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German as a foreign language

**German Studies in England and Wales at the Beginning of
the New Century:
Unpredictability and Challenge**

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German Studies in England and Wales at the Beginning of the New Century: Unpredictability and Challenge

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Since the beginning of the last century, the 20th century, German Studies at UK universities has broadened almost unrecognisably to encompass not only literature and historical linguistics but almost all the social sciences, many of which were either just evolving or, like business and management studies, did not exist. After a hundred years of unpredicted and unprecedented violence in Europe, a reunified Germany in an economically powerful and politically stable European Union and European continent, together with an almost 35% 18 year old participation rate at UK universities, German Studies ought to be looking forward to a promising future. But a potent cocktail of adverse factors ranging from the inexorable forward march of English as the international language, through competition with Spanish for the narrowed space for a second foreign language in the National Curriculum for England and Wales and the growing preference of UK, latterly fee-paying, unsupported students for programmes with more obvious lucrative career prospects has led to a rapid and serious decline in applications to German. The paper analyses these largely unpredicted developments that have occurred in the last five, at most ten years and asks if they can be reversed.

German Studies at the beginning of a new century lives in interesting times. The circumstances that were to face the student – in the real sense of the word – of Germany and German language and culture in Britain at the turn of the 20th century were very different. As a university subject German was still in its infancy. The study of the German language in the schools and university was seen as an alternative discipline to Latin thanks to its rigorous morphology and Latin-like word order, and at university it was pursued in the same manner as the ancient languages with prose composition, if not verse composition, constituting a pre-eminent activity. (Whether in parallel with Greats at Oxford, for example, students were also required to compose in verse I have not been able to ascertain...). Historical linguistics, largely in the form of etymology and the study of earlier forms of the language dominated philological aspects of the subject. Familiarity with biography, content and metrical form were the chief constituents of literary appreciation, with a strongly positivistic approach to literary history and research. Political science as we know it did not exist. The study of German politics and economics would have been part of history. Political

thought was the property of the history of philosophy, political theory of constitutional law. None of this is very surprising since the scope of our subject, which now embraces the social sciences, linguistics and schools of literary theory at which our more firmly rooted forebears would have scratched their heads, did not begin to expand until the 1960s and 1970s.

This earlier format and approach were still largely intact until the creation of the new universities, technological universities and polytechnics between 1963 and the early 1970s. These acted as the catalyst for change, a change that went hand-in-hand with the massive expansion of the social sciences and the emergence of that most buoyant of all social science subjects business and management studies.

But what had been happening in Germany itself a hundred years ago and what was soon to happen in the opening decades of the 20th century was moving swiftly, more swiftly than politicians, the military or British business and industrial interests, let alone universities were able to comprehend. In the short space of forty years from 1870 Germany had emerged as a nation state, not only as the last of the great West European nations but as its largest. German industry had been transformed from a craft base to a major manufacturer in all the key areas, coal, steel, ships, vehicles, electrical goods, chemicals and, of course, armaments. Britain's supposed 'natural' dominance as the world's workshop, and its greatest naval power and as possessor of the largest Empire, was already waning, though few could see it. The resultant tensions were to shatter the world order in the convulsion and senseless slaughter of the First World War, and still those tensions were not resolved by it. Indeed another World War, the Cold War with its hotspots in Berlin, Korea, Africa, Central America and Vietnam have had to be endured before some semblance of a new stability could emerge. Germany has remained at the epicentre of all these developments.

No less convulsive were the changes that swept across German literature, Expressionist verse and drama, for example, both anticipating and reflecting in their violence of form and themes the political and military scene. If their message, like that of the early and middle years Brecht, was only too clear, the enigmatic nature of a Modernist literature that refused easily to yield up its secrets at the intellectual, linguistic and biographical levels found its German-speaking

counterparts in the Rilke of the Elegies and in Kafka in *Morgenstern*, the Dadaists, in George and Benn to name but a few (see Reeves, 1999). Arguably, the iconoclasm of Nietzsche fostered both the violence of the Dionysian literary revolt and the refuge in an Apollonian art for art's sake.

