

About the blessing of linguistic diversity in the field of education (and beyond)

Learning through drama from the Irish past

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In this article performative teaching practice becomes a departure point for reflections on linguistic diversity in the field of education. Reference is made to personal experiences with linguistic (in)sensitivity in intercultural encounters, and personal views are expressed to spark off a broader discussion on the development and implementation of linguistic diversity policies.¹

1 Introduction

Wanjih yimeng kumwolkayindanj.

Dja nang manbe kumwolkayindanj, nang kamak rowk.

Just imagine you were asked to pronounce these words and speak these sentences.

This is exactly what I asked the participants to do who took part in a professional development workshop at the Theatre Pedagogy Centre Bressanone, in the trilingual region of South Tyrol (approx. 70 % of the population use German as their first language, 25 % Italian and 5 % Ladin).² The workshop, presented in more detail in Schewe (in print), focused on the pedagogical challenges associated with Europe's increasingly multicultural and multilingual educational landscape.

In various improvisation exercises the participants engaged with aspects of cultural otherness, including an exercise in which the participants, in small groups, rehearsed a scene in which they had to use English, another (invented) language as well as a puzzling prop (see Fig. 1), a wooden stick that I had cut notches in.

¹ Note that this article builds on the author's contribution to the Symposium History in Stories: The Irish Past and the Challenges of the Present, organised by Irish Studies Würzburg (July 1, 2022). The Symposium Proceedings, edited by Bergmann & Eisenmann, are scheduled for publication in 2024.

² These are approximate figures as, depending on the source of information, percentages slightly differ. Italian and German are the two official languages in the region of South Tyrol, however in some districts Ladin serves as a complementary official language at local level.



Figure 1: A wooden stick used as a prop in a workshop

The participants, all of them experienced drama and language teachers, came up with impressive performances. One group, for example, set the scene in an Asian country and turned the prop into a sacred object in a fake shamanistic ritual for gullible English tourists.

2 The criminal devaluing of a language

After a discussion of the scenes, including the stereotypical elements that had emerged in the improvisations, the participants were shown a power point slide that revealed the historical connotations, for Irish people, of a stick with notches cut into it:

The “tally stick”, or “bata scoir” in Irish, was introduced into classrooms. Children attending school had to wear a stick on a piece of string around their necks. Each time they used Irish, a notch was cut into the stick. At the end of the day, they would be punished according to how many notches they had on their stick. (Ask About Ireland, n.d.)

The participants could not believe their eyes, none of them had ever heard about the shocking 'educational practices' applied by the British in 19th century Ireland (and in other colonised countries). However, another internet information source offers the additionally perplexing perspective that such practices were said “to have the support of many parents who saw the English language as necessary to their children's future advancement” (Let's Learn Irish Forum 2020).

Given my special interest in performative teaching and learning, I introduced the workshop participants to two Irish theatre plays with a specific focus on aspects of linguistic diversity. In both plays several of the characters are forced into making difficult language choices for themselves.

Workshop activities initially focused on Brian Friel's play *Translations*, originally published in 1980, to explore aspects of linguistic diversity from a (post)colonial perspective. The play is

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set in 19th century Ireland, when the British Army conducted the first cartographic survey of Ireland that resulted in the anglicisation of Irish place names and thus accelerated the decline of the Irish language.

Friel's play has become a classic of Irish drama and, according to Fintan O'Toole, "renowned worldwide 'as a definite statement about the nature and meaning of colonialism'" (as quoted in Brannigan, 2004, p. 71).

