Providing bilingual education since 1689

I’ve been teaching about bilingualism for more than a decade and when I speak about bilingual education and dual-immersion programs I draw on examples from Canada and the USA. These are the examples that fill the literature and the textbooks. I’d bet that a survey of university classes dealing with bilingual education would find that English-French dual-immersion programs in Canada and English-Spanish dual-immersion programs in the USA emerge as the paradigmatic cases of bilingual education that we present to our students.

An article in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* reminds us how myopic this view is:

A PhD literature review in the field of two-way immersion (TWI) education revealed that German TWI programs are hardly ever mentioned in English-language publications. (Meier, 2010, p. 419)

As the author goes on to show this is not because such programs are rare but because even scholars in the field of bilingualism are a bit blinder on the non-English eye. I have to admit that I myself had never before even heard of the *Französisches Gymnasium/Collège Français*, which has been providing bilingual education in French and German in Berlin since 1689. That’s right, for over 320 years! Originally founded to serve Berlin’s Huguenot refugee population, the school has, with a short break in the final year of World War II, been operating uninterruptedly ever since.

When I wrote about the *English translation of a speech by German Chancellor Merkel* last week, I had occasion to reflect on the control the English-language hegemony exerts over our ways of seeing in journalism. It’s a bit harder to face the fact that the same kind of hegemony operates even in a scholarly field explicitly dedicated to bi- and multilingualism.

Meier’s article shows that the *Französisches Gymnasium/Collège Français* is just one of many dual-immersion programs in Germany in a wide range of languages. That we know so little about those programs is not only a result of English-language hegemony but also of the ideologies of those groups in German society who control the information that gets seen and read internationally. The dominant groups in German society share a monolingual mindset and homogeneous views of the nation which help to obscure the fact that, for instance, in 2007 24% of all children born in Germany had at least one non-German parent (official statistics quoted by
Meier, 2010, p. 427) and that at least some of these will head for one of the country’s many bilingual education programs.

Yoshio Sugimoto (2010, p. 14f.) explains the process beautifully with reference to international views of Japan:

Numerically small but ideologically dominant, core subcultural groups are the most noticeable to foreigners and are capable of presenting themselves to the outside world as representatives of Japanese culture.

Such a core subcultural group in Germany consists of ethnic Germans who cling to the myth of a homogeneous and monolingual nation. As Meier shows with reference to bilingual education, the reality is much more complex and diverse. It is fascinating, too! However, the inconvenient truth is that as bilingualism scholars we are actually colluding with the ideologically dominant if we fail to put diversity at the heart of our work – and that should routinely include reading the non-English-language literature, too!