Sprachpolitik: Some Socio-Political Effects of English in Germany

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Language is a major component of identification for individuals and nations, and linguistic difference has manifested itself as an enduring political issue. This continues in the age of “globalization” when the presence of a powerful global force, the English language, now less attached to a particular national entity, is viewed as intrusive among language groups that are, including in the most economically and technologically advanced countries. Some groups and individuals within Germany’s postindustrial civil society are conducting an ardent defence of German against the encroachment of English. The German state, meanwhile, is pressured to support the national language while adapting, like the private economy, to new imperatives that tend to magnify the presence of English.

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Germanists indeed have much to do with the German nation, but there is an important aspect I do not want to forget. Germanistik is not only driven by German academe. It is an international discipline, which is at home in all possible countries and concerns itself there as a significant element of German culture.

The once highly regarded German language counts for less and less in academe. English continues further on its international victory march.

This paper examines some current effects of the English language presence in Germany. In the last half-century, the post-war occupation of (West) Germany and the post-Cold War surge of commercial forces worldwide contributed to a vast growth in the presence and usage of English, and at least some familiarity with it among much of the population. In recent years a rising discontent with this and associated developments has been simultaneously manifested, notably through the appearance of civil associations.

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whose declared aims focus on the prevention, or even rescinding, of “unnecessary” or “superfluous” English terms in the German-speaking area (*Sprachraum*). For supporters of this standpoint an avid espousal of German is what transpires in practice, with a correlated advocacy of a more extensive avoidance of English. The two quotations above reveal differing sentiments towards the status of German. In the former, the then Federal President, Roman Herzog, affirms an optimistic viewpoint of a language in a flourishing condition. The second imparts the relative decline of German and the rise of English. I contend that the prevalence and probable expansion of the latter in Germany will be accompanied by the intensification of an emergent political issue, firstly in civil society and later becoming a greater concern for the German state.

The scope of the enquiry comprises national and international dimensions and, while a primarily empirical approach is employed, it also possesses theoretical tangents. It is not easily situated within a single, clearly defined discipline. As the international relations theorist Martin Wight once remarked, “the purpose of building pigeon-holes is to reassure oneself that the raw material does not fit into them. Classification becomes valuable, in humane studies, only at the point where it breaks down.” From one perspective, a chiefly *comparative politics* setting is utilized to investigate the politicization of language use within the German domestic polity. Identification and evaluation of cultural-linguistic attributes and their roles in the socio-economic context reveals widely differing attitudes towards English, German, or combined usage. There is an appropriation by the “defenders” of German of a right to speak for the nation and even, given the historical role of the language, in defence of the nation itself. For others, less concerned by the trends, the employment of English is a response, passive or active, to economic and social realities.

From another angle, *international relations*, itself presently experiencing a certain fluidity, provides a disciplinary lens through which to observe the contemporary operation and impact of international or “external” influences. While their influence cannot be discounted, it is not, at least not directly, *states* that encounter one another here. However, the concepts of national identity and cultural hegemony, which sustain links to states, have resonance and are useful analytical tools. In addition, there is the advent—in the literature at least, and, conjecturally, beyond it—of the phenomenon of “globalization.” The confluence of language and economy complicates a universalist “class” explanation, demonstrating instead the *international* nature of current “global” processes, even where the emergence of a worldwide managerial elite is mooted. Linguistic evolution and economic processes are often closely linked, but as individual cases languages also have qualities which incline many of their speakers to resist others, even when