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**English as the language of the European academic community:  
Questions from the Freie Universität Berlin**

Germany has traditionally been classified as a country that is positioned in Kachru's expanding circle (Kachru), where English is learned as a foreign language and used specifically for international communication. However, several socio-demographic factors like German reunification, europeanisation, and globalisation have caused the role of English within Germany to change. We now speak of a 'new Germany', a country which has an integral function in the EU and has a new important European capital, the city of Berlin. Berlin, a combination of east and west, old and new, traditional and modern, serves as a perfect example of the shape of things to come in an ever-expanding Europe.

In order to assess the role of English in Berlin, I have compiled a sociolinguistic profile of the English using community. This paper will present a summary of a small part of my profile: an analysis of the role of English in German academic communities. It will show that, especially in the academic community, English is being used increasingly, not only for international but also for European and national communication. However, the increased use of English does not come without problems. Therefore, I will also point out some of the linguistic issues that need to be discussed as a result of this increasing use of English. First, I will describe the uses of English in German academic contexts and in particular the situation at the Freie Universität Berlin where I have carried out a qualitative analysis of what German students use English to do.

I have carried out this study at the Freie Universität Berlin, a major German university with approximately 43,500 students. The students polled (in 101 questionnaires and 5 interviews) have a very advanced level of English: They all have American Studies or English Philology as one of their major or minor subjects and had between 8-10 years of English before entering university<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on my survey, see Elizabeth Erling, "'I Learn English since Ten Years!': The Global English Debate and the German University Classroom.," *English Today* 70 18.2 (2002).

## **English at German universities: The Freie Universität Berlin (FU)**

In the past, European universities were essentially national institutions and therefore German was the undisputed language of German universities. In general, the language of the German university is still German, but the use of English is increasing in Germany so rapidly that the question may be asked how long it will remain so. Until recently it was only individual courses with guest lecturers or seminar classes in English Philology and North American Studies departments that took place in English. Now English is fulfilling increasing functions at German universities and being used in more and more disciplines. The Freie Universität Berlin, for example, offers over twelve courses of study which are taught in English. An example of one such programme is the Masters in Agricultural and Rural Development, for which proficiency in English is a requirement for acceptance. English is necessary because much of the reading for the course is in English, the programme is open to foreign as well as to German students, courses are sometimes taught by guest professors from various other countries, and the degree programme is designed as preparation for work in international organizations.

But it's not only these programmes where English is regularly used. Students report that for almost any degree, at least a passive knowledge of English is mandatory—especially in the fields of political science, business, media studies and film, (not including the natural sciences like chemistry, biochemistry, physics, biology, and in medicine and law). In many cases, English is becoming *the* language of the scholarly domain.

### **The increasing use of English**

The increased use of English in education is due to a combination of global, European, and national initiatives. These can be summarized as the following:

#### Global developments that have resulted in the increasing use of English: the academic lingua franca

Evidence shows that English has taken over as an international lingua franca of science—it is the leading language of academic publications and conferences. Sociolinguistic accounts have shown that in almost every discipline, the most important publications appear in English (Coulmas: 183; Hilgendorf; Ulrich. 2001 Ammon). Many German journals no longer accept publications in any other language than English. English has even replaced German as a language of spoken academic communication, as conferences held in

Germany are usually held in English. Ulrich Ammon claims that “German is now probably used less than English, even within the German-speaking countries, for international communication; from some international conferences and journals of the natural sciences it has even come to be totally excluded” (: 349).

#### European developments that have resulted in the increasing use of English: Academic cooperation and exchange

European unification has also had the result of making German institutions less German. Due to the widespread interaction between European universities and the introduction of European Masters programmes, English is increasingly used as a lingua franca between German universities and other institutions. Guest professors at the FU often hold their lectures and require students to write papers in English. The popularity of EU exchanges such as Erasmus and Socrates results in intercultural academic exchange largely in English. As a result “more and more universities are beginning to offer programmes in English because mobile students are often unable to follow courses in the language of the host institution” (Mackiewicz: 1). In addition, students of English from Spain, for example, not only go to Britain to study English, but also to Germany: The Freie Universität accepts Erasmus students from European universities who come to take part in the university’s English programme. And German students who want to study abroad in one of several European institutions, in the Netherlands or Finland, for example, do not have to learn Dutch or Finnish for their studies but English.