Translations was performed in the Abbey Theatre and embarked on a nationwide tour in 2022. The director of the production, Caitriona McLaughlin, emphasised the ongoing relevance of *Translations* for people in Ireland and beyond:

2022 marks the centenary of partition on this island. Politically and socially, we are in the process of reframing our relationship with Europe and the UK, negotiating self-determination within a framework of collaborative cooperation. However, even as I write, oppressed peoples across the globe are being invaded, eroded and erased by neighbouring states with imperial imperatives, keen on regime change and on the removal of national and cultural identity. The importance of our language, of representation and identity, so central to how we see ourselves in the world, is again both urgent and necessary. Great plays constantly find fresh resonances.³ (McLaughlin, 2022)

The other play, *The Speckled People* by Hugo Hamilton (2011), centres on the playwright's childhood in 1950's Dublin. Workshop activities focused on Hamilton's experience of growing up in Irish (the father's first language), German (the mother's first language) and English (the language outside the home), including situations of being bullied by other children because he is 'speckled' (between languages and cultures). For example, in improvisations based on the following scene, the participants explored the damaging impact of the father's rigid language regime on everyone in the Hamilton family:

FATHER: There is no English in this house.

MOTHER: You mean there is no English to be heard in this house.

BOY: Only German or Irish.

FATHER: Only German or Irish.

MOTHER: To be heard.

³ Currently we are confronted with the daily disturbing news on the harsh reality of Russia's neo-imperialistic war against Ukraine. Olszewski Machado (2020) and Franke (2023) offer noteworthy perspectives on how the Russian language has been instrumentalised to expand Russia's sphere of influence.

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FATHER (*raising his voice*): There will be no English spoken under this roof.
Is that clear?

Silence. FATHER *sits down in his armchair and picks up his book.*

(Hamilton 2011, p. 15)

What a paradox it seems that Hugo Hamilton's father who turned into a fiery Irish nationalist and hated the British Empire (and English language), applied punishment methods reminiscing of oppressive colonial practices.

The discussion that followed the performative activities resulted in the interim conclusion that language education, when it is driven by an imperialistic agenda, causes serious harm; and equally so if it is driven by an extremely nationalist agenda. The point was also made that any religious instrumentalisation of education is problematic, for example, when texts from holy scriptures are engaged with in an uncritical way. In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, for example, linguistic diversity is portrayed in a very negative light, as a divine punishment for human greed and arrogance. Any uncritical engagement with this story would allow for a problematic association between linguistic diversity and (fear of) punishment.

However, pedagogies of the 21st century, including performative pedagogy (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020; Piazzoli & Dalziel, 2024), aim to create anxiety-free environments in which students feel safe and linguistic diversity is experienced as a blessing, because it provides immense opportunities for intercultural learning and personal development (see, for example, Montanari & Panagiotopoulou, 2019; Tracy & Gawlitzek, 2023; Müller et al., 2023).

3 Respect for all languages, valuing their beauty and uniqueness

All languages are unique, deserve respect and have their own beauty, including the languages of former colonial powers. For example, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971, celebrates the beauty of the Spanish language when in his memoirs he writes:

... son las palabras las que cantan, las que suben y bajan... Me prosterno ante ellas... Las amo, las adhiero, las persigo, las muerdo, las derrito... Amo tanto las palabras... Las inesperadas... Las que glotonamente se esperan, se escuchan, hasta que de pronto caen... Vocablos amados... Brillan como piedras de colores, saltan como platinados peces, son espuma, hilo, metal, rocío... (Neruda, n.d., p. 53)

[... it's the words that sing, they soar and descend ... I bow to them ... I love them, I cling to them, I run them down, I bite into them, I melt them down ... I love words so much ... The unexpected ones ... The ones I wait for greedily or stalk until, suddenly, they drop ... Vowels I love ... They glitter like colored

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stones, they leap like silver fish, they are foam, thread, metal, dew ...]
(Neruda 1974, p. 53-54)

It is interesting to note that, for Neruda, the Spanish language remains ingloriously associated with Spain's colonial oppression of Chile's indigenous communities and their languages, but has also become a vehicle of cultural empowerment:

Qué buen idioma el mío, qué buena lengua heredamos de los conquistadores torvos... Todo se lo tragaban, con religiones, pirámides, tribus, idolatrías iguales a las que ellos traían en sus grandes bolsas... Por donde pasaban quedaba arrasada la tierra... Pero a los bárbaros se les caían de las botas, de las barbas, de los yelmos, de las herraduras, como piedrecitas, las palabras luminosas que se quedaron aquí resplandecientes... el idioma. Salimos perdiendo... Salimos ganando... Se llevaron el oro y nos dejaron el oro... Se lo llevaron todo y nos dejaron todo... Nos dejaron las palabras. (Neruda, n.d., p. 53-54)