What all this amounted to was unpredictability. But then again, it was many years before British Germanistik exposed itself to these problematic works, preferring to focus on the Goethe-Zeit and bourgeois realism.

However, from the 1960s our subject has transformed itself and I do not need to detail what has happened. Notions of what may be included in British Germanistik have radically changed, now embracing the whole range of social sciences applied to the study of things German, perhaps best summarised under the title 'Area Studies' or 'Deutschlandstudien'.¹ The study of the German business environment is seen as legitimate as the post-war history of German political parties, Patrick Süßkind's *Das Parfum* or Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*. The German-Jewish issue is no taboo nor the destiny of the Romanies. The variety of German university syllabi is enormous as departments seek to capture aspects of that multi-faceted prism, German society or culture, in an all-embracing manner reminiscent of the Grimms' conception of Germanistik as the study of a cultural totality (see Reeves 1990). Nor, of course are the other German-speaking countries, Austria or Switzerland, neglected.²

Surely then, our course is set fair? The study of a language has become a compulsory part of the pre-16 National Curriculum for England and Wales. Britain has been a member of EEC/EU for twenty-seven years, the Single Market has virtually been completed, a single currency adopted by eleven of fifteen EU states. Germany has been reunified. The move to Berlin as the capital has been decided and achieved. Timetables for the eastward expansion of the EU from the new Germany's eastern and south eastern borders have been established in outline. Germany remains the power-house of the European economy and Britain's biggest visible trade partner. Moreover, it has been officially recognised in the UK that the universities play a key role in the emerging knowledge-intensive economy, the university participation rate of eighteen year olds has been

¹ E.g. Althof (1990). This volume contains papers from a symposium organised at Wolfenbüttel and published by the DAAD.

² A fine reflection of the breadth of our subject may be found in Peter Lutzeier's recent volume, Lutzeier (1998).

lifted to 35% and is rising to 50%. We should be looking at a cloudless sky in the year 2000, much as many thought the sky was cloudless in 1900, the Boer War being seen as a serious but temporary irritation, not the beginning of the end of an Empire on which the sun would never set.

Unfortunately for us in German Studies, just as no one, not even the most 'scientific' of the political scientists, predicted the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Eastern bloc in 1989, none of us at that time foresaw a whole string of events that ten years on seem life-threatening to the subject. Let me try to sketch these events. Please forgive me if they seem only too familiar but familiarity does not reduce their menace.

Let me start with the economy, as President Clinton might say. After the rush of enthusiasm in the 1960s and 1970s, university expansion in terms of numbers of Higher Education institutions and relative rate of increasing spend came to a halt. The winter of discontent (1978-79), the demise of the Labour Government under Callaghan and the emergence of the monetarist and neo-liberal government under Margaret Thatcher ushered in a new period of public sector stringency, though it took the Treasury and the DfEE until the early 1990s to figure out a definitive way to drive down the unit of resource across the whole sector, enabling the number of students to double in ten years and the polytechnics to be made universities, all without significantly increasing expenditure on Higher Education, indeed keeping it well below comparable GDP percentages in Mainland Europe. Moreover in 1979-80 spending on Higher Education represented 1.23% of UK GDP. In 1999-2000 it represents 1.13% and is not planned to increase to more than 1.14% up to 2002, notwithstanding the huge increase in student numbers.³

Meanwhile the transformation of the university sector into a service industry where employers and students are our customers is still continuing and has a long way to go. But there is no doubt that the introduction of the flat rate fee⁴ and the abolition of the grant except for the few in order to finance the continual expansion of Higher Education into social groups that were previously hardly represented, is not only part of a social agenda (indeed a welcome and necessary agenda in my view). It represents a further decisive step towards an industrialised system (see Reeves 1998) in

³ House of Lords Session 38, 20 January – 4 February 2000.

