students in investing in German. Why, after all, make the effort to learn German when English appears to open all the necessary doors in life – from participation at international conferences to booking a hotel room in Greece? And just consider the Italian, Brazilian or Spanish adolescent with little interest in his academic studies but with an obsession with racing cars. What can he not fail to notice at the end of every Formula One race? Within seconds of the competition finishing his racing hero is sitting in front of an array of microphones and talking to the world's press in English. It is difficult to find parallel forces of attraction in German to motivate younger learners.

German is also disadvantaged in that it does not have a world presence. French, Spanish, Portuguese and English have all become languages with global communities. Indeed, the future of those languages has already passed into the hands and mouths of those who live outside of Europe. To learners this richness and diversification holds a considerable attraction. History too inevitable plays its part. To most non-Germans the idea of Germany is still, and to a considerable extent, painfully linked to the darkest moments in the history of twentieth-century Europe. It took half a century and the Football Championships of 2006 for Germany once more to be able to celebrate itself and its national identity with the unselfconscious innocence that most other states would take for granted. In other words, to learn German is not simply a process of learning a new set of linguistic habits, including glottal stops, it is an engagement with a difficult, complex and fluid community, one whose very boundaries have been in a perpetual state of flux. That complexity is, of course, part of its fascination. Those who have studied German at university will be well aware of both the diversity and richness

of German culture. But its rewards come only after a long period of study. We cannot get learners reading Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* or Goethe's *Faust II* after a couple of months of study. And how many years of study does it take in order to have entry into the linguistic joy that is Nestroy?

German culture along with its book market has at times sensed that the German language and its literature possess a ponderous reputation. There have even been attempts at what might be deemed a 'literature lite' model as an approach to match the popular fiction characteristic of the English-speaking literary market. Patrick Süskind, Bernhard Schlink and Robert Schneider are but a few of a more recent generation of authors whose work eschews the earnestness of earlier writers. How convincing their attempts at being both serious and popular have been is another matter, but it does raise the question of whether or not the German language is destined to go its own cultural *Sonderweg*. Perhaps being German really is a serious business and there is little point in pretending to would-be learners that it is quite a jolly language and society, one made up of beer festivals, the bacchanalias of Rhineland carnivals and mad, but ever so engaging, Bavarian monarchs.

As teachers of German outside of Germany we have only modest powers of influence on the image that the German-speaking world projects of itself or on the way the media in our own countries receive and interpret that image. Our press will invariably take more interest in the upsurge of right-wing parties in Germany and Austria than in the fact that both countries are able to manage a health system that can at least provide dental treatment to most of its citizens in sharp contrast to some other countries in the developed world.

The German state does acknowledge its responsibility in supporting the German language abroad. Despite perennial internal wrangles over funding levels, Germany and Austria invest heavily in the promotion of the German-language as an aspect of both their foreign and cultural policy and have established and maintain ably-staffed agencies through which that policy is conducted. Their promotion is usually focussed on the educational elites within other countries – hence the many bursaries offered to foreign university students to study at least for a short period at German institutions. But there are other forces at work too. Mass migration to Germany since the 1950s has brought the German language into contact with what were once remote linguistic communities, most notably the Turkish-speaking world. Large numbers of migrants have also reached Germany from the former Soviet Union. These various groups have all had an urgent need to acquire proficiency in German and they swell the ranks of those learning the language, but they constitute a very different language-learning community to, say, a classroom of fourteen-year-old German learners in Toronto, or Melbourne, or Cork. The impact on the future of German outside of Germany could depend on what happens to these migrants. If they and their families establish a pattern of constant movement between Germany and their country of origin it may well be reflected in the position of the German-language in that country of origin. But if migrants arrive and stay then the link with the home country may weaken considerably within a single generation.

In a trading world a working knowledge of the language of Germany, which survives economically by exporting, will always be in demand. It is not unusual in West European businesses for competence in German to be found amongst recently arrived and highly motivated young people from Central Europe, be they Czechs, Poles or Hungarians. This is a reminder of the traditional sphere of influence of the German language and the legacy of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The recent award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Hertha Müller will no doubt have delighted those who care for the international status of the German language. For most newspaper readers around the world, however, it was probably just baffling to learn that somebody born in Romania wrote in German. The residue of German-speaking communities throughout Europe and outside of Germany is too diverse for

them to constitute a single phenomenon. The status of the German-speaking communities in Belgium, Denmark, or the South Tyrol, is in legal and economic terms wholly different to those tiny pockets of German-speakers still to be found in the former Soviet bloc. But their presence represents a challenge to the sovereign states in which they are located for the German language cannot really be deemed a foreign language if it is spoken on their territory. Those states not only have to establish a relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria but also with an element of the German-speaking world within its own borders. Migration or assimilation have been typical responses in the East, whilst a confident celebration of linguistic identity has been more often the response in western Europe along with very high standards of living and an ability to function bilingually within the host state.

