

## How the presence of a bilingual school changes the linguistic profile of a community



It is one of the great narratives of our time that the market will fix everything. In education this means that [parental choice is assumed to improve education](#). Rather than the state supplying high-quality education, the neoliberal credo is that parental choice will create high-quality education. Does that mean that [we do not have high quality language education in Australia](#) because there simply is not the demand for language education?

Or could it be the other way round? Could it be that the state of languages in Australia is “a national tragedy and an international embarrassment,” [as Michael Clyne, Anne Pauwels and Roland Sussex put it in 2007](#), simply because the supply is not there? A case study of what happens when high-quality bilingual education becomes available in a community could prove just that.

In 2008, the [German International School Sydney \(GISS\)](#) moved to a new location in the [suburb of Terrey Hills](#), about 25km north of the Sydney CBD. GISS runs a high-quality K-12 English-German bilingual immersion program that is accredited by both the German Ministry of Education and the NSW Board of Studies, and leads to the [International Baccalaureate](#). The 2008 GISS relocation in conjunction with [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(ABS\) census data from 2006 and 2011](#) allow us to explore how the linguistic profile of a community changes when high-quality bilingual education becomes available.

By way of background, it is important to know that German in Australia is the second least maintained migrant language (after Dutch); i.e. German speakers shift from German to English at very high rates and the rate of German transmission from one generation to the next is relatively low (see Clyne 2005 for details). Low language maintenance rates for German are usually attributed to cultural affinity to the dominant English-speaking culture; to the fact that language is not a core value for Germans; to relatively high proficiency rates in English among German migrants; to relatively high rates of exogamy; and to low ethnic concentrations (see Clyne 2005, Ch. 3). All these reasons could be described as market model reasons: the ‘demand’ for German among German migrants is low and so they give up the language. My case study suggests that supply – or rather the absence of a supply of high-quality bilingual education – may be another crucial factor.

[Terrey Hills](#), where GISS has been located since 2008, is in the Local Government Area (LGA) of [Warringah](#),

and it is also conveniently accessible to residents of two other LGAs, namely [Pittwater](#) and [Ku-ring-gai](#). So, has the presence of German increased in these LGAs? Census data allow us to approach this question through two data sets, namely 'country of birth' and 'language spoken at home.'

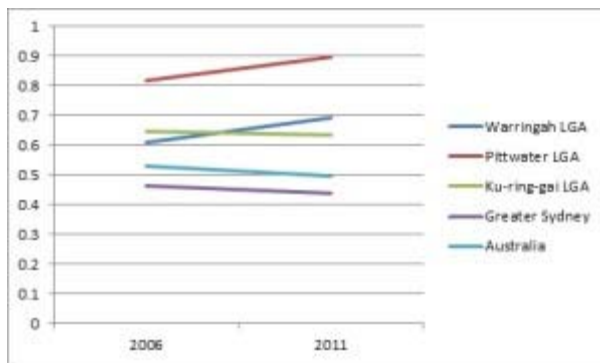


Figure 1: Percentage of residents born in Germany

To begin with, as Figure 1 shows, the percentage of residents born in Germany increased in both Warringah and Pittwater between 2006 and 2011. For Ku-ring-gai it remained virtually unchanged. These figures are in contrast to those for [Greater Sydney](#) and [Australia](#) as a whole where the percentage of residents born in Germany slightly decreased during the same period.

Second, the figures for German as a home language show the same tendencies but the changes are more pronounced (Figure 2). This means that there were markedly more residents who spoke German at home in Warringah and Pittwater in 2011 than in 2006.

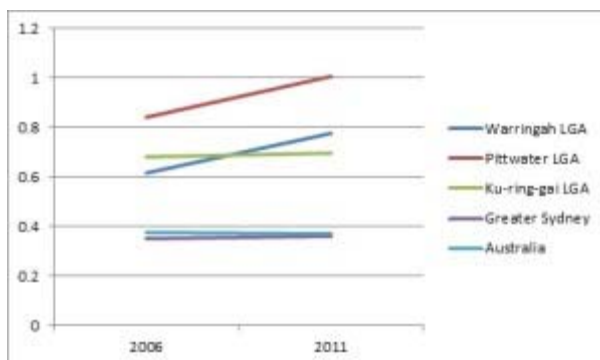


Figure 2: Percentage of residents speaking German at home

Third, the census data also allow us to compare the figures of residents born in Germany with the figures for those who claim German as a home language. We can use 'born in Germany' as a proxy for 'speaking German as a first language.' Admittedly, this is a crude measure as it excludes ethno-linguistic minorities born in Germany as well as German speakers from Austria, Switzerland and other European countries. It also excludes those Australian-born residents who speak German as their first language. Even so, relating the number of Germany-born residents to that of German speakers allows us to gauge language maintenance and shift: if the number of those who claim German as their home language is lower than the number of Germany-born residents, we can consider this as evidence of language shift from German to English in the first generation. If, on the other hand, the number of those who claim German as their home language exceeds the number of Germany-born residents, then we can consider this as evidence of language maintenance. These additional German speakers can be assumed to be mostly second-generation Australians of German ancestry. They might also include intermarried families. The latter would be particularly intriguing as the sociolinguistics literature typically assumes that exogamy results in the adoption of the majority language (i.e. English) as the family language.

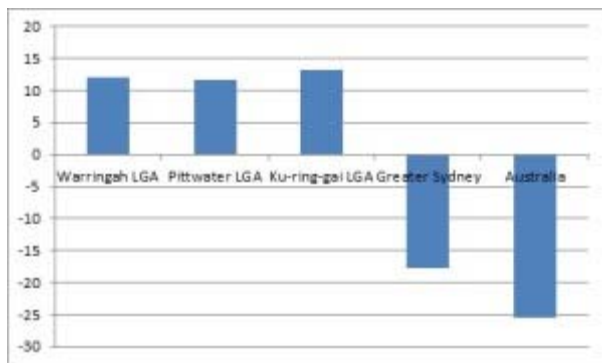


Figure 3: Residents who claim German as their home language as a percentage of the Germany-born

Figure 3 confirms what we know from the literature about language maintenance among German migrants – but only for Australia as a whole and for the Greater Sydney area. In both these locales the number of residents who speak German at home is much lower than the number of the Germany-born. In Australia, there were 108,001 Germany-born residents in 2011 but only 80,370 who used German as their home language. The figures for Greater Sydney are 19,340 and 15,894 respectively. That means the rate of language shift from German to English is at least 25% in Australia as a whole and at least 17% in the Greater Sydney area.

Against this background, the figures for Warringah, Pittwater and Ku-ring-gai are highly exceptional. With the number of German speakers between 11.7 and 13.1 per cent higher than the number of Germany-born residents, the German language is clearly thriving in these areas.

Can this be just a coincidence with the fact that a high-quality bilingual English-German immersion school is available to the residents of these areas? I don't think so. While mindful of the fact that correlation does not equal causality, the data presented here would plausibly suggest that the presence of GISS has attracted both Australian residents born in Germany and Australian residents speaking German at home (two overlapping but not identical categories) to Warringah, Pittwater and, to a lesser degree, Ku-ring-gai.

Furthermore, these data would also seem to suggest that it is the presence of GISS that enables local residents to raise their children bilingually. A project that is not feasible for many German speakers elsewhere in Sydney and in Australia – however much they might wish for it.



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Clyne, Michael (2005). *Australia's Language Potential*. Sydney, UNSW Press.