⁴ Tuition fees were introduced in the academic year 1998-99 at the flat rate of £1000 per year.

which we sell a service that will only partly be paid out of tax revenue and in which the majority of students, just like our international students, personally purchase that service. The quality inspection system is an integral part of this transformation, ensuring fitness for purpose and value for money for the customer, whether that customer be government through its agents the Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency, or the student and student's parents, who can read the public reports on the individual institutions and note the grades awarded. Likewise the principal customer for research as funded through the dual system (the only serious source of research money for the Humanities, incidentally) is the Funding Council and that funding too, is allocated on a quasi-value for money basis as measured in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

At the same time as the universities moved from a situation that was in some ways analogous to the Church, if not in funding then in professional culture, the UK economy and the aspirations of the UK workforce were shaken up, exposed to a competitive spirit from which many industries and professions had foolishly thought they were protected. This itself had a profound effect on young people. The A-level points⁵ race took off, vocational/professional hopes were aroused and as subjects such as Business Studies and Information Technology began to boom, subjects perceived to be difficult and leading to modest career rewards such as engineering and certain of the humanities, dropped in popularity. German was one of the latter. The reputation for difficulty may be linked to the demise of Latin, for those of us who had been steeped in Latin morphology from a tender age, however, sterile we considered that study, could find German morphology relatively straightforward. The decline in single subject German, which can be ascribed in part to the loss of interest in philology and medieval literature and a dislike for literature as a subject that seemed to naïve eighteen-year-olds obscure and irrelevant – and, of course, too difficult – was offset for some twenty years from the mid-1970s by the rise of combinations with another language, the social sciences and above all, Business Studies. That offset now seems to be fading in effect. The obvious truth that Germany is our largest trading partner, an industrial motor in the heart of Europe but only fifty minutes away by plane from London Heathrow, a country well

⁵ University entrance in the UK is competitive. In England and Wales, for example, decisions are made on the basis of grades attained in three A level subjects. The five pass grades are A to E, with A being equivalent to 10 points, B to 8, down to E, which is equivalent to 2 points.

disposed to Britain and very well disposed to the universities through those excellent institutions, the DAAD, the Goethe-Institut, the Alexander von Humboldt and other Foundations, a sister country sharing a language of common origins with deep literary and philosophical connections, does not seem to have had any lasting impact on the popularity of our subject. When I gave my inaugural lecture at Surrey University in 1976 (Reeves 1976) calling for a new, broader perspective on our subject, that economic reality seemed to me to promise a bedrock for future appeal and thus for the future of our subject, ensuring the survival of less popular but no less important branches of our study. I did not conceive that that appeal would also fade. Indeed for some fifteen years the ever greater applications for German programmes combined with Business Studies or economics seemed to demonstrate my prediction. In 1992 for example, the year of the Single European Market, Aston University's International Business and Modern Languages programme had over 1200 applications for 75 places and we were able to take double that intake number with an average of over 24 A-level points. Today the application is only 25% of that number. The number of places is some 85 and it remains a key strand in the School of Languages' portfolio, but clearly something has impacted on German at university that goes beyond a proliferation of provision in a popular area! If for example we compare 1996 national applications for German Single Honours with 1998 we find a decline of 22%: 258>201. True, French had also declined from 757 to 716 – but that is only a 5% decline.⁶

For Joint Honours with German the statistics are still only available for 1996, which may underestimate what has happened since. Here the decline for German was only 5%, French Joint Honours 2%, with accepted applicants numbering 3789 and 1622 respectively.⁷ However the total number is deceptive since a single candidate may well be accepted for more than one programme, in the case of German leading to an inflation factor of 50-60%.⁸ (A much larger inflation factor has to be added when we look at all applications, given that an individual could choose six universities in 1996). In that same year German Single Honours applications totalled

⁶ UCAS Annual Reports, 1996-98.

