

Multilingualism or "English only" in the European Union?

Dangers and Challenges of the Future

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This paper intends to demonstrate the overwhelming *dominance* of the English language in the European Union and to explain its historical and linguistic causes. De Swaan distinguished four levels of communication within the EU: the national level, the transnational level, the EU institutional level (with the European Parliament and other institutions) and finally the communication within the EU Commission's bureaucracy. This distinction has proved highly useful. At the second (transnational) level, we need a real multilingualism to shape the sense of a European identity in the minds of all EU citizens. As the example of the "anglomania" that can presently be observed in Germany clearly shows, a limitation to English as the only common European language entails many risks. Therefore, the author proposes some steps that may help to restrict the increase of Anglicisms in different domains. At the same time, he pleads for the development of broad multilingual and multicultural competencies among the EU citizens by using English, French and German as "bridge languages" in a diverse European language culture.

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1. Introduction

The European Union has been mainly an economic community with its interests in a common European market and free movement zones within European boundaries. An economic framework has been built up since the very beginnings in the 1950s. The common currency, which was planned since 1991 (Treaty of Maastricht) and finally realised in 2002, was the next big step to complete this supranational framework. Furthermore, Europe is a plurality of nations, languages and cultural traditions that in some cases differ greatly from country to country.

Since January 1st, 2007, with the admission of Rumania and Bulgaria, there are twenty-one official languages in the EU plus some more minority languages. With these two states plus the ten others which became official members in 2004, the European Union made the largest and most substantial expansion in its history. This enlargement is, for the EU, both a unique historical chance and a political challenge, but the risks of geographic, political and financial overexpansion are absolutely possible.

My research focuses on another major problem, communication. With over half a dozen new countries, mainly from the East, Europe will more than ever be confronted with language problems. This essay analyses whether a common European lan-

guage, a so-called „*lingua franca*”, can counter the obstacles of communication and help to build up a European identity.

In the last few decades we have observed a growing importance of English as *the* working language not only within the European institutions, but also in business, advertising and science. It seems that this language will more and more restrict the other two *linguas francas*, French and German, which is the mother tongue of almost a quarter of the people in the EU. My argument is that languages are not only instruments of communication; they are at the same time cultural relics, a carrier of the experiences and traditions of generations of a nation. Can the overwhelming dominance of the English language be in the interest of the European Union? The EU is trying to build up a counter-position to the United States of America. Such a counterpart should be fixed in the diversity of languages of every EU citizen (Raasch 2002).

The second part of this essay demonstrates how the present „anglomania” and other influences of English have changed the German language, especially in the last fifteen years. This example shows that the restriction to only one common language may entail many risks for nation-states and for European identity.

2. English and multilingualism within the EU

With the expansion to twenty-seven nation-states, Europe will more than ever be confronted with identity problems. The percentage of acceptance for European politics is dramatically low, mainly in the ‘new’ member states. The best example to underline this is firstly the statistics published frequently by the EU itself, which indicate among other data the acceptance and opinions of the citizens within the EU. Another, more practical, example is the polls for the European parliament, which have remained for decades on a constant low level. And we should not forget the year 2005, which marked the refusal of the European Constitution by the French and the Dutch referenda. Automatically, two questions concerning these serious problems emerge: Why is the acceptance of the EU stagnating and how can we change this? It seems that the EU is taking the responsibilities and the possibilities away from the nation-states. This is often the reason why people do not see that the main and fundamental decisions are still made by each European member state.

There are many theoretical ways to enhance a common European identity. According to King (2000: 420) “the view of Europe is a complex mixture of identification on the regional or urban, the national and finally supranational level”. Therefore it is very important to make Europe more comprehensible for everyone. The main task of politicians in every European country should be to help their citizens to understand „the concept of Europe” and to convince them of it. The second step is to improve the communication between the countries, which assumes the ability to speak with someone whose mother tongue differs from one’s own. This step has already been taken with success. The percentage of speakers of foreign languages has constantly increased (see European Commission 1999).

The last Eurobarometer (2005: 7) shows that English is spoken by 47%, German by 30% and French by 23% of EU citizens, whereas Italian (15%), Spanish (14%) and Polish (10%) are situated below the 20% level.

Moreover, Van Els (2005) demonstrates that no other major language in Europe, neither French, nor Spanish, had increased its number of second-language speakers as greatly as English. An increasing number of people are using English in fields like business, transport and technology. A new level of international communication has been achieved. With the accession of Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) to the EU in 1995, the position of English became increasingly stronger, even predominant. It became the most attractive second language in nearly every EU country.

Even in the European core institutions, the European Parliament, the European Council of Ministers and the EU Commission, English became the most widely spoken language. The development from a dominant French position in the beginning of the European Economic Community in the early 1970s to English as the sole working language nowadays cannot be denied (House 2003).

