

Who Decides Sprachkompetenz? What Does It Mean To Be Competent in a Language?

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In the fall of 2011, I attended a talk on Integration. One of the speakers, a German man who represents his political party on Integration policy (Integrationspolitik), told the audience, “It is unacceptable that immigrants don’t learn German and continue to use their native language. I expect them to speak German like a native speaker.”

When I heard this, I was angry. Although I agree that immigrants should speak German, the expectation that adult immigrants “speak like a native” or stop using their native language is unreasonable. It is almost impossible for an adult learning German to use the language like a native.

Native German speakers like him don’t know how difficult it is to learn a new language. They don’t recognize how most immigrants work hard to learn German, and do learn German. They don’t realize the importance of using a native language in addition to the new language. Instead of trying to understand the experience of immigrants, they blame immigrants for not using German like a native speaker.

I had to leave the event before I had an opportunity to ask him some questions. If I had, I would have asked, “What exactly do you mean by a native speaker? My mother-in-law, who speaks a German dialect called Oberpfälzisch that many people make fun of? Someone from Hannover, where people supposedly speak proper German? A professor at the University who speaks academic German? Or someone like yourself, who speaks German with a strong Fränkisch accent and uses dialect from the region called Franken?”

Learning German is a centerpiece of Integrationspolitik. Like most aspects of Integrationspolitik, native speaking Germans decide policy. When immigrants fail to speak like natives, policy makers blame immigrants for not integrating, instead of questioning the policy, or asking immigrants

themselves what type of support they want, to reach the level of German that they actually need.

In this article, I am going to provide some information about the experience of learning and using a second language. My comments are based on my personal experience learning German, the experiences of other immigrants, and the work of many people in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). At the end of this article, I will provide some suggestions for how we might answer the question, “Who decides Sprachkompetenz?”

Learning a second language is a difficult and long term process

If someone learns a second language as a child, then it is possible that they will sound like a native speaker: they will use the language like a native speaker, and have an accent that is similar to the native speakers in the region where they live.

But when someone learns a second language as an adult, it is almost impossible to speak like a native, and learning a basic level of another language can take an enormous amount of energy. It takes decades to reach the level of a native speaker.

The process of learning German is different for each immigrant. There is no “one size fits all.” Learning German is not the same as going to class, studying, and passing a test. An integration class might help some people, but others learn the language by living here. I know of immigrants who speak German and have never taken a course, and others who keep taking classes, and never make much progress.

Context impacts our ability to use a Second language

Even if I have taken classes and passed a test to prove that I am fluent, there are many factors that influence my ability to actually use German. If I am confident, rested, have a reason or need to speak, am able to understand what others are saying, and trust that my speaking partner wants to listen to me, then my ability goes up. If am I nervous, tired, am not sure what I want

to say or have nothing to say, am not able to understand my speaking partner, and if no one wants to listen to me, then my ability goes down.

I might be able to make small talk with a neighbor or communicate with colleagues at work, but I might not be able to express my needs at the city office where I am expected to understand and speak a type of bureaucratic, complicated German used by the people who work there. Or I might have a feeling of belonging in one part of town or in a community organization where I am a member and respected, but not feel welcomed in a bar or some regions of Germany when I am the only foreigner and there is a history of foreigners being assaulted. That will influence my ability to speak German.

If a native speaker notices that immigrants aren't saying much, they might conclude that we don't speak German very well. That might be true, but it could also be that we aren't ready to talk.

Immigrants do learn and use German

Even though it is difficult for many immigrants to learn German, most of us learn and use German in some form. We listen to German radio and watch German television. We read German newspapers and magazines. We speak with our neighbors in German. We have German friends and acquaintances, and because most of them don't speak our native languages, our conversations are in German. We belong to clubs and organizations where we use German.

Our ability varies, but we learn and use German. We speak with an accent, but we speak German. Our vocabulary may be limited, but we use German. We may not understand everything we hear, but listen to German. We make mistakes in spelling and grammar when we write, but we write in German. We may not understand every word we read, but we read German.