⁷ UCAS Special Report.

⁸ See UCAS Annual Reports, 1996-98.

1379. German Joint Honours on the other hand were 11545. We cannot discount the reduction of choices in 1996 from eight to six universities but the decline was evident before that.⁹

Chart 1 compares applicants for German with those for Italian, Spanish and Russian between 1994 and 1998. The decline in German is by far largest, to only 50% of its former total.

Chart 1: Total Applicants: Modern Language Subjects (English Universities)

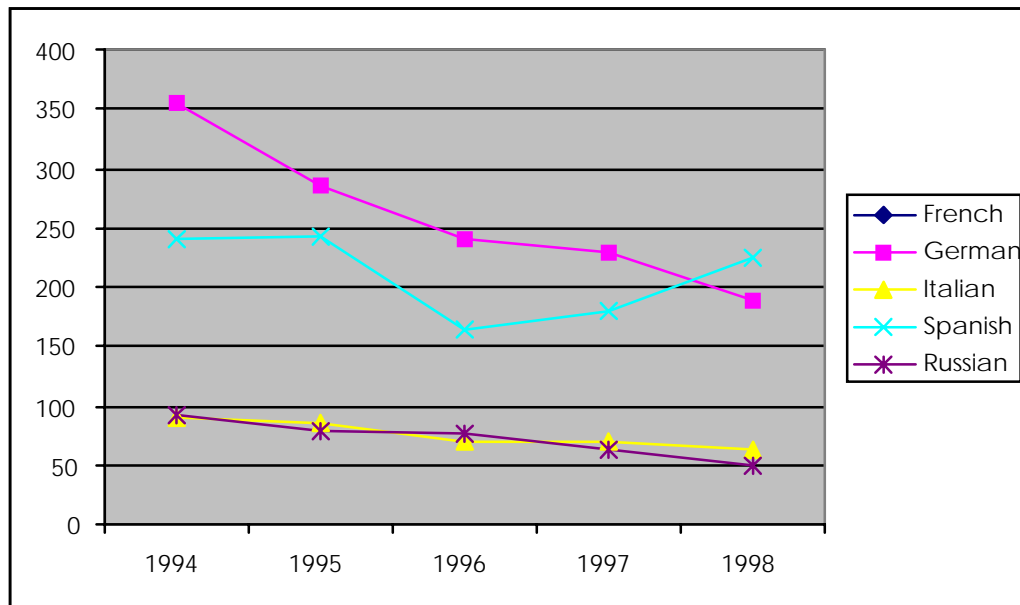
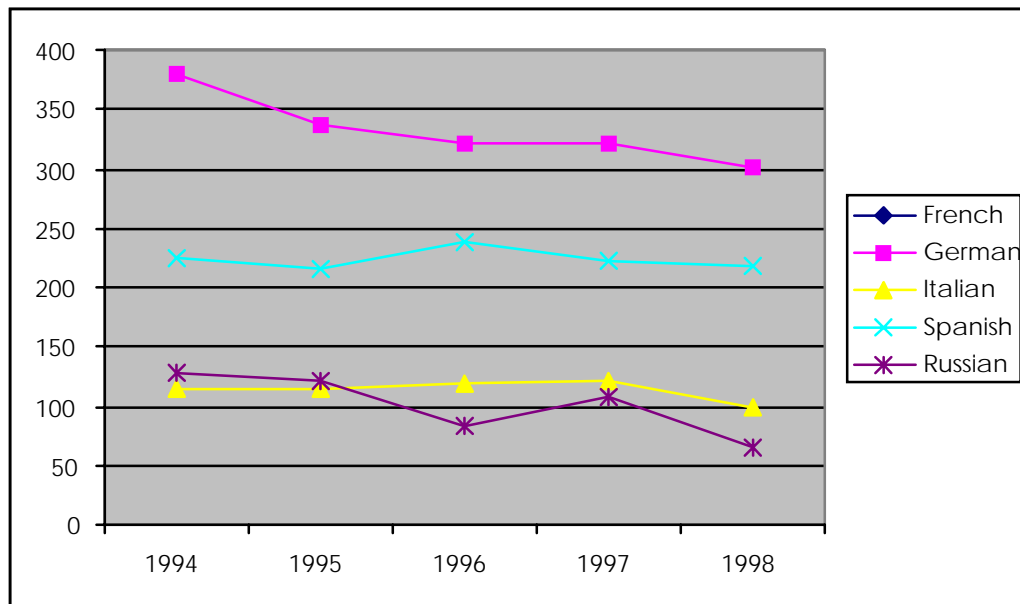