[What a great language I have, it's a fine language we inherited from the fierce conquistadores ... They swallowed up everything, religions, pyramids, tribes, idolatries just like the ones they brought along in their huge sacks ... Wherever they went, they razed the land ... But words fell like pebbles out of the boots of the barbarians, out of their beards, their helmets, their horseshoes, luminous words that were left glittering here ... our language. We came up losers ... We came up winners ... They carried off the gold and left us the gold ... They carried everything off and left us everything ... They left us the words.] (Neruda 1974, p. 53-54)

Similarly, when in the late 18th century English became the predominant language in Ireland, Irish writers gradually began to embrace English as their medium of aesthetic expression. Over time many have excelled in the field of English literature, including Nobel Laureates William Butler Yeats (1923), George Bernard Shaw (1925), Samuel Beckett (1969) and Seamus Heaney (1995).

In the context of cultural and linguistic diversity perhaps James Joyce – fluent in several languages and strongly opposed to imperial dominance as well as extreme forms of nationalism – deserves special mention. Given the recent dramatic decline of the Irish Catholic church, it is noteworthy that already a century ago Joyce rejected the increasingly dominant role of the Catholic church and its very narrow understanding of norms. In response to what he felt were regressive political developments in Ireland, he created the pioneering vision of a culturally and linguistically diverse modern Europe in which divisions and borders were to become increasingly meaningless. In *Finnegans Wake*, first published in 1939, most of the characters are multilingual and "an estimated total of 50 distinct languages (not counting regional variants of English) feature in the novel." (McCreehy, 2017, p. 1).

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Despite the predominance of the English language, Irish was established as Ireland's first national language, and was awarded full status as an official language of the European Union in 2022. The advantages that come with a bilingual (Irish-English) competence cannot be underestimated.

Irish citizens, due to their English language competence, especially since Brexit, have a competitive advantage on the international job market. As bilinguals find it easier to learn an additional language, their job prospects would even increase further if they were fluent in an additional (EU-) language.⁴ However, most young Irish graduates look for work experience in other English-speaking countries (e.g., USA, Canada, Australia, UK) and tend to shy away from the challenge of paving their way into a non-anglophone culture. Fischer (2022) critically analyses this trend in his very insightful reflections on 50 years of Ireland's EEC/EU membership. He emphasises, for example, that "Irish education has lost much of its European focus, and consequently the EU is less on young people's radar than it used to be" (p. 30), and he reminds us that "against the massive daily onslaught of Americanised social media culture, the EU is the last bastion of cultural and linguistic diversity". (p. 39)

Previous Irish generations experienced how a colonial power aimed to devalue the Irish language by applying a rigid 'English only' policy. Might this scarring experience have made the Irish particularly sensitive to any nation, ethnic group or individual fearing for their linguistic identity, and made them particularly empathic towards other languages and cultures?

4 Linguistic (in)sensitivity and identity

"We went on holiday to Spain and had a problem with the taxi drivers as they were all Spanish." A search on the internet for "ridiculous complaints received by travel agents" will bring up websites with this and further examples of such incredible cultural insensitivity.

On a recent visit to Berlin, I observed of the following incident:

A young woman drives slowly through a narrow street with a rented van. Driving is tricky as there are cars parked on both sides of the street. I see another person on the passenger seat. The van stops near the green space, exactly where I am standing. As soon as the van stops, I hear loud honking noises from a red Audi behind. A guy, around 30 years of age, storms out and shouts at the young woman: "Why are you stopping, what the f*** is

⁴ Even though Irish citizens are expected to learn Irish during their school years, this does not mean that they will be fluent in Irish when they leave school. They certainly will have some familiarity with Irish, but only a small percentage will achieve a fully bilingual (Irish-English) competence. For more recent perspectives on the state of the Irish language see, for example, Minihan & Ó Caollaí (2023).

