

Tipsy on multilingualism?!

English-speaking countries have a poor track record when it comes to language learning. Educators in Australia, [the UK](#) and [the USA](#) regularly bemoan that fact and call for a change in language policy to strengthen the learning of languages other than English. One of their key arguments is economic: language learning is good for the economy, or so we are told. The basic argument goes like this: being monolingual in English is ok for buying as everyone in the world is learning English anyways but it's not so great for selling. Marketing 101 says that you want to address your customer in their language. As a general line of reasoning this makes a lot of sense. However, the devil is, as always, in the detail. I'm intrigued by the fact that in Australia wine-marketing has become the example de jour.

For example, it has been suggested that the growth potential for Australia's wine industry would be significant if Australia had more fluent German speakers. Germany is the largest importer of wine in the world, yet Australia does not capitalise on this. Australia's top four wine export markets are English speaking countries.

Their source is a [2006 conference presentation](#). When I came across this wine example in the ACER paper for the second time in a matter of weeks after having only shortly before read the Go8 report, I couldn't help wondering whether this is an urban legend in the making? So, before I see it in the next textbook on language policy, I'll have a go at it.

On the wine front, there is a factual problem with the example:

- According to [a 2007 analysis of the global wine import market published by the Californian Wine Export Program](#) Germany is not the largest wine import market in the world. According to their data, which they source from the *World Wine Report – 2007*, Germans consumed 1,990,000 liters of wine in 2007: way behind France (3,234,000), Italy (2,690,000), USA (2,688,300), and only slightly ahead of China (1,760,000), the UK (1,382,000) and Russia (1,310,000).
- Market growth is another good indicator of where the action is and again Germany doesn't lead the world in wine import growth rates, which, between 2002-07, saw a staggering 272% increase in China. Solid growth rates [were also reported](#) from Russia (+75%), Italy (+39%), Czech Republic (+40%), United States (+34%), Canada (+24%), France (+15%), United Kingdom (+14%) and, finally, Germany (+9%).

So how do Australian wines perform in the German market? [Still according to the above report](#), in 2007, Australian imports had a market share of 2.0% in Germany, which gives them the 8th largest market share behind Italy (30.9%), domestic wine (25.2%), France (13.2%), Spain (12.0%), South Africa (2.8%), Chile (2.7%) and the USA (2.1%). Is it reasonable to expect Australian wines to be doing significantly better in the German market? I don't think so. Germany itself has major wine-growing regions and is close to France, Italy and some of the world's other most traditional wine-growing regions. The European Union is the world's largest wine market, in terms of production and consumption as well as import and export. So, there are wonderful things to be had much closer to home and Australia is simply too far away to be a major player and plays in the same league as South Africa, Chile and the USA.

Australian wines have a market share above 10% in only three European countries: the UK (16.5%), Ireland (16%) and Denmark (12.5%). While two of these are English-speaking, one is not. Instead of language, they are united by their lack of an indigenous wine tradition. In contrast to Germany and most other European countries, wine production in Denmark, Ireland and the UK only started in the late 20th century “helped by global warming” as [various internet sources](#) gleefully report. As such these three European markets have more in common with various Asian countries, where Australian wines are also doing well – the supposed language handicap notwithstanding: Australia is the 2nd-ranked wine importer to Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, the 3rd-ranked to China, the 5th-ranked to South Korea and 6th to Japan.

The success of Australian wines in international markets has been attributed to [colorful branding, under-cutting](#) and [a high alcohol content](#). Indeed, the positioning of Australian export wines at the lower end of the market has also been blamed for their recent loss in market share both in the UK and the US, a development labeled as “[Yellow Tail Effect](#).”

So, as far as international wine markets go, it does not seem that there is much to the example of the supposed language handicap of Australian wines in the German market. Unfortunately, there is not much to the language side of the example, either. However dire the state of languages other than English may be in schools, Australia actually has a good-sized pool of fluent German speakers. [According to the 2006 census](#), 75,000 Australians (0.4 percent of the population) speak German at home, making it the ninth most widely-spoken community language. Surely, if language were a factor in the Australian share of the German wine market, that’s a large-enough talent pool to staff a couple of sales teams for the German market.

Now, you might ask why I’m nitpicking at this particular example? Apart from the fact that I really don’t want to see it in the next textbook or even report that comes along, I find a wide-spread lack of sophistication when it comes to the intersection of economics and language policy disappointing for my field. Clearly, the economic argument carries a lot of weight in language policy decisions. However, I just don’t see how the cause of multilingualism is helped by using shonky examples. Overall, there aren’t all that many solid studies on the economics of multilingualism out there. Partly, that has to do with the fact that language policy researchers and economists rarely engage in interdisciplinary dialogue. Partly, it also has to do with the dominance of context-insensitive research methods in the field and the scarcity of case studies.

The example is also testament to the fact that the supporters of multilingualism sometimes get carried away with an exclusive focus on language to the exclusion of all other considerations: at a time when we all should be concerned about global warming, [food miles](#) and – in Australia – the [depletion of our water resources through unsustainable agricultural practices including in the wine industry](#), it might not be such a bad thing if Australian wines haven’t made great inroads into the German market. Next time someone expounds on the benefits of language learning and multilingualism, it would be great to see some consideration given to how they intersect with the big issues of our time from environmental sustainability to global justice.



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