Chart I source: HEFCE letter to Vice-Chancellors, December 1999

Naturally Departments have attempted to mitigate that fall so that in Chart 2 the fall in entrants is shown to be much smaller but what that means in terms of entry points is not clear. Chart 2 source: HEFCE letter to Vice-Chancellors 17 December 1999.

⁹ UCAS Special Report.

Chart 2: Total Entrants: Modern Language Subjects (English Universities)



What we also observe is, however, a long term trend of falling popularity of modern language studies at university, affecting French, Italian, Spanish and Russian. HEFCE¹⁰ highlighted this trend in a recent letter to universities but it has been argued by the Universities that languages continue to be popular in combinations or as a supplementary subject. Certainly the statistics for combinations under the Q, R and T UCAS codes¹¹ show only a decline of 9% from 1996 to 1998 (applications and acceptances) but this is still a fall and in terms of acceptances larger than for German or Spanish Single Honours (at -4% and -6% respectively) though far smaller than for French at -18%!¹²

This brings me back to the common factor with 1900 – unpredictability.

¹⁰ The Higher Education Funding Council for England (www.hefce.ac.uk), the body which distributes government funding to universities in England.

¹¹ The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (www.ucas.ac.uk), which processes applications for university places in the UK. The course codes Q, R and T include linguistics, literature and foreign languages subjects.

¹² UCAS Annual Reports 1996-98.

When Margaret Thatcher dispatched Lord Cockfield to the European Commission in the early 1980s she had not expected him to emerge as a champion of a Single European Market, which, even when it was relaunched as the completion of the EEC's original objective, was known to be intended as the basis for a European political union, already featured as the ultimate aim of the 1956 Treaty of Rome. 1992 caught the imagination of the public and had a tremendous impact on interest in learning foreign languages in schools, universities and companies. But the enthusiasm was followed by disappointment as the reunification of Germany, which had overtaken the excitement of the Single European Market, ignited fears among the older generations in UK and particularly the more xenophobic among them of the emergence of a greater, uncontrollable Germany that might seek hegemony in Europe in a fateful repeat of the Bismarkian era. Kanzler Kohl's obsession with the euro as the final link in the Market and a key to a higher, though undefined if almost certainly federal, potential union added to this fear, and his remarks on any failure of the euro being a matter of war or peace in Europe were seized upon by an increasingly anti-German UK press and interpreted literally. The rise of the Europhobic Conservatives who became the bane of John Major's government undoubtedly helped to whip up anti-German feeling that harked back to the last two wars. The British TV companies seemed, for a decade or more, to want constantly to feature programmes about the Nazi era – documentaries, situation comedies such as 'Allo Allo' and straight comic sketches which repeated the Nazi caricature of Germans and Germany ad nauseam. Imbecilic football rivalry aided by the boulevard press poured further fuel on this combustible situation.

