

LANGUAGE POLICY IN GERMANY AND BEYOND¹

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ABSTRACT

In Germany and Switzerland the world-dominion of English was already predicted in the 19th century. While today the impact of English on German has alarming consequences for many, English lexemes often fill a welcome gap in German. The role German politicians play in this field can at best be called ambivalent. Strongly negative is the part they played in the discussions about the reform of the orthography of German. The paper concludes with remarks on the language policy of the European Union for which a conscious policy of multilingualism is advocated.

Remarks on language policy in many countries must necessarily also include comments on the impact of English on the respective languages. I note with pleasure that among the many subjects treated by Professor Jacek Fisiak in insightful contributions, the Polish – English linguistic contact was among the first he dealt with. His Ph.D. dissertation “Zapożyczenia angielskie w języku polskim”, Łódź 1961, must be mentioned here, to be followed by quite a number of studies, such as on noun gender assignment of loanwords, on the adaptation of English verbs in Polish or on the word-formation of English loanwords in Polish (on the last-mentioned aspect see Fisiak in Viereck – Bald 1986).

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as well as Jacob Burckhardt were great names in the intellectual world of 19th century Germany and Switzerland respectively, the first philologists and the second a historian. Already in 1874 Burckhardt predicted the coming world-dominion of English with the alarming consequence: “The only rescue of books written in German is their translation into English” (Burckhardt 1874, translated from German). 130 years later this ingenious

¹ Paper read on the occasion of Professor Fisiak’s 70th birthday and retirement celebrations 19 April 2006.

prophecy is no longer a prediction, but a fact. In 2000 German-speaking people translated 5,519 books from English, whereas English-speaking people translated only 248 books from German. Germans translated 2,058 belletristic works from English – English-speaking people only 38 from German.

Even a quarter century before Burckhardt Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm expressed a specific misgiving about German in Chapter 6 of their *Deutsches Wörterbuch*: “It is the duty of linguistic research and, specifically, of a German dictionary to oppose the immoderate and unfounded penetration of the foreign word” (Grimm – Grimm 1854-1971, translated from German). A philologist called Grimm’s dictionary a Pyrrhic victory of Germanistics. By opposing the foreign word, it was argued, words such as *Kultur* were missing in the dictionary. Such reproach, however, must be modified: The volume that was to contain the word *Kultur* only appeared in 1873, that is ten years after Jacob Grimm’s death and fourteen years after the death of Wilhelm Grimm.²

During the Middle Ages the English influence on German was scarce. The few attested words belonged to the seafaring domain, such as *Boot* and *Dock*, and were originally only current in the Low German area. The 16th century is similarly negligible. From the mid-17th century the number of English loanwords or loan translations increased as a consequence of the beheading of Charles I (1649) and of English players who performed the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in Germany.³ Apart from political and literary terms some scientific words also came into German, such as *Logarithmus* 1652, *centrifugal* and *centripetal* 1687.

The 18th century witnessed a strong increase of English words in German due to the completely different character of the relations between the two countries. They were now based on an intensive study of English literature, philosophy and medicine.

The 19th century saw the most important English impact in material areas. It was the time of great advances in technology and the natural sciences and with many loans the inventions themselves came into the country, thus underlining England’s leading role in industry and the sciences. However, in social life England also enjoyed a high prestige, as can be seen by such loans as *Dandy* (ca.

² Wilhelm Grimm died in 1859 at the end of the letter D of the dictionary and Jacob Grimm died in 1863 when he was working on the word *Frucht* ‘fruit’. Jacob Grimm called English for linguistic reasons a world language (see his *Kleinere Schriften*, published posthumously in 1864: 293). Also Will (1903) was of this opinion. Brackebusch (1868), however, left the matter open.

³ Not only did they perform in Germany, but also in Poland. There were similar constructions to Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, fairly recently reconstructed in London, and to the London Fortune Theatre in Germany and in Poland. Here I would like to point out the work of the Poznań Shakespeare scholars Henryk Zbierski and Jerzy Limon on the theatre in Gdańsk, cf., e.g., Limon (1979).

