

## The cult of personal responsibility



Ads for a campaign to speak German are currently all over Germany. [The campaign is called “Ich spreche Deutsch” \(I speak German\)](#) and aims to convince migrant youths to learn more German or learn German faster. The campaign’s clever slogan “Raus mit der Sprache” (lit. *Out with language!* Meaning *Speak! Confess! Out with it!*) accompanies images of so-called “ambassadors:” German pop stars, TV personalities or sports stars with a migrant background who pose with their tongue sticking out and painted in the colors of the national flag. The campaign is headed by the Federal Minister for Migration, Refugees and Integration, [Professor Maria Böhmer](#), although it does not seem to be a governmental campaign but is organized by the “[Germany Foundation for Integration](#).” This foundation is [headed by a group of politicians and media people](#) none of whom know anything much about language learning or migration as far as I can tell.

The campaign is based on a number of questionable assumptions. To begin with, it is based on the assumption that in order for migrants to succeed in Germany they have to speak German. Second, that migrants haven’t noticed that most educational and job opportunities in Germany require German and that therefore they need to be informed of that fact through advertising. Third, that few migrants and their children learn German and, fourth, that they don’t do so by choice. Migrants are assumed to be too lazy to learn Germany, as is made explicit by one of the “ambassadors”, the [TV moderator and model Collien Fernandes in a tabloid interview](#):

Q: Why is there so little desire to learn German?

A: Many people are too lazy. [...] I hope the campaign motivates some people to attend a language school. All you have to do is go to the campaign’s homepage. There’s a great data base and it’s easy to choose a school.

Q: And that’s enough?

A: You can’t make it any easier than that. All we can do is get people to think and then we have to say: “Ok, you’ve got to do the rest yourselves.” (my translation)

The *I-speak-German* campaign is ostensibly concerned with [enhancing “opportunity justice” \(\*Chancengerechtigkeit\*\) for migrants](#). The choice of the word is telling: not for them, the social-democratic “equality of opportunity” (*Chancengleichheit*)! How can an opportunity be just if it is not equal?!

In order to have **equal opportunities** a society needs policies that minimize inequality and re-distribute opportunities. In order to have “just opportunities,” it seems that it’s enough for the rich and privileged to exhort the poor and disadvantaged to get off their bums because it’s all their own fault. That such a conception of justice is nonsense had been the societal and political consensus in Germany ever since World War II until neoliberal market fundamentalism started to wreak its havoc there, too. As Brian Barry explains in [Why Social Justice Matters](#), a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor has long been a feature of capitalism but was tempered throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the New Deal in the USA and strong welfare states in Western Europe. The distinction has made a come-back in the guise of “personal responsibility” in recent decades and has served to justify the widening inequalities of recent years: we are supposed to believe that the emergence of an über-rich millionaire caste and the fact that the middle class is fast slipping into precariousness is due to the excellent choices made by the former and the irresponsible ones made by the latter.

Just like finding and keeping a job in the age of downsizing and outsourcing or holding on to your mortgage and house when the housing bubble burst are not purely acts of will power or the outcomes of your personal choices, successful language learning is not just an act of will power or the outcome of personal choices. The consensus in applied linguistics is this:

- Language learning takes a long time: four years in the best-case scenario and from there up to “never” (Collier 1989 continues to be the most concise overview). However, the exact length and final outcome (as measured in proficiency level) depends on many factors, the most important of which are outside of the control of an individual language learner, including age and bilingual education provision.
- Age: while it is possible to learn a language at any age, it is almost impossible to modify your accent after puberty. However, non-linguists most often judge proficiency on the basis of pronunciation.
- Interactional opportunities in a new language do not simply appear because you try for them, as Yates (2011) shows. Even migrants who followed all the advice on how to strike up conversations in English did not necessarily find willing interlocutors. Furthermore, for adults, the imperative to work and earn an income or to care for children often simply take precedence over seeking out opportunities to practice a new language.
- Bilingual education: up to puberty, the only safe way to learn another language is to maintain the first. Stunting development of the L1 by switching exclusively to the L2 has negative effects not only on language learning but overall cognitive development and academic achievement. Post-puberty learners have almost no chance to catch up to the proficiency levels of their peers without special language support (e.g., García 2011 for an overview).

There is only one lesson to be learnt from this: if policy makers are serious about equal opportunities for migrants through learning the majority language, there is no way around bilingual provision. German policy makers have by and large failed in this regard. The *I-speak-German* campaign may be their attempt to shift the blame. However, politicians and media stars who fail to educate themselves on basic aspects of language

learning before scapegoating a large segment of the population as too lazy to learn surely deserve to be reminded of their own personal responsibilities: too lazy to get informed!



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