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going on?" The angry guy is not approaching the van driver to say politely hello and enquire, in German, what is happening, but feels entitled to vent his anger in rude English. The arrogance and the matter-of-factness with which he shouts, in English, is astounding. The young women get out, they seem very stressed. They tell me that they are moving into new flat in the house on the opposite side of the street. I give them a hand to unload a larger piece of furniture. This takes perhaps three minutes. They then drive on to park the van in a side street.

The kind of cultural insensitivity the young man displays in this situation, including his lack of effort to offer a "Hallo" or ask a simple question in German, is quite amazing. Ignorance and arrogance (as perhaps unconsciously adopted imperial behaviour patterns?) are likely to cause considerable harm in intercultural encounters.

However, in everyday life we fortunately also come across intercultural encounters that turn into a mutually enriching experience and help to build a diversity-sensitive society. Speakers of English as a first language, who shy away from an engagement with a foreign language, can sometimes be heard saying "I am not good at languages". However, an Irish friend of mine who recently came to visit me in Berlin did not come up with such an excuse, but in preparation for his trip went to the trouble of looking up some basic words and expressions in German. In cafés and restaurants he seemed to quite enjoy saying "Guten Tag", order dishes or ask for the bill in German, with the staff often returning his effort with a smile. As the following example shows, asking a simple question can make a big difference:

A share taxi on the way to Dublin Airport. After the first exchanges with the driver the passengers relax in their seats, the taxi is slowly moving through the inner-city traffic. On the motorway the driver receives a call. He begins to speak into the mobile that is mounted on the dashboard, in a language that the passengers do not understand. Perhaps he is talking to a good friend or family member? The conversation continues for several minutes. As soon as it ends, one of the passengers says to the driver: "Do you mind me asking: The language you just spoke in, what language is it? I quite liked the sound of it." The taxi driver replies: Yoruba. He is delighted to explain that Yoruba and Hausa are two of Nigeria's major native languages and that English, while it is the official language, is not necessarily spoken by people in the more rural regions, as they tend to communicate in one of the hundreds of native Nigerian languages.

A taxi trip turns into an interesting, mutually beneficial intercultural encounter. The driver appreciates the opportunity to talk about his home country and its impressive linguistic diversity, and the passengers are gifted with new cultural knowledge.

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According to the *European Migration Network* (n.d.), Ireland is becoming an increasingly multicultural society. In everyday day life, encounters with non-Irish nationals (in 2022 approx. 13.8% of the population) have become a normality. While most of them, over the years, will achieve a very impressive level of competence in English, many will continue to speak English with a slight, or sometimes stronger, accent.

Yoko Tawada (2020, p. 1) reminds us that an accent is an expression of an individual's linguistic and personal identity and that any encounter with an accent, if we are curious enough, potentially widens our horizons:

Der Akzent ist das Gesicht der gesprochenen Sprache. Seine Augen glänzen wie der Baikalsee oder wie das Schwarze Meer oder wie ein anderes Wasser, je nachdem, wer gerade spricht. Die Augen meiner Sprache enthalten Wasser aus dem Pazifik, wo zahlreiche Vokale als Inseln schwimmen. Ohne sie würde ich ertrinken. ...

[The accent is the face of the spoken language. Its eyes shine like Lake Baikal or like the Black Sea or like another water, depending on who is speaking. The eyes of my language contain water from the Pacific, where numerous vowels float as islands. Without them I would drown...]

Der Akzent ist eine großzügige Einladung zu einer Reise in die geografische und kulturelle Ferne. In einer modernen Großstadt muss man stets darauf gefasst sein, mitten in der Mittagspause auf eine Weltreise geschickt zu werden. Eine Kellnerin öffnet ihren Mund, schon bin ich unterwegs nach Moskau, nach Paris oder nach Istanbul. Die Mundhöhle der Kellnerin ist der Nachthimmel, darunter liegt ihre Zunge, die den eurasischen Kontinent verkörpert. Ihr Atemzug ist der Orient-Express. Ich steige ein.

