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TRENDS

The Language Trap

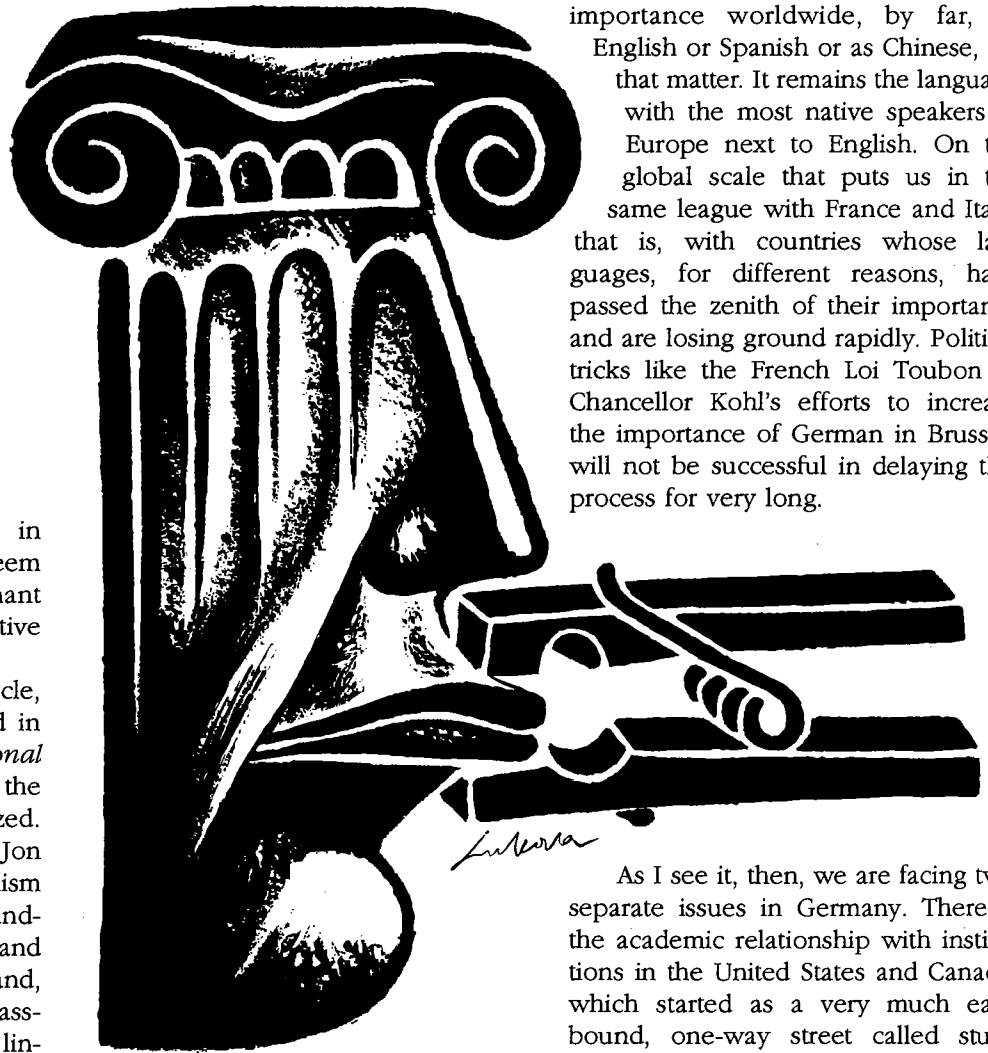
by Axel Markert

Should we all start teaching in English, we whose languages seem less important than the dominant idiom, or should we stick to our native languages, whatever the cost?

In Jon Heise's thoughtful article, *Nur auf Englisch?*, which appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of *The International Educator*, the American side of the issue at hand is carefully scrutinized. There are two sides to this coin, Jon says: on the one hand, monolingualism is a "voluntary and unbecoming handicap to international cooperation and understanding." On the other hand, countries not using English in the classroom will become "increasingly linguistically isolated as the rest of the world continues to embrace English."

Let me try to throw light on this

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importance worldwide, by far, as English or Spanish or as Chinese, for that matter. It remains the language with the most native speakers in Europe next to English. On the global scale that puts us in the same league with France and Italy, that is, with countries whose languages, for different reasons, have passed the zenith of their importance and are losing ground rapidly. Political tricks like the French Loi Toubon or Chancellor Kohl's efforts to increase the importance of German in Brussels will not be successful in delaying this process for very long.

problem from a German vantage point. German is not (yet) one of the languages which the EU euphemistically calls "less-spoken," like Finnish or Greek. But it does not have the same

As I see it, then, we are facing two separate issues in Germany. There is the academic relationship with institutions in the United States and Canada, which started as a very much east-bound, one-way street called study abroad and has gradually become a reciprocal affair named student exchange with substantial numbers in both directions. After a post-reunification boom, the interest in the German language seems to have dwindled

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again in North America, and with less American students coming here to study, we can send less German students to American schools under the exchange.