#### National developments that have resulted in the increase of English: brain drain to brain gain

The increase of the use of English is also due to national reforms intended to make German universities more internationally accepted and more attractive to scholars. Germany is making attempts to attract international students, scholars, technicians, scientists, and doctors in an effort to fill the gap for technologically skilled labour: “the necessity to make German universities more accessible to foreign students . . . is considered important for the country’s economic and political future” (Ulrich. 2001 Ammon: 357).

Foreign students are more likely to study in Germany if they can use English at university. These students, who are generally equipped with some knowledge of English, find that it is too difficult to acquire a third language while pursuing their studies. Therefore, many departments have had to introduce more in English in

order to accommodate non-German speaking academics. Some students admit that they wouldn't have come to Germany if they didn't have the opportunity to study in English (in Pietschmann 2001: 6).

The increase in the use of English at German universities is also an attempt to better prepare students to meet the requirements of the international academic community. Through English, these students have more access to international scholars, universities, and texts. Proficiency in English is not only a requirement for going to English-speaking countries or contacting their scholars, but also for contact with many other countries that use English as an academic language, Israel, Greece, or Sweden. Even for those who do not plan to leave Germany, a knowledge of English can be necessary.

Another reason for reforming the German academic system is to keep German academics in Germany. "There is growing criticism recently over the increasing 'export' to the USA of highly qualified young scholars and technology experts as well as specialists in the natural sciences... and 14% of all young Germans with a doctorate go to the United States" (Center for Research on Innovation & Society 2000 in Hilgendorf: 163-64).

The collective reasons for the increasing use of English at German universities are well summed up by the message of greeting from the Minister for Education and Research of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Freie Universität's Conference on the European Year of Languages 2001:

"We want to make German students fit for the international labour market and to bind foreign students to Germany as a study location through attractive courses of study. Germany as a location for education must be liberal-minded, and tolerant in its dealings with foreigners. We must more intensively recruit young foreign scientists, students and skilled personnel. Germany needs highly qualified scientists from abroad. We want to enrich the global talent pool as well as make maximum use of it. It is only in this way that we can advance Germany's position as a centre of science" (Bulmahn: 41).

### **Issues arising from the increasing use of English**

There is obviously great potential in the prospect of having an international language in which scientists from every culture or nation could communicate, share ideas, and collaborate together on research. However, the

increase of the use of English in the German and international academic community provokes certain anxieties about the linguistic situation in Germany. In fact, this year there was an entire conference dedicated to the fate of European languages in the age of globalisation (Future of German). There are many linguistic issues that need to be researched and discussed due to the increase of English in German academic circles:

### **Will Germans continue to learn other languages?**

The strong presence of English in the academic context has produced the fear that German students will no longer learn other European languages. But one emphasis of European integration is multilingualism: The EU now has the goal that all Europeans should be fluent both in their mother tongue and English plus one other foreign language. The results of my data show that German students are fairly multilingual. Only 2% of students don't speak another foreign language beside English. 58% have learned at least two other foreign languages besides English and 18% have learned three additional languages, totalling five languages. The most common third foreign language is French. Spanish is the second most popular additional language and the third is Russian.

### **Will the international community continue to learn German?**

With the popularity of English, programmes for studying German as a second language abroad may become less popular. Learning German may not be seen as necessary for those who plan to go abroad to study in Germany if they know that they don't need German for studying or living there (Ulrich. 2001 Ammon: 359). But the increasing presence of foreign students in Germany could also result in an increase in learning German as a foreign language, as these foreign students will inevitably learn at least some German. For instance, 16% of the students surveyed at the FU were non-German and all of them were making efforts to learn German, even those Erasmus students who were in Berlin for one semester to study English.