1830) and *Snob* (ca. 1870). And last but not least a number of branches of sport were introduced in Germany, together with their special vocabulary. The word *Sport* itself is of English origin; it was used in German in the singular after 1850, prior to that the plural was much more common (cf. English *sportsman* > German *Sportsmann*, also used in a transferred sense of ‘a gentlemanlike person’). Horse-racing, boat-racing, tennis, cycling and, of course, football show the breadth of the English spheres of influence to be complemented by the originally Irish *steeplechase*, a word that was first translated literally as *Kirchturmrennen* ‘spire chase’, then as *Hindernisrennen*. The technical terms of tennis and football, soon translated into German, became accepted in the German of Germany, whereas in the German-speaking periphery, that is in Austria and Switzerland, the English expressions are often still used today.

In the last century, three phases can be distinguished. Quite naturally, the influx of English was reduced around the First World War. The interwar period was the first period when American English exerted a greater influence on German than British English, a situation that has not changed since then. Since the Second World War the English impact on German has assumed such dimensions that every attempt to record it quite fully becomes futile. It is especially noticeable in the media, in technology and the film industry. Thus (mostly) Americanisms occur especially often in those areas that are connected with technical innovations, such as information technology or new technology, abbreviated as IT or NT in German publications (the computer can be mentioned here), telecommunication from whence we get *Handy*, a pseudo-loan for English *mobile* or *cell phone*, youth culture (pop music), economy, clothes, science and politics. These loanwords mirror the status of the United States of America as the most technologically and industrially advanced country. Of course, the English influence must not only be seen negatively. Americanisms or Britishisms fill lexical or semantic gaps in German and there are numerous cases where they are to be preferred for stylistic purposes as they convey American or British colour, precision, brevity, vividness, tone or simply variation of expression (see Viereck 2004 for a rather detailed treatment of the impact of English on German from a historical and a linguistic perspective).

When a German equivalent cannot be found fairly soon, then the English word will stay. Often the English word is shorter. Small wonder with a language where such linguistic monstrosities exist as *Steuervergünstigungsabbaugesetz* ‘law on the abolition of tax rebates’, a matter of amazement or ridicule at least since Mark Twain. Such recent English additions as *Mobbing*, *Stalking*, *Dialler* or *Phishing*, an artificial word created from *password fishing*, will no doubt not be translated into German. Yet in very many cases the use of English words in present-day spoken and written German is excessive, unfounded and thoughtless and it is quite natural that this meets opposition especially from older peo-

ple who do not know (enough) English. Consequently many angry “Letters to the Editor” appear in German, Austrian and Swiss daily papers. A number of language societies exist in these three countries today which publish lists from time to time of unnecessary Anglicisms with their German equivalents. The following table reproduces excerpts of such a list, which altogether comprises 2,000 words put together by members of the association “Muttersprache” in Vienna:

Loanword	Suggestion for rendering in German	Number of synonyms
<i>Bar</i>	Schantisch, Schankstube, Schank, Tresen, Schenke, Alma mater alcoholica*	6
<i>Box</i>	Schachtel, Pferdestand, Montageplatz (car)	3
<i>Boom</i>	Hochkonjunktur, Blütezeit (economy)	2
<i>boomen</i>	blühen, wuchern	2
<i>Camping</i>	Zelten, Fahrt-	2
<i>clever</i>	klug, schlau, gewitzt, gerissen	4
<i>Container</i>	(Groß-)Behälter	1
<i>Diskette</i>	Speicherscheibe, Merkring*	2
<i>Dock</i>	Werft, Schiffsbaustelle	2
<i>Dress</i>	(Be-)Kleidung, Gewand	2
<i>Drink</i>	Trank, Trunk, Getränk	3
<i>Fair</i>	gerecht, ausgewogen, unparteiisch	3
<i>Festival</i>	Fest(spiel), Feier(spiel), Film-, Musik-, Theaterfest	5
<i>fit sein</i>	in Form, gesund sein	2
<i>Fitness</i>	Gesundheit, Kraft, Ausdauer	3

(Muhr 2004: 41)

Several comments must be made with regard to this table. First, the number of German lexical equivalents for the 15 English words is 2.8 on an average. That means three German words are necessary to render the content of an English loanword. This certainly cannot be called a facilitation of communication.