The teaching profession had, however, attached great expectations to changes in the National Curriculum for England and Wales. The inclusion of one compulsory foreign language to 16 was expected to lead to marked diversification, and an increase in the numbers successfully taking GCSE¹³ languages. In 1991-2 there were 306,010 entries in French of which 139,075 achieved grades A-C, 97,636 entries in German with 53,295 achieving grades A-C, and 27,681 entries in Spanish with 15,620 at grades A-C. By 1996-97 entries in French had only increased marginally to 313,013 with grades A-C achieved by 153,261. While German had increased strongly to 130,687 entries and 71,097 at grades A-C, Spanish had grown still more strongly to 40,845 entries and

¹³ General Certificate of Secondary Education, examinations sat in various subjects by British school pupils at the age of 16 (after 11 years of schooling).

22,713 achieving grades A-C. In the latest figures available, for 1997-98 there were 312,358 entries in French of which 152,155 achieved grades A-C showing a slight decline. In German there were 129,674 entries of which 70,960 achieved grades A-C which suggests that a plateau has been reached. In Spanish there were 44,575 entries with 24,506 achieving grades A-C¹⁴ In percentage terms Spanish has been the winner but even if German has levelled off, it has benefited from the new Curriculum despite the problems mentioned above.

More worrying is that the number in French gaining A level grades A-E has decreased substantially. In 1992-3, 21,811 gained such distinction in French, in 1998-9, 16,372. In 1992-3 8,248 gained these grades in German, in 1998-99 7,885, a number that has held up remarkably well in comparison but that still shows decline and no reflection of the 30% increase in successful German GCSEs¹⁵

When we look at the A level candidate numbers there is a similar trend with French losing out most (1992-3: 25,215; 1998-99: 17,775).¹⁶ The German candidate number has fallen from 9,548 in 1992-3 to 8,527 in 1998-99, the disjuncture between GCSE and A level being a matter of great concern. However, falling numbers in University entrants is not matched in every foreign language A level candidature. In Italian, candidates have increased from 429 to 556, in Spanish from 3,767 to 4,640 and in Chinese from 465 to 1122, while even Russian has recovered from 354 to 455, though the total number of University candidates for all languages has fallen from 41,061 to 34,439.¹⁷ (Nevertheless the decline in A level grades A-C is tiny: 23,050 to 22,854. (See Chart 3)

Chart 3: A level results in modern languages

¹⁴ Source DfEE

¹⁵ Data supplied by the Department of Education and Employment (DFEE) for HEFCE Letter, December 1999.

¹⁶ Data supplied by the DFEE for HEFCE Letter, December 1999.

¹⁷ Data supplied by DFEE for HECE Letter.