Additionally, a study made by the Goethe Institute has found that, despite the rise of English, there were no fewer students of German in 2000 than there had been in 1995: The number of those studying German as a foreign language remains constant at 20 million, with increases in eastern Europe making up for losses in other areas of the world (Schuller: 8).

### **Will German continue to develop as an academic language?**

Some scholars (Denison; Hilgendorf) contend that the language situation in Germany is potentially diglossic, meaning that different languages are used for different functions. English is being progressively used in academic contexts, while German is only used for teaching at lower levels. This linguistic situation causes concerns that German may no longer develop as an academic language. For example, in July 2001, the German Press Association announced that:

“German has become a dead language to scientists, even to German scientist within their own country. . . . virtually all major German scientific journals are now published exclusively in English and decline to accept manuscripts written in German . . . . And worse, scientific lectures at German universities increasingly are conducted in English” (ddp).

This resulted in an appeal to promote German as a scientific language at state-funded institutions of higher learning.

However, there are also scholars that believe that a English and German can and do co-exist in the academic context. Brutt-Griffler argues that in the global context, English performs important functions without usurping the domain of national languages and that a feature of World English is stabilized bilingualism (Brutt-Griffler). De Swaan does not believe that the use of English for academic purposes will lead to the detriment of other languages, as “in all other domains the national languages will prevail and English will not easily make inroads there” (De Swaan).

However, these claims have not been backed up by linguistic evidence. Research methods should be devised to examine whether national or indigenous languages are being hindered by English and whether students lack academic language in German.

If this is the case, should methods be taken to ensure the use of national languages in the academic context, like requiring academics to publish in their national language, as suggested by (Gunnarsson)?

### **Are nonnative users of English disadvantaged in the academic community?**

The use of English as a scientific language is thought to give “an undeniable and enviable advantage to native speakers of that language” (Willemyns: 341), so it has often been claimed that German scientists and scholars are underrepresented or disadvantaged in academia. Research which is neither written nor translated into English may be completely ignored. Furthermore, German researchers may not be able to produce high quality texts in English, and they may not be as skilled in arguing their opinions and presenting their findings as they would be if they wrote in German.

### **How should the university system react to international academic English?**

#### **English proficiency requirement**

One potential solution that has been proposed in response to the increasing use of English is that university regulations change to make proficiency in English a requirement for all university applicants. This would create a situation where knowledge of English is a key requirement to higher education, as students incapable of following their courses in English would be prevented from going to university. However, this solution does not account for the fact that students with German schooling, even though they may have learned English for ten years, are generally not sufficiently equipped with the skills to function in academic English. Additionally, the 2001 PISA study (which compares international data on schooling outcomes) shows that German students’ general performance is below average, so it seems irresponsible of the university system to place even more pressure on schools. Additionally, this system would further disadvantage minority students who learn German as a second language and for that reason lag behind in English and are sometimes excused from learning a third language at school.

#### **Increase in English teaching**

An increase of English teaching could eventually strengthen the merit of German scholarly work. If some German scholars are now feeling marginalized due to their inability to interact in the international scientific community, an improvement in English teaching at university and more exposure to the language will help them to feel less so. Once German academics have more access to and experience with English, the problems of writing in English will decline. The use of English, the access to an international community, and proper instruction in English will result in a general mastery of the language.

However, although there is an increasing presence of English at German university, there is not an increasing presence of English being taught. The demand on students of all disciplines to be proficient in English is not met with opportunities to learn the language. This creates a serious problem for those without experience in academic English. The dominance of English in several academic disciplines may mean that students, especially undergraduates who don't have much experience with English, only semi-comprehend the literature given to them in their first years of study.

Many students think it is good that they have to study in English, but they find it difficult, especially in all the theoretical and discipline-specific discussions to keep up with the academic use of the language. As one student reported: "It would be great if we could take English courses in our institutes so that we could learn the language of our field"<sup>2</sup> (in Pietschmann). But, for reasons which may have to do with a lack of funding and resources, few such courses are offered.

