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The Status and Function of English in Germany

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Following Kachru's rough classification of World English, Germany should be placed into the "expanding circle", since it is a foreign and not a second language for the vast majority of the population. English does, however, have a guaranteed status in Germany beyond the usual, peripheral domains (like air traffic etc.), namely as a general school subject and as a medium of instruction in a limited number of bilingual schools as well as in the "International Study Programmes" at university level. The latter have been established recently to attract foreign students and to equip German students and professors with the necessary language skills for international communication. English is also established as the official business language, usually co-official together with German, at numerous larger German companies, especially the global players. Beyond these legally, or statutorily, established status, English functions, i.e. is used, in numerous formal or informal international contact situations.

There is, on the other hand, a noticeable, and perhaps growing, resistance against the spread of English in Germany. It is particularly noticeable from the side of various private organisations, for example the "Verein Deutsche Sprache", which deplore the decline of German and the Americanisation of German culture and which have found ample access to the media. There is also a growingly determined promotion policy for the German language from the side of the German government. A declared major objective of this policy is to establish German as a working language in the institutions of the European Union. The German government has more or less openly declared that it will insist on German being one of the EU working languages, except perhaps in case there will be only a single working language, which functions as a lingua franca (which would have to be English).

In spite of all these tendencies it seems likely that English will make further inroads into Germany. It may, in the long term, become more acceptable if it more clearly changes into a pluricentric global language, which I have proposed to call "Globalish", with specific features for each linguistic background (French English, German English, etc.). It could then develop into a real world language, in which all the language communities participate with their own, autonomous norms, similarly as is the case in today's pluricentric languages. The presentation will close with an outlook on the chances and difficulties of transforming English into pluricentric Globalish.