Of course, there are a few immigrants who haven't had the time, desire, resources, or need to learn German. Some are older immigrants who came here originally as guest workers (or family members of guest workers), but they were not expected or encouraged to learn German. It was many years later, in the last decade or so, when immigrants were expected, and now required, to learn German.

Because many Germans don't have personal contact with immigrants, they are not in a position to evaluate our ability to speak German. They only hear us using German, or our native language, in situations where we are strangers to them. It is similar to when I am on a train and hear a conversation between two native Germans. If they are speaking dialect with each other, I can't tell if they can speak formal, standard German. Nor do I know if they speak English or another second language. And depending on their dialect, I might not be able to understand what they are saying at all, even though they are speaking a type of German.

Immigrants use their native language in addition to German

Most of us pray, dream, and express our feelings in our native language. Our native language is the language of the heart. Although immigrants might be fluent in German, there are times when we want or need to use our native language. When someone uses another language, it impacts how they feel about themselves and their relationships with others. So using our native language from time to time is essential. It helps us remember who we are.

Many of us use our native language at home with our families. Some of us use both German and our native language at home. I have a colleague who uses several languages at home with her husband and children: they speak German, Turkish, and Arabic. It is a rich environment for language learning. If the family only spoke German at home, it would be a loss for everyone.

Although some native Germans criticize immigrants for using our native languages at home, there are many German communities around the world where Germans speak mostly or only German. How many native speaking Germans living in Spain, Thailand, or Turkey are fluent in Spanish, Thai, or Turkish, or the dialects spoken in those countries? Which language do these Germans speak at home?

Different immigrants have different goals for learning and using German

If I ask 100 immigrants why they want, or need, to learn German, I might hear 100 different responses. Here are some examples.

- The owner of a small restaurant located in a village needs to know the dialect of that village
- The owner of a shop needs to know the languages spoken by the immigrants who shop there
- An employee at Adidas or Siemens might need to write, read, and speak fluent English, but not German.
- A former guest worker, who is now retired, might not need to know much German at all.
- Professors need to have a high level of academic German and the vocabulary for their specialty;
- A worker on a construction site in Nürnberg, where there are probably workers from several Eastern European countries, needs to speak casual German, maybe some casual Polish and Rumanian, and have German vocabulary for tools and building materials.

Each of these people needs to emphasize a different aspect of language. One person needs to be very skilled in reading and writing, another person skilled in listening and understanding, and another in speaking. Each one needs a different type of German, some need a mix of German and at least one other language, and some need to learn German only at a very basic level.

So it doesn't make sense to have one standard of German for all immigrants. Each immigrant needs to decide their goal for using German and learn that level of German, or another language that is more important for them given their role in the economy, family, and community.

Who should decide Sprachkompetenz?

Of course we all need to learn German. It is the one language we have in common. But I believe that each immigrant has the right to decide how much German she or he can learn and is willing to learn. I believe that native German speakers have the same right: to decide how much and which German they want to use. My wife has a right to use Oberpfälzisch

with her mother, slang with her friends, standard German with her colleagues, and English or some type of German with me. The right to choose your language is a basic human right.

Instead of hearing about the few immigrants who don't speak German like a native, I would like to hear some recognition for the courage it takes to learn and use a second language, especially when you get criticized for not speaking like a native. I would also like some to hear some recognition of the many resources that immigrants bring to Germany, one of which is our ability to communicate in more than one language. It allows us to be translators between communities in Germany and throughout the world. It is one of our many contributions to the creation of an intercultural society.

I would also like native German speakers to learn how to listen to us. I understand that it can be difficult to understand us, given our accents and the way we use German, especially if we are beginners or relatively new to Germany. But I believe this is only a question of practice. I would like native speaking Germans to put the same level of effort into communicating with us, as we do trying to use their language and communicating with them.

Finally, I suggest native and non-native speakers have a dialogue, as equals, about the level of German that we need as individuals, and as a society. If we can learn to communicate across our differences, and learn from each other, then I believe we can create a society where we can all succeed, regardless of our background.