



PHOTO: ZAIN AJI

BOOK INTERVIEW

The English issue

There's no question about the increased prevalence of English in Germany's *Hauptstadt* over the last decade(s) – hence these pages – but whom does this benefit? Taking the text from their own live Instagram conversation during the pandemic, Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah explore who the inclusion of the English language is for in the book *English in Berlin* (available in both German and English) out this past September

When did you start thinking about how English is used in Berlin? MH:

It started with Sinthujan seeing more and more English language in the public space in Berlin, even political statements like: "My culture is not your costume." We took these observations as a starting point but also collected anecdotes and personal experiences from our social media followers to question how normal it had become to speak English in Berlin, how it's even demanded from you in certain spaces. The more gentrified and internationally elitist the space is, the more they expect you to respond in English. You could even speak of parallel societies that allow you to navigate the city without a word of German but normalized International School English. We were wondering why it is that we have this acceptance and flexibility with English, but not with so many other languages that racialized minorities in Germany speak. We are both children of refugees and not speaking German was a real obstacle in our day-to-day life, but for native speakers in English, who aren't refugees but privileged migrants, it is not. It was interesting for us to look into this paradox. **SV:** What we try to do in our book is to look at the local city level, reflecting on the structural but also the personal, how language dynamics impact day-to-day interactions of people. We also

(Moshtari Hilal) ماشتري هلال
 (Sinthujan Varatharajah)
 English in Berlin
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Moshtari Hilal,
 (photo top), **Sinthujan**
Varatharajah (photo
 bottom): *English in*
Berlin, Wirklichkeit
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look at how the city and certain social milieus within it desperately attempt to globalize themselves at the expense of local populations, who have much longer and more substantial stakes in this city, its development and future.

You talk about this specifically in the cultural field. MH:

There's this demand for diversity, and cultural spaces try to respond to it, but the way they respond is limited; it's very surface-level. This limited space for alternative, different, non-white, non-hegemonic voices in the cultural landscape of Germany in general and Berlin specifically creates a certain economy of diversity. This economy wants workers that represent diversity, that check a specific box, and rarely is the class aspect that is linked to locality is considered. Within this diversity economy we observe how a specific mobile and privileged expat workforce is put in direct competition with more marginalized local and racialized cultural workers. **SV:** A lot of Institutions and policymakers as well as cultural workers assume that using English functions as a shortcut to inclusivity, misunderstanding and ignoring the fact that we live in a country that is based on nationalist and racist assimilationist language policies. Bilingualism of any language was always frowned upon and punished until recently, especially if it was non-European and non-imperial languages. It still is in many schools, workplaces and public spaces. In that sense the country has raised generations of refugees, immigrants and their descendants who were to whatever level much more proficient in German than English. Why? Because they had to be. English is not the lingua Franca that connects most non-German speakers. Yet it's now being really aggressively pushed whilst ignoring the fact that there's never been any similar accommodation for any other language-speaking group, be they Arabic speakers, Turkish speakers, Kurdish speakers, Russian speakers, Vietnamese speakers or Polish speakers. These populations actually form the largest group of second-language speakers but have never been considered significant enough by the city and its many bourgeois institutions. **MH:** The system, the institutions, the German public creates double standards. We observe how institutions import international discourse and often try to replace genuine confrontation with their own local racist structures, histories and conflicts. Equally using English became in these spaces another form of virtue signaling in progressive discourse. It's a lazy shortcut without genuine interest in accessibility, as Sinthujan pointed out. Especially when institutions are funded by tax money, there is a material responsibility to accessibility.

What we see now is the inclusion of Ukrainian and Russian.

Very quickly, it was possible to have resources not just in one other language but in two. SV: Ukrainian refugees were suddenly housed where Syrian, Afghan, Eritrean and other refugees were previously housed, so they were literally physically replacing and displacing them, and you also saw all this language

infrastructure emerging, in railway stations, airports, everywhere really, even museums. That's not to be criticized in the sense that it shouldn't have happened, rather: why is this not being extended to all groups? Why not Tigrinya speakers? Why not Somali speakers? Why only Ukrainians? If Ukrainian refugees can be exempted and given EU Temporary Protection Status as the first and only group since the creation of this legal avenue in 2001, why hasn't this been done before and why is it only done for selective groups at specific times? The more cynical and depressing part with English is the fact that suddenly you're able to switch so quickly into another language. When we grew up, we were policed and attacked for speaking any language in the public space, even in private spaces, that was not German. **MH:** Germany doesn't want to be welcoming to demographics that are not profiting them. It's important to understand that whenever we see double standards, it's intended to be like that. Do cultural institutions not make enough of an effort to be more accessible because „those people“ can't afford to participate in that world anyway?

Without understanding German, you also can't fully grasp the local discussion of racism. For instance, a commonly recycled scare-narrative is about children speaking other languages in school, but it's never English or French that is meant by that, it's always non-European languages.

MH: Language is one symptom of the discussion. What language can be spoken in the public space? Who are you allowed to be in this country? When are you a suspect? For us as people who experience not just hostile looks but even attacks or being told we have to shut up when we talk to our parents on the phone on the subway, it's kind of astonishing that English has this friendly reputation now in Berlin. **SV:** The city thrives on this schizophrenic image that Berlin is not Germany, whereas it's from within this

very city that important national and international economic decisions are formulated. It's after all the seat of government and power. It's quite interesting how that rhetoric "Berlin is not Germany" is divorced from the material reality of spatial distribution of power and decision-making of this country. Here you have all these creative classes that come in and benefit from the fact that this for Western standards impoverished city allows for certain flexibility and mobility for them in terms of where they can live, chill, work, open ateliers, stores, and institutions. But then you also have large working-class populations, many of whom are immigrants, refugees and their descendants, who are much poorer vis-à-vis their own kin in West Germany. They're at an economic disadvantage to their peers who arrived maybe under similar conditions and from similar places. These nuances often get lost in this discussion. Berlin is a very vulnerable, place despite being the capital of one of the richest countries in the world.

Any suggestions as to what could be done better? **MH:** It's important that we do not get lost in individualized responsibility. We need to have collective responses. More accessibility means having more than one language and even more than two, so coming up with answers for effective translation and also creating budgets specifically for that. Starting to think about double standards and making the naturalization of English in Berlin into an issue, can lead to a productive discussion. **SV:** Mobility is built up on the immobility of other people. This is something that a lot of expats have to think about more critically. There's a reason why they enjoy so much mobility in the city and it has very much to do with the fact that other people do not.

Interview: Jara Nassar

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