Every semester the FU turns away hundreds of students that would like to study English but cannot. University policy insists that only students with majors or minors in English or American Studies are allowed to study English. There are no other services for students of other subjects. So all the students of political science, chemistry, medicine, and law, for example, who feel like they'd like to improve their English or need help writing an article, have nowhere to go within the university to receive language help. They are left to their school English to struggle by or they must turn to private language institutes, translators, or studies abroad. It's not only students but also German academics who are left to sink or swim, or "publish (in English) or perish". In a 1990 survey by Ammon, 57% of German academics reported having insufficient writing skills (according to their own standards), and 19% would not participate in conferences if the use of English was required (Ulrich Ammon).

### **International academic English**

Ulrich Ammon has argued that even with an increase of teaching academic English, norm expectations are too rigorous and writers and publishers in the non-English speaking world cannot compete with the English-

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<sup>2</sup>„Es wäre prima, wenn wir Englischkurse am Institut hätten, in denen wir auch die Fachbegriffe lernen“.



speaking world. The pressure to publish in English results in a lower quality of material published in non-English speaking countries, as nonnative writers do not always have access to native speaking proofreaders. The failure to follow Anglo-American grammatical or stylistic norms is often interpreted as lack of scientific rigour, vagueness, or lack of stringency (Clyne; Gunnarsson: 307). As an example, Ammon pointed to a review of his own book where Peter Trudgill criticized the quality of the academic texts written by German English-users:

“It also has to be said that some of the English written by non-native speakers is so bad ... as to be almost incomprehensible. Obviously, the editors did not have native speakers vet all such contributions” (Trudgill in Ulrich. 2001 Ammon: 354).

This disadvantage in English will remain as long as native speaker norms stay in place. For this reason, scholars such as Ammon, Jenkins, Modiano, and Seidlhofer support the establishment of a European English that would be norm-making, so the national peculiarities from non-English-speaking countries cannot be evaluated as incorrect (Ulrich. 2001 Ammon: 356; Jenkins, Modiano and Seidlhofer). This European English hybrid will increasingly look to continental Europe rather than to Britain or the United States for its norms of correctness and appropriateness (Jenkins and Seidlhofer). Since English is required for international communication rather than interaction with only native speakers of English, considerations for an appropriate international variety are in the interest of academic communication, which serves a global audience but has no corresponding linguistic standards.

### Problems of such a proposal

But is such a proposal for European English really feasible? Do we have the economic means to develop and implement a new set of English standards to be taught in the whole of Europe? If so, who should decide these norms and how should they be decided? Will a proposal for European English just evolve into “a single general European broken English (Janssen: 51)? And even if we do come up with a core of European English, how will it be implemented? Will Europeans want to speak such a variety? Do we need to interfere with European language use? Or will it simply come to pass that the academic community, which shares an international identity, will continue to interact and thereby naturally form an international standard of English .

## **Conclusion**

When considering the role of English at German universities we see that English is competing for a role as the language of academia. English is on the increase in every scientific discipline and students are having to cope with more academic English in their studies. What remains to be seen is how the European academic community will respond to the increasing use of English.

Ideally, individual departments should offer courses in English to their students so they can keep up with the English literature in their field. All undergraduate students, not only students of English, should be trained to read academic texts in English, and courses in academic writing should be offered for advanced students and researchers.

Moreover, it is not only linguistic training that is needed. Students should be made aware that writing in English requires different organisation techniques and styles of argumentation, and they should be given the option to either follow these norms or purposely flout them: their linguistic practice “should be informed by estimates of the possibilities, risks and costs of going against dominant judgement of appropriate [academic] usage” (Fairclough: 54). Students need to be aware of the consequences involved in their choice of using English as an academic language and they should be offered other choices in academic writing: they can follow the traditional Anglo-American writing norms, stand by their nonnative idiosyncrasies, or decide to write in their native language.

But, in an academic context faced with major economic and structural reform, will such efforts be taken? Or will English users be left on their own to make their way with the skills they have? And will English remain in the hands of native speakers despite its international community of users?

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