The interest level of the German students, however, continues to be high. It is, incidentally, also growing steadily for places like Australia and New Zealand, where student interest in going to Germany is even lower.

And there is, of course, an intra-European problem. The EU countries have had to struggle with a marked imbalance in their mobility schemes between the Anglo- and the non-Anglo countries from the start. Since English is the dominant foreign language in the Union, as it is worldwide, there are many more students interested in going to Ireland and the United Kingdom than there are students from the Anglo countries interested in studying on the Continent (the place that some of our British friends keep insisting on calling "Europe") in one of the native languages there. The relative size of academic institutions on the Continent and the Isles, ranging between the University of Edinburgh with maybe 15,000 students and the Complutense in Madrid with maybe ten times as many, compounds the problem. The LINGUA Program was mainly designed to come to grips with that dilemma, a dilemma, however, which has not been resolved despite the valiant efforts of the Union's member countries. There will always be, I dare say, more Greek students willing and competent to study in English than there will be Irish and British students able to do so in Greek.

For both issues, the North American (and Australian/New Zealand) and the intra-European one, I believe there is but one solution. It's neither "No — we don't want English to supersede the local language as a means of instruction!", nor is it "Yes — let's establish English instruction as

part of the regular educational system!" It's "yes" and "no" — we have to set a language trap. Among others, DIS, Denmark's International Study Program, could show us how to do that. Like the Dutch and the Swedes, the Danes, as a country with a less-spoken language, had to think about finding ways of attracting students from abroad much earlier than, say, the French or the Germans. The bait in their program is English language instruction, but once the trap has sprung, students may find that they



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have to (and want to?) learn much more Danish than they may have thought. Most of the DIS' students are put up with a host family and even in a cosmopolitan place like Copenhagen, it is difficult to survive without some Danish. And, of course, like people in any country, the Danes tend to be friendlier the more of their own language a foreigner can muster.

As I see it, we have to set similar traps in other non-English speaking countries if we want to ensure a balanced student flow within the EU and if we want to cultivate or build reciprocal exchanges with English-speaking countries overseas.

To be sure, I am very much

opposed to branch campuses of American (or British or Australian) universities in other countries. I remember visiting the Beutelsbach campus of Stanford-in-Germany in the early sixties where students, as I perceived it at the time, learned, talked, ate and behaved as they would have in California. This is not what I am aiming for, nor is a copy of the DIS which, for me, is too independent from the University of Copenhagen, with its own faculty and a special program, although the Rector of the University of Copenhagen continues to chair the DIS Board.

I would like to see the development of English language classes within our universities which would be offered to both native and visiting students. Besides offering an incentive for the students from abroad, this would also help us in internationalizing the nine tenths of our students who would not normally study in another country, even when the ambitious EU goal of 10 percent student mobility has been reached. And I would like to see us develop reasonably priced German language instruction so that exchange students with little or even no German could quickly achieve a "survival" level, and might even be tempted to go way beyond that, to a point where they might be able to take classes in German. It is certainly easier to motivate students towards reaching that goal when they are in the country, as we all know. The University of Tübingen's program for California State University students provides ample proof of that phenomenon and would encourage us to continue in that direction. For over ten years, California students with much less than the normal level of German have been brought up to par within one semester. Neither my colleagues in Long Beach nor I would have dared predict the success which this program has had when we started it.

Integrated English language instruction would, obviously, present yet another advantage. It would help internationalize not only our own students, but also our faculty. Given our experience with visiting faculty teach-

ing in English, students do not seem to have any problems with integrated English language instruction. Faculty will, in many cases, need new programs to help improve their mastery of English. "Having teachers stay and work in an English-speaking country might be among them (new programs)," as A.A. Vinke and W.M.G. Jochems note in their study, *Switching from Dutch to English as the Medium of Instruction: An Exploratory Study into Teacher Experiences*. And "A second option is to design and conduct an English language course that focuses on 'teaching in English.'" In the EU context, programs like LINGUA should be designed to provide assistance here.

I have been thinking about the "language trap" idea long enough to know where the problems are.

First and foremost, a series of inter-

nal obstacles will have to be overcome. Among others, as Jon Heise points out, the dignity and pride of some potential opponents in and outside of the universities could be threatened: "This feeling of indignation may be heightened when individuals from a strongly dominant country or society such as the United States ask people from a less powerful country or society to relinquish the use of a local language in favor of English." University regulations governing written and oral examinations will have to be changed.

Next, host families for every student in such a program will have to be found, to provide a living context where at least a modest level in the native language is mandatory. Finding home stays would present a tremendous problem in Tübingen, for example, and many of the host families

might be more eager to improve their own or their children's English than to help their guests learn German. This, needless to say, would be utterly counterproductive.

And last but not least, extra language instruction does cost extra money, and we cannot charge for that and ask for an equal number of tuition-free places for our students within the exchanges. Therefore, a new formula for the exchange balance would have to be created.

There is quite a bit of experience with these issues in all parts of the world, and if we start pooling the resources of the English-speaking countries outside of Europe with the possibilities of the intra-European mobility schemes, I am sure that the bait in our language trap would remain fresh.

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