[The accent is a generous invitation to a journey into geographical and cultural distance. In a modern metropolis, one must always be prepared to be sent on a trip around the world in the middle of the lunch break. A waitress opens her mouth and I'm off to Moscow, Paris or Istanbul. The waitress's mouth is the night sky, underneath is her tongue, which embodies the Eurasian continent. Her breath is the Orient Express. I get on.]
(English Translation, MS)

5 How to cultivate linguistic sensitivity in institutions

Like an accent is an expression of personal and linguistic identity (Werani 2023), so is a person's name. By using a person's name in conversation and making a special effort to pronounce their name correctly, we create a culture of respect.

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When I came to University College Cork in 1982 to take up a temporary lecturing post in German, initially it was challenging to pronounce the students' first and family names correctly, especially those names on my class lists that were spelt in Irish.

For anybody Irish, it would equally be challenging to correctly pronounce the names of persons from a non-Irish/non-anglophone background.

Let us take my first name 'Manfred' and surname 'Schewe', as an example. Over the years I have come across an impressive range of pronunciation attempts and my daughters sometimes came back from school and gave me the most recent example of how they had been called upon by teacher X. They sometimes found it funny, and other times not funny at all.

Remember that a person's name is to that person,
the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
(Dale Carnegie)

This quote, often referred to by communication skills coaches in the US (see, for example, [Dale Carnegie Training of Central & Southern New Jersey](#)), captures well why in education (and beyond) we should try our best to pronounce a person's name correctly. We might initially not get the name fully right but can always look for assistance by checking with that person directly. The following examples give an idea of how institutions could assist in this matter:

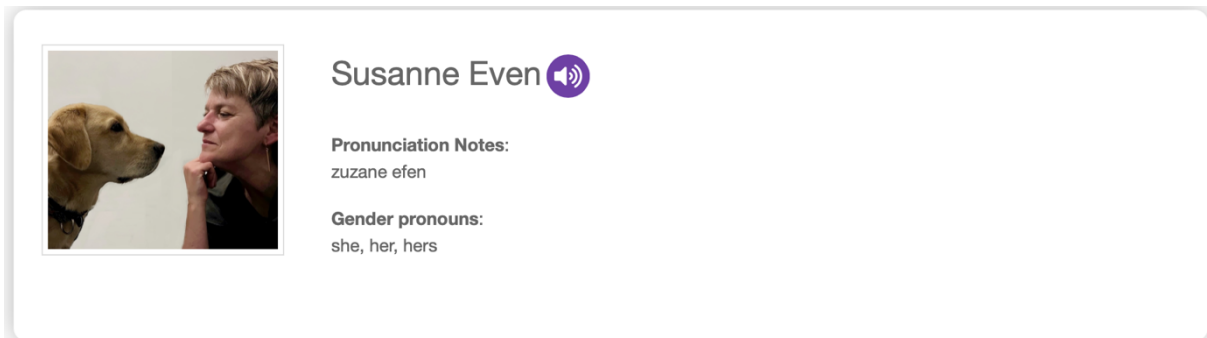
When last year I taught a module as part of a summer course for graduates, run by the School of Languages Middlebury College, Vermont, I was asked to assist students with the pronunciation of my name by presenting it in the following way: Use *capital letters* for the element (syllable) of my name that is emphasised, and use *small letters* for the non-emphasised element. This is how it looked in my module description:


MAHN-frehd SHEH-veh

A different system of phonetic notation is supported at Indiana University (IU), Bloomington, where students can choose from a very impressive range of 80+ language programmes (<https://college.indiana.edu/academics/languages.html>). It is noteworthy that the list of programmes is preceded by quotation from Nelson Mandela: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."

Scenario co-editor Susanne Even who is based in the Department of Germanic Studies at IU, uses the digital tool [NameCoach](#) to present her name in this manner (Fig. 2):

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Susanne Even 

Pronunciation Notes:
zuzane efen

Gender pronouns:
she, her, hers

Figure 2: Susanne Even's use of NameCoach – <https://www.name-coach.com/evensusanne>

Via the digital tool colleagues and students receive not only written, but also auditory pronunciation assistance.

It would be desirable that universities in Europe, especially via their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) units, make similar support available, and on their homepages provide guidelines that explicitly address the institution's approach to linguistic diversity.