Second, words marked with an asterisk (*Alma mater alcoholica* for *Bar* and *Merkling* for *Diskette*) are new creations; they are simply ridiculous. And finally, Muhr (2004: 41-42) shows that some of the German equivalents are inaccurate (those for *Dock*, *Boom*, *Drink*), as they do not render the content of the English word correctly and some are simply wrong (those for *Dress* and *Container*), as their range of meaning is too general. As becomes evident, some of these language societies do themselves a disservice. They “care” about the German language in such a way that they feel obliged to translate or render every Anglicism into German with sometimes ridiculous or inaccurate results. Of course, these puristic procedures have a long tradition in German lands. As is the case today, they have always found their staunch supporters and their fierce opponents.

With regard to the excessive use of English in German some light becomes visible at the end of the tunnel insofar as the language societies are trying to put the problem into politicians’ minds. Let me just mention a few examples. These societies recently approached the appropriate Ministry with regard to not using English words on German stamps anymore. In 2003 the European stamp only featured an English word, namely *poster-art* (written in small letters with a hyphen),⁴ English only was also announced for the European stamp 2004, namely *holidays*. Due to protests it was issued with a bilingual imprint: *Ferien – Holidays* (both words in capital letters). On the European stamp for 2005 only *gastronomy* had originally been considered which was then changed to *Gastronomie*. It is debatable whether this is a successful word as it carries two meanings in German as against one in English.⁵ Finally with regard to stamps, the following stamps were issued in Austria in February 2004 and in late 2004:

⁴ According to the *OED*, s.v. ‘poster’, *poster art* is written in two words, whereas according to the new German orthography multiple-member words from English can be written either as one word or with a hyphen when the first member is a noun or a verb, e.g. *Chewinggum/Chewing-Gum*. In the case of adjective plus noun Anglicisms are preferably written in German in one word, although writing them as two words remained possible, e.g. *Highsociety/High Society*.

⁵ See *OED*, s.v. ‘gastronomy’ and *Duden Fremdwörterbuch*, s.v. ‘Gastronomie’.



The German version says: Together we maintain and shape the German language. *Deutsche Sprachwelt* is also the title of a newspaper that is devoted to the support of German. It appears four times annually.



X-Mas?

Wir feiern
besinnliche
Weihnachten.

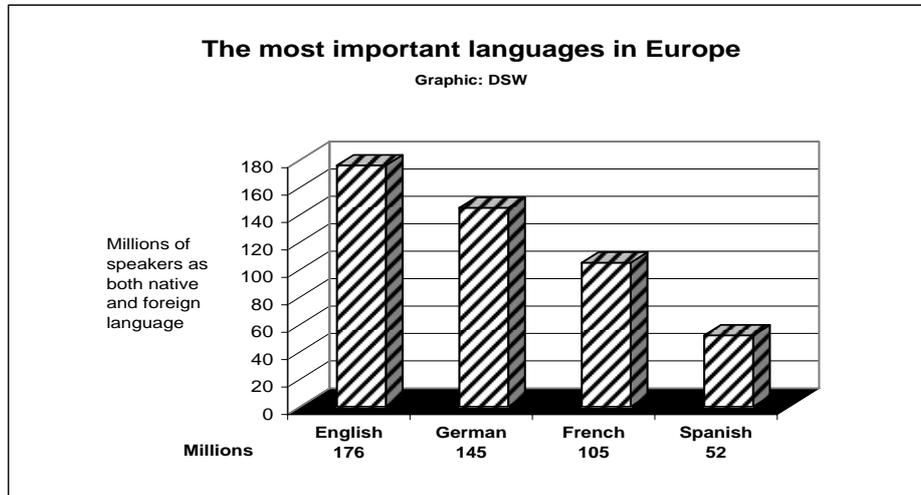
Nein danke!