The overwhelming dominance of the English language can be explained by two reasons. First of all, there is the historical one: The Great Powers, victors of WW II (USA, England and the Soviet Union) divided up Europe in their sectors, while France was only the fourth victorious force, with fewer rights of regulation. So, the USA and the UK had a combined effect on the use of English as *lingua franca* and the adoption of English words. Furthermore, there are also linguistic reasons. It seems that English is easier to learn and to speak because of its grammar. The sentences are often shorter and more concise in comparison with French and German. Besides, in many EU countries it has become the dominant first foreign language in school because since the decline of the Soviet Union, the United States is the only significant world power which influences huge parts of the economy, as well as politics, science, technology and pop culture.

De Swaan (2003) distinguishes four levels of communication within the European Union:

- The first one is the domestic communication within each member state. The official national language is at this juncture spoken by a vast majority.
- The next level is the transnational communication between the citizens of the EU. On this level, several languages (above all, English, French and German) are in competition with each other.
- Levels three and four concern the public communication in the European institutions (e.g. European Commission, European Parliament) and finally the Commission's internal bureaucracy.

The very first European decree to be stated after the foundation of the European Economic Community in 1957 was that all the official languages of each European member state have equal status and are treated in the same way in official debates. This arrangement still has its relevance today, the only difference being that the number of official languages has increased in 50 years from four languages in the beginning up to more than twenty (Aktuell 2006: 259). In daily life that means that the European Union with its enormous machinery of institutions, its growing population, budget and complexity must have, in my opinion, a common place to start from. It is important to emphasize, however, that *only* on the third level, i.e. public communication in European institutions, can having a few common languages decrease a lot of costs and unnecessary bureaucratic efforts, and at the same time, shape a European identity in a better way. At this level, Europe really comes together; representatives of each European member state are in direct contact with other ideas, attitudes and

opinions. An efficient communication in only a very few languages is the basis to prevent misunderstandings and other unintended obstacles.

But it is the most important duty of the EU to keep multilingualism on the second, the transnational, level. The variety of European languages, regional and national, is a historical tradition which has formed, and still forms, European identity. As the Commissioner for Education, Culture and Multilingualism Ján Figel argues in his recent interview at the European Day of Languages 2006:

"Multilingualism has been of the Union's life since its beginning with the Coal and Steel Community and the Economic Community [...] Next year, with the foreseen accession of Bulgaria and Rumania, and with Irish finally becoming an official language, we will have 23 official languages. Which do not represent by the way the whole spectrum of the linguistic diversity of Europe: today, the total population of the European Union is close to 500 million, and there are about 80 or so autochthonous European languages as well as languages of the many immigrant communities in the Union. This cultural and linguistic diversity is a tremendous asset that must be safeguarded and promoted."
(www.europa.eu/languages/en/document/90)

The present situation in Europe is on the one hand a dominant position of the English language and on the other hand the demand for a multifarious European culture. De Swaan (2003: 145, 175) regards the situation from another point of view. According to him,

"the competition between official national languages with „internal“ regional minority languages and „super-central“ languages like the English on the other hand make the languages of the European states without exception 'robust'. They have been under protection of the central states for two centuries and more [...] As long as each state continues to act as the protector of its national language, it is in no immediate danger, even when a large majority of citizens have acquired the super-central language."

Should we not distinguish between languages like French, German or Dutch and those of the new member states, for instance Polish or Slovenian? Or rather: Does every nation-state really act as a protector?

It is a normal tendency that we adopt words and meanings from other languages in everyday life. Nevertheless, we should take care that our national languages not be "contaminated" by the privileged EU working language, English (Van Els 2005: 271). In the next section, I will report the findings of my research on the German language and I will try to prove how far the growing English influence can be seen as a threat.

3. Anglicisms in the German language: A serious threat?

„Zu Michael ‚Ballack's Favourites‘ zählt natürlich das ‚Location Free Media Gateway‘ für den heimischen ‚Sat-Receiver‘. Zwischendurch fuhr der ‚Football Hero‘ womöglich mit dem ‚Clean Power Diesel‘ eines japanischen Herstellers zum nächsten ‚Meeting‘ der ihm zugeordneten ‚Task Force‘ in irgendeinem ‚Kaffeehouse‘ an der Ostsee. (Schreiber 2006: 185)

Of course, the German author is exaggerating in this case. The use of Anglicisms in German, however, has become increasingly intense since the early 1990s (Pfalzgraf 2003). According to a survey of the University of Hanover in 2004, among the 100 most used German words (nouns and adjectives) nearly one quarter had an English origin. In 1980 it was only one!

This development began about 15 years ago, when internationally-active companies began to use English words in their slogans, for instance, to freshen up their national image to a more cosmopolitan one (e.g. Lufthansa: "Thinking in new directions"; Ford: "Feel the difference"). Other domains, mainly media and advertising, followed immediately. Suddenly the trend to dress up everything with English became more and more visible. The flood of English words is endless. But not every word has the same meaning in the two languages: There is a distinction to be made between the adoptions of "real" English words, "half-real" English words (*teenie*) and finally "Pidgin-German". That is the German creation of new words which sound English, for example *Handy* or *mind map*. A shift of significance, however, is one of the most grave and dangerous changes. Words like *street worker* or *power woman* have a completely different meaning in the two languages.