Universities aspire to do well in World University Rankings, expecting academic staff to engage and be successful in research. However, might the issue that is raised in the following quotation perhaps need further discussion within the academic community?

Die allermeisten wissenschaftlichen Aufsätze werden heute auf Englisch veröffentlicht ... Generell erfolgt das Gros der wissenschaftlichen Kommunikation heute auf Englisch, auf internationalen und vielen nationalen Konferenzen wird Englisch gesprochen ... Dies bedeutet allerdings auch eine extreme Privilegierung derer, die gutes Englisch beherrschen (Grjasnowa 2021, 107-108)

[The vast majority of scientific papers are now published in English ... In general, most scientific communication today is in English, and English is spoken at international and many national conferences. ... However, this also means an extreme privileging of those who have a high standard of English. – Translation, MS]

The writing of a research paper in English, and also the preparation of lecture notes, is definitely a greater challenge for academics from a non-anglophone background. Even after many years in an English-speaking environment, they normally will not achieve the level of linguistic nuance, idiomatic agility or poetic accentuation that they might wish for. This issue has recently been highlighted by Lavista Ferres (2023) and in a major recent study undertaken by Amano et al. (2023).

While in my experience colleagues generally kindly assist with the proofreading of manuscripts, this can be very time-consuming, their voluntary support can therefore not be

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taken for granted.⁵ Ideally, universities would offer an academic writing support service for staff from non-anglophone backgrounds or contribute towards the cost for an external proofreading service.

In this context I came across a recent Morning Ireland Radio Programme on RTE1 (Oct 9, 2023) featuring an interview with TD Cathal Berry who expressed his views about Ireland's response to the conflict in the Middle East that had just escalated. When commenting on an apparently controversial statement made by the Palestinian ambassador, he said:

Look, I am always very conscious, when someone is speaking in their second language, they might not have the linguistic precision to get a point across".
(Berry, 2023)

The degree of sensitivity that Berry claims for himself, is quite noteworthy. His words remind me of situations in which an academic with English as his/her second language can feel under pressure, in board or committee meetings, for example, with the chairperson aiming to get through the agenda as quickly as possible. In situations like this, colleagues from a non-anglophone background might get stuck for the right English word or expression, feel discouraged to contribute to the discussion, and become frustrated when they see how colleagues with English as their first language eloquently and swiftly make their point. What could be done to create a greater awareness of this delicate issue within the academic community and, in more general terms, an awareness of the impressive range of languages and cultures that are represented in the institution?

My modest attempt to raise linguistic awareness may not have left much of an impact, but here is what happened several years ago: A former President of UCC had invited Heads of academic units to a brainstorming session to focus on areas in which the university could possibly perform better. After a good while, when the discussion had gained momentum, I took colleagues by surprise: I spoke in German! I kept going for a minute or two, noticing bewilderment on the colleagues' faces and feeling slightly uneasy about their sudden full attention. After a brief pause and looking around the room I explained that I had chosen to speak in a language other than English to raise an awareness of the different languages in UCC and that in my view it would be in the strategic interest of the university to build on the university's rich linguistic and cultural resources.

⁵ I wish to thank colleagues who took part in the 26th Scenario Forum Online Research Colloquium for participating in the lively discussion about *Linguistic Diversity in the field of education*, my Scenario colleagues Susanne Even and Dragan Miladinović as well as Peadar Donohoe, Joachim Fischer and Jack Healy, for engaging conversations and helpful comments.

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While universities have become proactive, via their EDI units, to engage with aspects of diversity, the following example shows that also in non-academic settings a more sensitive, client-friendly approach towards linguistic diversity is desirable:

During my recent travels across Europe I took a flight, operated by a low-cost airline (with headquarters in Dublin), from an airport in Spain to an airport in Germany. A young cabin crew member gave rushed safety instructions that even a passenger whose first language is English, would hardly have understood. On that day the airline's ignorant expectation was that all the passengers on board understand English. However, if the airline were genuinely concerned about the passengers' safety, would they not ensure that all of their instructions are given in clear, comprehensible English, preceded or followed by instructions in the first language(s) of the majority of the passengers? The calculated cutting of services for passengers, including language and translation services, is very regrettable.