X-Mas?

We celebrate a
Christmas of contem-
plation.

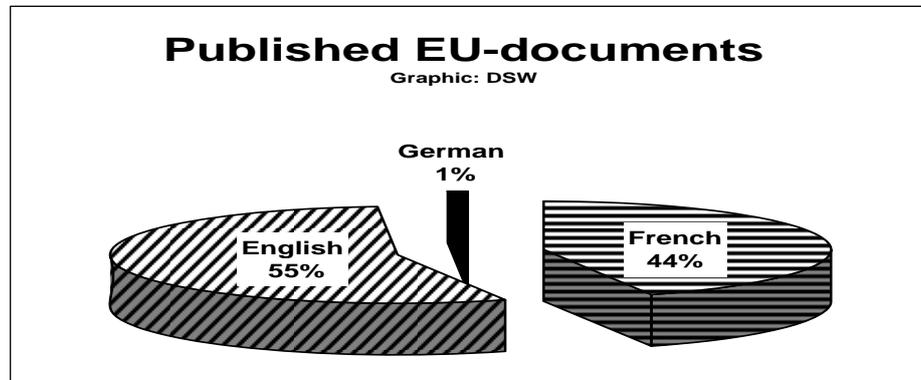
No, thank you!

The status of German in the European Union is also receiving more attention now among a number of German politicians. After all, German with 92 million native speakers comes in first place in the European Union, far above English and French. When foreign language users are taken into account, English, of course, takes the lead to be followed by German, French and Spanish, as Graph 1 shows:



(*Deutsche Sprachwelt* 14, 20th December 2003: 4)

When one compares this situation with the publications of European Union documents issued in the various languages an obvious discrepancy becomes noticeable, as Graph 2 makes clear.



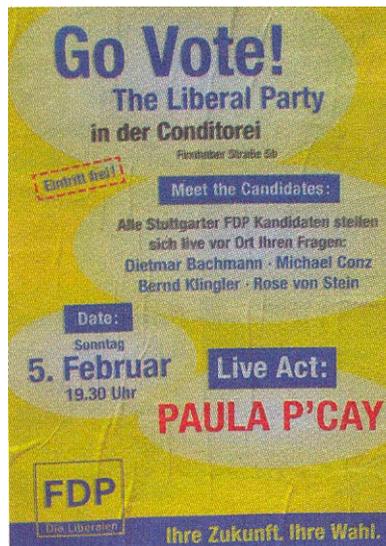
(*Deutsche Sprachwelt* 14, 20th December 2003: 4)

While 55% of the documents are published in English and 44% in French, only 1% is published in German. Consequently efforts are now being made on the German governmental level to introduce German as a third working language of the European Union, in addition to English and French, and also as a language of publication where German ought to be on the same footing with the

other two languages.⁶ Whether this aim will be attained, remains to be seen. The German demand for this status has come rather late. (I shall come back to the European Union language policy a little later.) For many years, probably too many, German politicians took no interest in the fate of their mother tongue and now they are forced by public opinion to do so.

Still, there are remarks by German politicians nowadays that are simply outrageous. Late last year the Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg, one of the 16 states the Federal Republic of Germany consists of, pleaded on German TV for English to become the working language in Germany, whereas German should remain the language of the family, of leisure time and of the private sphere in general (Paulwitz 2006: 7).

Perhaps the poster below can already be interpreted in this, foolish, direction. A German party calls itself “Liberal Party” – and the German – English mishmash that follows is simply unbelievable.



The disregard for the mother tongue has been and still is noticeable in Germany’s cultural policy. When, for instance, Fiat in Turin or Mitsubishi in Tokyo donate 50,000 US dollars or any other sum for German cultural institutes in

⁶ See *DIE WELT*, 21 April 2006, 4: The German Parliament threatened to deal with European Union documents only when they reach Parliament in German. Finland already announced that during her Council Presidency in the second half of 2006 most of the European Union contributions will only be published in English or French. During her first Presidency in 1999 Finland published the most important press reports on the internet website apart from Finnish in English, French – and Latin.