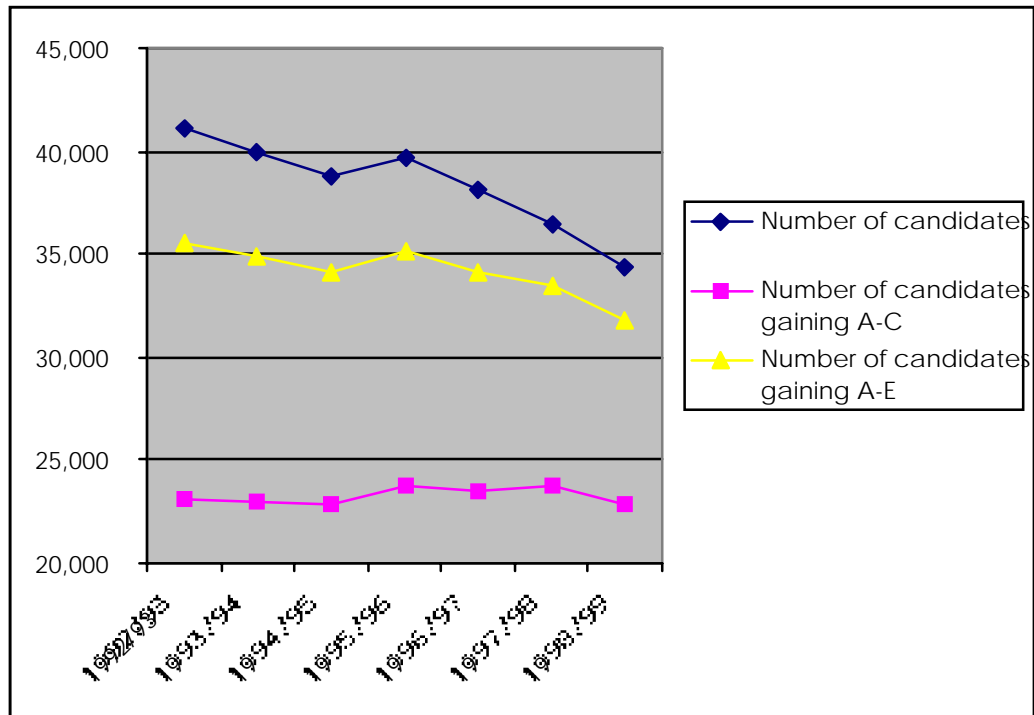


Chart 3. Source: Data Supplied by DfEE for HEFCE Letter, December 1999

What we seem to be observing is a greater take-up of the range of languages at the expense of the two traditional front-runners, French and German. But the additional key factor is the range of A level subjects, especially in the social sciences. There are many alternatives to a language A level including those such as economics or business studies, which seem more relevant in a cultural environment that now places so much more emphasis on business success, making money – and which, of course, seem to give the promise of meeting your university debts at the end of the programme.

Moreover the drastic reduction in maintenance (living costs) support for students was only one side of the coin in the transformation of universities into a service-sector industry. The number of 18 year olds and mature students entering Higher Education has more than doubled since the late eighties. With a participation rate of over 35% and a target of 50% we have become an integral part of the knowledge economy. But, as we saw, the central spend has effectively remained static. One key tactic of the Funding Council to help achieve this financial feat was the standardisation of

funding, lumping together profoundly different subjects such as German Studies and English Literature at a common average already driven down by the inclusion of non-funded student numbers beyond the MASN (Maximum Aggregate Student Number).¹⁸ Thus the cost of teaching an 18 year-old who has studied German at school for perhaps four years on a linguistically undemanding syllabus and bringing him/her towards the near native competence in the language which is the stated mission of some university programmes has been totally discounted, as if the British A level student of German already had a command of the German language equal to that of a peer who had been learning English since birth and uses it as an academic language. The consequent reduction in income of German Departments has been drastic, requiring in many universities other subject areas to cross-subsidise and so lose their own competitive edge against those departments not asked for cross-subsidy. The new concession to raise German to Band C is a purely paper exercise that gives most universities no more funding, a quite extraordinary and indefensible piece of sleight of hand. A number of Vice-Chancellors regard this as an unsustainable situation and are thinking carefully – and I suspect unsympathetically – about the future of languages departments and specifically German departments.

Thus we face a combination of secular, adverse trends: a service industry culture in which the customer pays and therefore has to earn substantially later. An external, media-hyped environment in which anti-European and specifically anti-German feeling has become endemic. A desperate desire among pupils to get good grades and therefore a fear of an apparently difficult subject, in the case of German exacerbated by the decline in Latin. A National Curriculum that has squeezed the traditional second foreign language. A lack of teachers of German so that head teachers play safe and opt for French. Nor is Germany the sunny, seaside tourist attraction that are Spain or Italy. And both Spanish and Italian are related to French, the traditional first foreign language. Nonetheless, it remains a disturbing fact that French at university has suffered more than German, albeit from a far larger critical mass.

¹⁸ The Maximum Aggregate Student Number is a number agreed with each university as part of its contract with the Funding Council. If this is surpassed then there is no central funding to support the tuition of the extra numbers.