Traveling across Europe feels different to my student days when I often wore a T-Shirt with “Europe is Yours” imprinted on it (Fig. 3). My first travels by rail and car I found highly exciting. While Interrail passes were relatively affordable, traveling by plane was very expensive at the time. When on a rare occasion I could afford a flight and the cabin crew member made announcements in the language of country X, I listened attentively to the sounds of that language. Picking up these sounds was a first attunement to the other culture and increased my anticipation of the time that I would spend there.



Figure 3: “Europe is yours”-T-Shirt

The logo on the T-Shirt captured well how I felt in those days, and how I still feel today. Consider the amazing linguistic variety of the European continent. Should not every effort be made, similar to the effort that the Irish have made to keep the Irish language alive, to protect Europe's unique cultural and linguistic diversity?

6 Looking ahead

The following points, based on the understanding that all languages are of equal value, aim to spark off further discussion on how we can navigate our way through the challenges posed by an increasingly multicultural and multilingual educational landscape in Europe:

- have existing language-related policies and curricula cross-checked for any traces of an imperialistic, nationalistic or religious ideology-driven (hidden) agenda
- cultivate a proactive attitude towards cultural otherness at all levels of education and encourage the learning of additional language(s)
- raise an awareness of the close link between language, personal and social identity
- emphasise the enriching experience of multi- and cross-lingualism across all subjects/disciplines and introduce Linguistic Diversity as a core module in all teacher training programmes
- develop guidelines/policies with an explicit focus on linguistic diversity

If we aim to educate students towards becoming enlightened multilingual European/global-citizens citizens, a concept of language education that Harald Weinrich (1988) presented several decades ago, might be of special interest. This concept, based on the Homburger Empfehlungen [Homburg recommendations] (Christ 1980), is without doubt very ambitious and perhaps quite idealistic. Still, it deserves to be mentioned here because it might be a source of inspiration for educational institutions that aim to develop and implement a linguistic diversity policy.

According to Weinrich language educators, besides facilitating a good command of the first language, endeavour to create opportunities for an engagement with a

- Fundamentalsprache [Foundational Language]
- Begegnungssprache [Language of Encounter]
- Verkehrssprache [Lingua Franca]
- Erschließungssprache [Language to be unlocked]

Let us take students in Germany, for example. Besides a competence in German as a First Language, they would be given an opportunity to engage with a

- *Foundational Language*: the laying of linguistic foundations, including grammatical terminology, that are needed to study any other language: traditionally Latin served as a foundational language.
- *Lingua Franca*: traditionally English as the most widely spoken Western Lingua Franca.

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- *Language to be unlocked*: to avoid Eurocentrism and open up to other parts of the world engage with a culturally more remote language, including languages with a completely different character system like Chinese or Japanese.
- *Language of Encounter*: given that there are large ethnic communities in Germany, students might be offered an opportunity to engage with a language of a community in the school's neighbourhood (for example, Turkish, Ukrainian). As Germany shares borders with nine countries, a language of a border country would also be an obvious choice.

In the context of "Language of Encounter" I am reminded of a guided bicycle tour through the city of Berlin:

A friend wanted to show us her district of Schöneberg and took us to parks, architectural landmarks, public places and monuments. However, she expected our active participation and gave each of us an improvisation task. When we stopped at what looked like a bigger supermarket, she explained that many from the Turkish community go shopping here and said to one member of our group (let us call her Sabine): "As we have planned to have some food after our bicycle tour, and we still have to do some shopping, we might as well get a few nice things in this market. Sabine, your task today is to do the shopping in Turkish." Sabine needed a few minutes to get her head around her task. She began to write down words and phrases and then checked in her translation app how to say Good Afternoon in Turkish, how to ask for 500 grams of black olives and so on. I accompanied Sabine into what could as well have been in the city of Istanbul, the broad range of oriental food products was amazing. I distinctly remember how delighted the shop assistant behind the counter was when Sabine pointed to the olives and politely said in Turkish: "Bu zeytinlerden beş yüz gram istiyorum." The cashier looked very friendly when Sabine wished her a good day: "İyi günler dilerim.", and Sabine had a proud and happy smile on her face when she joined the group of cyclists again who were eager to hear about her unusual shopping experience.