Italy or Japan, the German Finance Ministry takes away 41%. This is still the practice today. I call this theft of even foreign presents for the budget of the German language. It comes as no surprise, then, that the annual budget of German cultural institutions is being curtailed every year. In 2003 alone this led to the closing down of five cultural institutions. Ironically, in the same measure as the globalisation folly grows, the German government cuts down the financial means to teach German abroad. Whereas the government is not interested in the maintenance of German abroad, it shows an abstruse interest in the reform of its orthography with equally abstruse consequences which I would like to point out now.

In 1880 Konrad Duden, then director of a secondary school, published a slim volume entitled *Vollständiges Orthographisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* [Complete orthographic dictionary of the German language]. He accomplished something that has not been accomplished ever since, namely uniformity of spelling. Duden was very careful with standardizing the orthography; in 1901 he only abolished the *Th*, for instance, in *Thür* ‘door’ following the Prussian model, that has since been written without *h* and noted in 1902: 6 “If one had wanted to introduce a thorough reform, one would have lost the ground under one’s feet”(translated from German). The vision of German thoroughness, so-called, however, remained. Linguistic societies, philologists and poets alike developed systems of their own – often with the use of small initial letters. In 1920 a committee even advocated a “thorough phonetic reform”. However, nothing happened until the Nazis came to power. Their plan, far beyond reforming the orthography of German, had a perfidious logic: In order to enslave a people one only had to shatter its cultural pride. The most effective way to do this was to disturb the people’s linguistic self-confidence. A complete change of the orthographic system would lead to the downright upset of historical consciousness and to the devaluation of the writings of earlier times. Georg Schmidt-Rohr, a linguist, to whom we owe these “insights” was probably thinking of Turkey where the Latin alphabet was introduced in 1928. In any case, he thought something similar could be introduced in occupied eastern Europe. A new orthography for Ukrainian would set in motion a linguistic splitting up of the Russian empire, while in Poland, he thought, a new orthography could break up the Polish people’s strong sense of history.

However the linguist’s thoughts did not gain the ears of the Nazi bureaucrats any more – as some of them pursued similar aims, ironically for German itself. Of course, it was not called a breach with tradition which it actually was, but rather a “national awakening”. The new quite radical rules for the orthography of German were only published in 1944, fortunately too late to have any impact. At Hitler’s request thousands of booklets had to be pulped. Yet the same people who worked out the rules for the Nazis continued their work after the war. In

1954 they published demands that were almost identical with those of 1944. For these people, as for some linguists today, orthography is the visible expression of language – if words are pronounced the same, they ought to be written the same. A present-day Swiss linguist formulated: “When someone reads something written, then he/she transforms it to sound” (Saltzwedel 2004: 162, translated from German). If reading were to proceed like this, weeks would be needed to get through a daily paper. All these arguments are nothing but a justification for interfering with a well-established orthographical system and for prescribing new rules.

In 1996 a new attempt was made at reforming the orthography of German, which became effective two years later. The Ministers of Culture of the 16 German states decreed that the new rules become compulsory for German schools and for those working in the civil service by August 1, 2005. However, it soon became clear that this was not likely to happen without many changes. Millions of euros have been invested since 1996 in producing new dictionaries and school books. The Ministries of Culture exerted a strong pressure on school book publishers threatening that if publishers remained critical of the orthographical reform no school books would be ordered from them any more. This threat did not remain without effect. In 2004 the new *Duden* appeared in its 23rd, completely revised and extended edition. It was reviewed in a leading German daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, under the title “Das unmögliche Wörterbuch” [The impossible dictionary]. Some of the strangest rules were abolished there and new ones introduced following a decision of the Ministers of Culture taken in June 2004. It is quite clear, however, that these changes make all the dictionaries worthless that appeared between 1996 and 2004. Authors of literary works never followed the new rules, the daily paper just mentioned, soon reverted to the old spelling and punctuation again and two of Germany’s largest press publishers followed suit, namely the Axel-Springer-AG and the SPIEGEL-Verlag. With their various publications both houses reach 60% of the population. In an opinion poll carried out in September 2004 only 11% of the population were in favour of the reform, 60% were against and 29% were undecided (*DER SPIEGEL* 43, 18th October 2004: 50).