It is unlikely that in the near or distant future German will usurp the place of English in central and eastern Europe, but for the moment it has most certainly begun to replace Russian. Within the expanded European Union most new member states are precisely from the east and their presence will diminish the status of French within the EU. At present English is the *de facto* working language of the EU and of many of its working parties, followed by French, which benefits from the fact that the institutions of the EU are located in French-speaking territories. The status of German will be considerably enhanced if it can raise its profile at the EU to match that of French, but the perverse law of globalization is not that it recognizes linguistic diversity but that it throws up the need for a single lingua franca to bind together such a vast array of states into a functioning unit. The willingness of German-speakers to learn and perform in English may well weaken the case for German, whereas any German's insistence on the international stage not to speak English may send out a message that could be misconstrued. However, Germans have invested much of their post-war existence into becoming exemplary Europeans and hitherto have been careful not to make linguistic issues a source of strife.

How do all these factors impact upon those of us whose daily living consists of teaching elements of the German language to those to whom both the language and German culture may be remote and far from vital concepts? Do we need to pray that the next generation of boy bands will hail from Düsseldorf? Do we have to wait for Boris Becker's children to appear at Wimbledon? Do we leave knowledge of the language to the bilingual children of the mixed marriages amongst the army of bureaucrats in Brussels, or to those from families *mit Migrantenhintergrund*, or to those who happen to have grown up next door to Germany? Or do we just give up trying? If young people have no interest in acquiring German, or would rather learn Mandarin, should we just accept this as an evolutionary fact?

In some quarters it can be heard that we should only teach German to the most able who, perhaps when they are well into their university studies and in whatever discipline that might be, realise there is hardly an aspect of modern intellectual life that has not been greatly shaped by those who perceived the world through the medium of the German language.

It is clear the solution to the problem of securing the future of the language abroad is divided between the German-speaking countries themselves – and what they are perceived to offer to the would-be learner and what image they project of themselves – and the status of the German language within the society and educational institutions of that learner. In east European countries nobody has to try very hard to make the case for competence in a foreign language such as German or the commitment that such language acquisition makes of the learner. Those who teach German in the English-speaking world have, by contrast, a particularly difficult task. Although teaching materials have never been so attractive, colourful or authentic, and travel to Germany or Austria has never been so simple the very success of English as a world language takes all urgency and perceived necessity out of learning German. To this must be added a factor that most of us would rather not address. Students cannot learn all the languages of the world. Do we as teachers of Germans say that the study of

German is more important than the study of other languages on the school syllabus? A turf war is surely the last thing that is needed in modern language teaching and the study of any modern language brings immeasurable intellectual and personal rewards. But the loss of German, which will follow in the wake of its removal from school, college or university programmes that we are now witnessing in many parts of the world, will represent a huge intellectual impoverishment. It will close access to concepts and source materials that are essential to our understanding of the complexities of European society. It will also deprive future generations of entry into one of the world's intellectual and cultural power houses. And, sadly, it means the Viennese will have to laugh with Nestroy all by themselves.

Learning German is part and parcel of belonging to a learning culture, and acquiring a complete and formal command of a second language also requires a particular kind of learning culture and learning disposition, one that goes well beyond the short-term approach to our present view of skills acquisition. It may be that changes in teaching methods and schooling have proved to be inimical to such a learning culture. Unfortunately and however tempting, we cannot ask the German language to shed itself of its three genders and all its adjectival endings. So if the German language refuses to change we are either going to have to change the way we teach and learn it, or we settle for far more modest goals in our students' competency, or else we must wait for the pedagogical wheel to turn full circle. One thing seems certain, no matter how emphatic we as a profession are in regarding the merits of acquiring German, it does not follow that our communities at large will share this conviction yet. We have much to do. Fortunately, *Forum Deutsch* is a fine example of how those professionally involved in teaching German can exchange and develop ideas in the field of German acquisition. Such platforms will be essential in any campaign to safeguard and promote German. We now have to get the sheer adventure of language learning in general, and entering the German-speaking world in particular, across to those whom we know would respond to what we have to offer. The support of those agencies in Germany and Austria promoting the language will become an essential ally in this task, and here we can rely on the expertise of excellent colleagues. Past experience should tell us that just relying on education systems, be they governmental ministries or university management boards, to recognize the merits of our case will not happen. Our colleagues in classical studies proved to be remarkably resourceful a generation ago when the study of Latin and Greek ceased to be the cornerstone of higher education. They reinvented themselves and their discipline, making themselves indispensable to other disciplines such as archaeology, ancient history and cultural studies. No branch of modern learning, be it, for example, in sociology, theology, linguistics, or musicology, has not been fashioned in large measure by German speakers. We need to root German language programmes into as many other degree programmes as possible and demonstrate to students and colleagues alike the value of the German language to them, for older students will learn a language where they see a clear and overwhelming advantage to their existing studies. Younger children will always respond to enthusiastic teaching and here we must engage with our colleagues involved in the teacher training of modern linguists so that the language remains a buoyant option within our schools.

The recent celebrations marking the fall of the Berlin Wall will have reminded us all – if only for a few tantalising moments – of the sheer excitement, the significance, and the drama that can surround all things German. Let us capture that excitement and convey it to our students.

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