Any encounter with another language can turn into an enriching experience, and any closer engagement with another language is likely to have multiple benefits. One such benefit is that you are likely to become more aware of the special features of your own first language, including grammatical phenomena, semantic and poetic nuances. This seems to be the point that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), arguably the most influential writer in the German language, intended to make with his presumably deliberately provocative statement in his *Maximen und Reflexionen* (Goethe 1833, p. 50):

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Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen.

[Those who do not know foreign languages know nothing of their own.
(Translation MS)]

The fact that German language courses are offered worldwide by *Goethe Institutes*, testifies to the outstanding contribution this writer has made to the development of the German language.⁶

However, which language do you exactly call your own? The answer is sometimes not straightforward, as can be illustrated by my own biography. When I refer to German as my first language, I am in fact making reference to two different language varieties: *Standardhochdeutsch* (Standard High German) and the regional language *Niederdeutsch* (Low German), spoken by around 3-5 million people. Both varieties are equally linked to my personal identity.

Growing up in a North German village I spoke in Low German with my mother, with relatives, neighbours and other villagers. However, with my father who was blown into the village from another part of Germany (North Rhine Westphalia), I spoke Standard High German. Interestingly, when I became a father myself, I spoke Standard High German to our children while my wife consistently spoke to them in yet another variety of the German language: Swiss German.⁷

Only at a later stage in my life did I realise that my exposure to Standard High German at home must have worked in my favour during the school years, while for most of my fellow students it must have impacted negatively that our primary and secondary school teachers associated Low German with backwardness and a lack of education and applied a rigid Standard High German Only approach. From today's perspective it seems regrettable that the uniqueness and beauty of that regional language was not acknowledged and consequently many learning opportunities were wasted. For example, the teachers could have widened our intercultural horizons by drawing attention to the close links between Low German and the Dutch language,

⁶ Generations of scholars have worked on the compilation of a thesaurus, based on what is regarded as the largest vocabulary of an individual person that has ever been registered. It will take another few years for the *Goethe Wörterbuch*, consisting of a detailed annotation presentation of the approx. 92,000 different words that have been located in Goethe's writings, to be completed. For further details see: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (2004).

⁷ It seems that neither the term *first language* nor the term *mother tongue* fully captures my specific linguistic socialisation. The term *mother tongue* is frequently used, see for example the impressive *Mother Tongues Festival*, a celebration of linguistic diversity through the arts in Ireland. For details go to: <https://mothertonguesfestival.com>; the term *father tongue* is much less frequently used and the meaning and connotations of the term might need further discussion.

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spoken in the neighbouring country, with the border to the Netherlands only 50 km away from our village.

Over the last decades pedagogy has fortunately moved on and the debate about linguistic diversity in the field of education (and beyond) is steadily gaining momentum. For an overview see, for example, Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford and Lawrence (2022).

To conclude with, let me briefly highlight a recent development at Carl von Ossietzky-Universität Oldenburg, the university I graduated from. While in previous years students had already the option of writing their BA and/or MA thesis in Low German, the university has just launched a new Low German degree programme. Since the beginning of the academic year 2023/24 students who aim to pursue a teaching career, can opt for Low German as one of the two subjects they hope to teach at secondary level.⁸

Looking ahead we will hopefully come across many other examples in the field of education (and beyond), of how languages can be treated with respect and valued for their beauty and uniqueness.

And as a final note for the curious reader: The language referred to at the beginning of this article is *Gunwinggu* (also spelled Kunwinjku, Gunwinjgu, Gunawitji). It features prominently in a dramatic text entitled “A language to play with” (Holly Hepp-Galván, 2020, p. 75).

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⁸ For details of the new Low German degree programme go to: <https://uol.de/studiengang/niederdeutsch-2s-bachelor-629>

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