When the politicians installed a Council of German Orthography in October 2004 they saw to it that the opponents of the reform were in the minority. The work of this Council remained patchwork, also because the ministers had decided beforehand what should be dealt with. Aspects of the reform that according to their view were not controversial were banned from any discussion. Thus many shortcomings remain, which I cannot deal with here. I would like to mention just one example from the section how words should be divided: according to the *Duden Fremdwörterbuch* of 2001 *Teenager* can be divided not only as *Teen-ager* ‘a boy or a girl between the age of about 13 to 19’, but also as *Tee-*

nager which, taken literally, means ‘a gnawing animal living on tea leaves’! This nonsensical division has now been rectified and will be changed in the forthcoming new edition of the *Duden Fremdwörterbuch*. However, there are many more such strange results (see also Ickler 2006). All this shows how wise Konrad Duden was over one hundred years ago when he introduced only very few changes in order to preserve uniformity of spelling. The majority of the members of the speech community must find new rules sensible, otherwise they are not prepared to follow them. Decrees alone do not work any more. In the area of German orthography, at least, we find today a “collective disobedience”. There will now be two ways of spelling: one of the ministers of culture and one of the people.

I already mentioned the globalisation folly. *Globalisation* is a fairly new word. According to the *OED* it was coined in 1961; in the early 1990’s it appeared as *Globalisierung* in German. Languages belong to the most important victims of globalisation. The unity of the market, the uniformity of its actors and the monotony of its language form the “survival-kit” with which the survival is ensured. It is, thus, in an unfortunate way consequential that with the increasing globalisation process the interest of the German government in maintaining German abroad diminished. The linguistic norm is English: *one* world *one* language. Linguistic unitarism is part of an ideology that reduces a complex sociocultural reality to such an extent that a simple “rational” action becomes possible with quick decisions. The only concern of the present-day global players is: How can the unitary language English be imparted to the new generation as early as possible and with the least possible expense? The people for whom this trend is so advantageous have the power to enforce such developments. In Germany these tendencies become apparent in introducing courses of studies at various universities where the sole medium of instruction is English. I do not mean English studies, of course, where English as a medium of instruction is natural. On the European level the Bologna protocols are an additional example of this trend.

As an option for Europe and as a perspective for the world, multilingualism opens new ways and offers other possibilities than a world-wide uniformity. Let me continue and conclude with some remarks on the language policy of the European Union. On a supranational level the preservation of European multilingualism has in principle been the aim of the European language policy ever since the 1950s; it is part of the European peace policy. After all, language rights are human rights. The European Union propagates quite consciously a policy of multilingualism, not of bilingualism, because the preservation of many languages means the promotion of individual multilingualism and not of individual bilingualism. Those who are “only” bilingual, who know their mother tongue and English as a second language, tend to enforce the one foreign lan-

guage they know as the only valid one; in the end they push forward a leading language policy. On the other hand multilingual speakers who speak more than one foreign language attribute importance also to other languages, not just to one lingua franca. That is why the white book of the European Union postulated that every citizen should master three languages of the Community, that is more than only the lingua franca in addition to the mother tongue. That was also the demand made for the “Year of the Languages” in 2001. This is the theory; the practice, however, is different, as is so often the case.