But further factors are at work – predictable and unpredictable. German companies are transforming the way they operate. Under the pressure of endemic high unemployment, lack of competitiveness because of high labour and social on-costs and tight labour laws, German companies are shifting production out of Germany. They are also moving out from under the wing of their house bank on to the stock market to raise capital. The consequently acute awareness of shareholder value, the ever increasing difficulty of keeping market share and the pressing need to invest in research are pushing German companies into alliances and mergers on a global scale – the Daimler-Chrysler alliance and the purchase of Mannesmann by Vodaphone Air Touch are examples of friendly merger and hostile take-over respectively that point in the same direction. The banks themselves are reorganising to compete with the American and Japanese giants. Deutsche Bank and Bankers' Trust have merged. Now we hear that Deutsche and Dresdner Banks are to merge. And behind that merger lies Allianz Versicherung, one of the world's largest insurance companies. Now, what is the language policy of these new global giants? Certainly in the case of Deutsche Bank it is to abandon German as the company language and to turn to English – as have also Lufthansa and AEG! Even Deutsche Welle now broadcasts internationally in English to try and compete with CNN.

But regrettable as the retreat of German as an international commercial language may be, I suppose it was predictable. Unpredictable was the exposure of former Kanzler Kohl and of Wolfgang Schäuble as purveyors of sleaze, not on the puny brown envelope scale of certain British Conservative politicians but on a grand scale, that may conceivably turn out to be international in reach, and shine an altogether different light on the Franco-German partnership that was the core of the political union within the European Union and the butt of Mrs. Thatcher's ire. We have to be thankful that Herr Schröder's party is in power - but must also be mindful that the much vaunted Third Way was in fact the invention of the CDU in the late 1940s. The practitioners of German democracy, indeed those that shaped reunification – have turned out to be the practitioners of precisely what the British anti-European lobby has been claiming, corruption, a malpractice that has also turned out to be at the heart of the European Commission under Jacques Santer.

Meanwhile, in Austria, the inclusion of the FPÖ in government, Jörg Haider's quasi-Nazi profile and his most recent manoeuvrings have brought a dramatic new twist to the situation, providing the Europhobes with still more ammunition. And please don't mention the 'Beef War' or BMW...

'Aber wo bleibt das Positive, Herr Kästner?'¹⁹

I have to conclude that if no one is going to help us we have to help ourselves. That means organising high profile conferences to draw attention to the importance of our subject, its rich diversity, its role in contributing to the education of the new generations in a Europe of ever-closer bonds and economic ties. While the pound sterling may be outside the euro now, joining the euro is economically inevitable as the strains and threats of remaining outside grow intolerable for activities as wide apart as inward investment and agriculture. We have to build up the case once again for the business value of German both for the UK and for the individual whether in small and medium size export businesses, or for those with ambitions for promotion within German-led multi-nationals. We have to re-state the supreme educational value of young people not being confined to a knowledge of one language and one culture in a multi-cultural European and globalised economy. We have to highlight and illuminate the contribution that is being made by German writers and thinkers to our self-understanding in the Information Age, an age where the nature of reality and human inter-relationships is changing. We have to lobby Vice-Chancellors and politicians about the absurdity of the English Funding Council's funding of languages and the deceptive funding adjustment to German. We must enlist the support of the DAAD and the Goethe-Institut in making the case for the German language. It is above all the German language that is central to our argument. Without knowledge of the language no businessman, no politician, no diplomat, no social scientist has authentic access to the original texts and information and no sound or immediate insight into what is happening in Europe's largest nation and largest economy. Who is going to lead this campaign? Could it be UCML²⁰

¹⁹ The title of the well-known Erich Kästner poem, *Gesammelte Schriften für Erwachsene*, Droemer Kraur, Munich/Zurich, 1969, vol I, 218f.

²⁰ The University Council for Modern Languages, a body set up to promote the discussion of issues relating to the teaching of modern languages in UK higher education institutions.

Will it be the CUTG²¹ ? Or might the place where we are meeting, in the Institute of Germanic Studies²² be the institution best placed to take this lead? I leave you with this question.

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²¹ The Conference of University Teachers of German in Great Britain and Ireland (see www.cutg.ac.uk).

²² See <http://www.sas.ac.uk/igs>.