Five thousand Anglo-American words can be counted. In total the German language (including all technical terms) has over 500000 words. This seems for many people like an insignificant number, but the main problem is the breakneck speed and the increasingly poor quality of the new terms and words that are entering the German language. Moreover, it is not only the adoption of new words in product names, commercials and show business, but English also influences "denglish" phrases (an English/German mix), syntax constructions and grammar. If a society adopts foreign words, syntax and sequences of words without changing and integrating them in a sensible and adequate way, the language will gradually begin to lose its face (Doehlemann 2003: 3). The German publisher Eduard Grosse demonstrates another dramatic example. The German language had been *the* world language in scientific areas such as medicine from the beginning of the 19th century until 1910 or even 1930. Today, it has lost over 80 percent of its influence. For instance, German specialized literature in chemistry is published almost only in English nowadays.

De Swaan (2003: 145) mentioned that „European languages are without exception robust.“ In many countries of the member states, for instance France, I would agree with his thesis. But in the case of Germany we have to be quite cautious. By looking back in history, with the crimes against humanity in the Second World War, a balanced self-identification of Germans was almost impossible. Speaking English seemed like an escape. It helped people to forget the past and at the same time gave them essential security (e.g. House 2003: 561; Schreiber 2006: 187). Opinion polls, made by DER SPIEGEL, found out that nearly every German (98%) considers that a correct oral and written style of German is very important or important. Only 2% did not regard this as serious. Furthermore, 66% consider that English expressions are more or less unnecessary, and less than a third believe that English terms are enriching the German language. This evidence suggests no real necessity for the absorption of new words, at least in most cases (Schreiber 2006: 182-198).

In 2001, Berlin's former minister of inner affairs, Eckart Werthebach, made the proposal to pass a law in order to protect the German language. But he did not get much acceptance in the *Bundestag* and like many deputies, Marianne Heuwagen (*SÜD-DEUTSCHE ZEITUNG*) considered that "not everything should be dictated by laws; to regulate a language and consequently thoughts with laws will only produce the opposite effect." Nevertheless, the increase of Anglicisms is regarded with serious misgivings by many Germans.

But how can we counter this expansion? I would propose three things:

1. The first step should be to replace unnecessary „loan words“ by adequate German words, for example *Fahrrad* instead of *bike* or *einkaufen* in place of *shopping*.
2. The second step is to criticize politicians, managers or advertising agencies who use 'denglish', because they both create it and perpetuate its use. By writing e-mails or letters to the editor, everybody has the chance to denounce jarring denglishism and to promote language development.
3. Finally it is the task of politicians, and thus the state, to create a multilingual Europe. There is no multiculturalism without plurilingualism, which is a long European tradition, a tradition of our art, our literature and our scientific discoveries. The primary challenge will be to teach children and encourage the media and advertising to be proud of their linguistic heritage (Dormoy 1996: 24-25).

However, we should not be forced to translate into German words like *computer*, *e-mail* or *countdown* which are already integrated in the German language. An exaggerated "language battle" would soon become ridiculous.

4. Conclusion

Is English a serious threat? English is doubtless a powerful language and the facts show that the importance of this *lingua franca* will increase even more in the near future. Today, we cannot yet say that English threatens the German language in a serious way. But it *can become* a real danger. The development of Anglo-American influences in our post-industrial information society and the opening (especially in Germany) to nearly everything that is *in vogue* in the USA does not warrant any other conclusion.

Reading a contribution of the Danish author J. Kornbeck (1996: 243), we become aware of an evident parallel between the Danish and the German languages:

"Yet none can predict how many domains Danish will cede to English: Fortunately there is no immanent logic deciding what will be held and what abandoned, nothing is decided *a priori*. We may rightly assume that a certain number of domains are likely to change language if nothing is done to preserve them as Danish domains."

The question arises whether Germany and France can establish in a counter-position to the English in the European Union. It seems that in the future this could be more than just a vision. France is still trying to keep its strong position; Germany does not really dare to do it, even though a "germanophone zone" besides an "anglophone zone" and "francophone zone" could have future chances. Both France and Germany could work as pioneers for a multifarious European language culture. If you speak French, it is easier to learn other Romance languages, for example Italian and Spanish. The capacity to speak German opens the door for other Germanic languages, for instance Dutch, Danish or Swedish.

It seems that using a few common languages in the European institutions can improve communication between the member states. That is the decisive part, if we want to build up multicultural competencies and thus a European identity among EU citizens. The European Union itself regards as its main task to maintain diversity, plurality and the values of each European state. Having only one *lingua franca* for transnational communication throughout Europe would pose the threat of uncritical linguistic assimilation. Moreover, we need multilingualism to shape the sense of European

identity in the minds of all EU citizens. I would take it for granted that people who speak one or several foreign languages have a more cosmopolitan view.

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