In December 2000 an inquiry was carried out to ascertain how many people spoke no foreign language at all. This inquiry, published in 2001, revealed that in Europe as a whole this was true of 47% of the population. However behind this average value enormous national differences are hidden: In the United Kingdom 66% of the population spoke no foreign language, in Austria 48%, in Luxembourg only 2%. In the Scandinavian countries the percentages are relatively low, in Italy, Spain and Portugal relatively high. With those who speak a foreign language, English – unsurprisingly – occupies first place with 41%, to be followed at an enormous distance by French with 19%, German with 10%, Spanish with 7% and Italian with 3%.

These results show that there is a drastic contrast to the outlined principles of European language policy. But also the practice in inter- and supernational communication shows that reality differs widely from these ideals. The European Council that propagates multilingualism uses only English and French as working languages. The same is true of, for example, the WEU (Western European Union) in London, the EFTA (European Free Trade Association) in Geneva, the ESA (European Space Agency) in Paris and the broadcasting stations in Geneva.

The fact that all national languages of the member countries are official languages of the European Union is most visible (and audible) in the European Parliament, for which it is of central importance, but not in the European Commission. Also at the European Court of Justice all national languages – including, of course, Irish – are procedural languages. The question, however, is how many national/official languages a member state has. As to the Republic of Ireland, both Irish and English are official languages. But Spain witnessed a heated debate on the status of her regional languages Basque, Catalan and Galician. The regional-nationalist parties demand an official status for their languages in Brussels and Strasburg, which they at present do not even have at home. The Spanish Foreign Minister, moreover, suggested that also Valencian should receive official European recognition – a move strongly opposed by the Catalans who argue that Valencian is nothing but a dialect of Catalan. Thus the present discussions about the new European Constitution and the possible compromises to be reached in the various member states to ensure a majority for the

Constitution may well have an influence on the number of the official languages the European Union will finally have.

In view of both the practice of the European language policy and of the recent additions to the European Union, suggestions to reform the European language policy were made. One such suggestion was a restriction to the five languages spoken most often in the European Union, namely German, English, French, Spanish and Italian. This suggestion is completely unrealistic, as it ignores both Finno-Ugric and Slavic languages. Another suggestion, made by a German, and, earlier still, by a Dane, was to plead for a single leading language, which naturally would be English, at least for the internal use of the European Union. Such suggestions mainly arise from the fear that with the increasing number of languages the danger of inaccuracies and semantic fuzziness in translations will increase.

That semantic considerations are of importance also when only three languages are involved will be illustrated with the following example: The first sentence of the second paragraph of the preamble of the European Fundamental Rights Charter, published on 18 December 2000, reads:

Conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity.

In dem Bewußtsein ihres geistig-religiösen und sittlichen Erbes gründet sich die Union auf die unteilbaren und universellen Werte der Würde des Menschen, der Freiheit, der Gleichheit und der Solidarität.

Consciente de son patrimoine spirituel et morale, l'Union se fonde sur les valeurs indivisibles et universelles de dignité humaine, de liberté, d'égalité et de solidarité.

The Germans wanted a reference to the religious heritage that the French strictly refused to accept. As for the French *spirituel* had no association with religion, in contrast to English *spiritual*, the French and the Germans can now read into the text whatever they like.

38% of the population of the European Union are of the opinion that it will be inevitable to have a common language for the internal communication of the European Union, especially after the enlargement of 2004, but 47% are against that. How the 38% would react should they no longer use their own language, remains to be seen. According to these and other results the single leading language model does not seem to be feasible at present, not even for the internal communication of the European Union. A policy of multilingualism, on the other hand, can only succeed with a conscious language policy and language planning. A *laissez-faire* policy that leaves the linguistic development to the

laws of the so-called free market will in the long run probably lead to the monopoly of a single lingua franca. Such a conscious language policy and language planning, however, is noticeable in Europe only in modest beginnings; in Europe questions of language policy are mainly taboo. That is why a transparent public debate on these aspects is urgently needed.⁷

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⁷ This debate should also include a discussion of the pros and cons of the use of the neutral planned language Internacia Lingvo, commonly known as Esperanto (cf. Bormann – Frank 1994). For interesting suggestions see also Creech (2005).

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