
Reviewed by Richard Utz

Published 30.07.2010

At first sight, the title of this book, repeated on the cover and title pages in English, French, and German, looks like that of a Baroque novel. However, telling the story of the institutionalization of English Studies at the University of Strasbourg in three languages instead of one is not a matter of redundancy. In fact, Renate Haas (University of Kiel) and Albert Hamm (Université de Strasbourg) have made a virtue of necessity in order to do justice to a narrative situated in the culturally and linguistically diverse borderland between France and Germany. Therefore, the trilingualism of the volume presents not only a welcome tribute to European language traditions” (p. 23), but also, for us readers, an occasion to compare and contrast how three major European academic discourses describe their similar, but also diverse, pedagogical and scholarly practices.

Albert Hamm begins the historical case study by focusing on the various foundations that facilitated the establishing of the first continental chair in English Studies. He holds that

> the uncommon situation of the University of Strasbourg, characterized simultaneously by its strong bi-confessional identity and by a de facto tri-lingualism – Latin, German, French – played a decisive role in the interest of a history of English studies in Strasbourg. The successive oscillations between France and Germany which have characterized its history and, more generally, its international outlook, have created the conditions for an unusual development of the study of ancient as well as modern languages and, accordingly, of English. [...] The creation, in Strasbourg, of the first chair in English in November 1872 is also the fruit of a combination of circumstances owing as much to the political and academic situation in Germany and to a whole series and coincidences as to the geography and the history of Alsace. (pp. 28-29)

Similar to most European universities, the prehistory of English Studies in Strasbourg begins in the first half of the nineteenth century, in 1838, when the monopoly of Classical Studies on the academic education in languages and literatures (in 1854, the faculty library catalogue lists 63 works for the Greek department, 103 for the Latin department, and 29 for “foreign literature”) is broken by the addition of a chair in “Foreign Literatures,” Frédéric Guillaume Bergmann. Bergmann, who would serve as Dean of the Philosophical Faculty from 1860 through 1871, and then continued to serve after the Franco-German war had
transformed the Université into a Reichsuniversität, played a major role in convincing respective university leadership cadres of the necessity for including contemporary and English literatures. However, the faculty at Strasbourg, again not unlike those at other European universities, kept resisting any changes to the traditional (here: Napoleonic) system of academic instruction. The university's proximity and manifold connections to German institutions, while facilitating heated discussions about systemic change from the Napoleonic to a Humboldtian academic model, were insufficient in bringing about a more foundational revision of curricula and strategic plans.

“[U]ndertaken with a high amount of German patriotism, nationalism and chauvinism,” this foundational revision finally happened after the military annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, when the German reorganization focused on making the institution a widely visible imperial beacon of the “demarcation against a French understanding of scholarship and science and French culture in general” (p. 47). Renate Haas’s research demonstrates how many German intellectuals enthusiastically colluded with their political leaders to create such an academic bastion of Germanity already months before, and certainly after, the proclamation of the German Empire in Versailles. Haas proceeds to show how different reorganization plans proposed different solutions: Charles Schützenberger, a Strasbourg Professor of Medicine, attempted to protect the autonomy and freedom of the institution against too radical a Germanization, proposing a surprisingly modern mélange between French and German elements and centering “on language problems and aspects of bi- and transculturalism” (p. 51). Wilhelm Dilthey, an eminent German philosopher and historian who would later take Hegel’s chair of philosophy at Berlin, rejected the idea of a more provincially oriented institution. Convinced that the Humanities (Geisteswissenschaften) were “the main buttress of Germany's international prestige” and had excellent “Germanising potential” (p. 55), he aimed at creating a university concept “that would make Strasbourg the lodestar Göttingen had been for the preceding century and Humboldt’s Berlin for the first half of his own” (p. 54). Dilthey’s sketch, which proved more influential than Schützenberger’s, did not contain a position for a chair of English. After all, Old English (Angelsächsisch) was still commonly considered part of German(ic) Philology as a linguistic variant of Old Saxon (Altsächsisch), and Middle English led a subaltern existence within Romance philology. However, Dilthey certainly presented “an unusually broad conception of the humanities section for Strasbourg” (p. 57), a plan that fit well with the ambitious general plans to reorganize the institution. In the end, the philosophical faculty, probably led by their progressive Dean, Bergmann, requested from Otto von Bismarck (the Reichsuniversität was under the direct control of the Imperial Chancellery) two chairs in modern philology, one of them specializing primarily in English, an innovative choice they explained in part with the need for ensuring the thorough philological education of secondary school teachers in Alsace-Lorraine. Taking great care not to emphasize the French character of the region, the faculty concluded that the ‘new’ institution had the unique opportunity of becoming a leading center for the study of modern languages. Thus, ironically, it was the French Dean of the Faculty who preferred championing one chair position for English and Romance philology each instead of two chairs for Romance philology (and this happened concurrent with a complaint by German-speaking faculty at the School of Medicine about some of their colleagues’ teaching in French).
Another ironic aspect of the foundation of English Studies is that the two new chairs in modern philology, Eduard Böhmer (Romance Philology; from the University of Halle) and Bernhard ten Brink (English Philology; from the University of Marburg), quickly started a troublesome turf war. According to Haas, soon after the *Reichsuniversität* had established the very first separate chair and *Seminar* of English on the European continent, ten Brink

\[\text{did everything he could to merge it again with Romance philology. Ten Brink's main reasons will have been his broad, comparative understanding of philology and the troublesome fact that English hardly attracted any students, because it was far less established in the schools than French, especially in Alsace-Lorraine. (p. 65)}\]

One might add to these motivations that instruction in English prior to 1872 had been attached to chairs of Romance philology at most universities. Thus, the altercation between Böhmer and ten Brink was probably also simply a function of the separation pangs of two specialized national disciplines in the teaching of ‘foreign’ languages and literatures at the modern university.

Of the two chairs, ten Brink turned out to be the more successful one. Böhmer's stubborn concentration on scientific philological subject matter (esp. historical grammar, medieval French) disappointed those who had hoped for a better education of students training to be teachers of French as well as those who missed “the familiar literature lectures for students of all disciplines and for the broad public” (p. 66). Like the majority of German professors of ‘foreign’ philologies, who were more proficient in the historical languages they investigated than their modern variants, Böhmer did not master his target language well enough and, in the politically loaded Strasbourg atmosphere, failed at his Germanizing mission. Ten Brink, who lectured regularly on the French classical authors, French metrics, and the *Chansons the Roland*, had fewer nationalistic issues to fend with. He smartly focused his scholarship, tempered dry-as-dust philology with literary considerations, and quickly became one of the best-known international authorities on the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. His Germanizing moves were less publicly noticeable, as when he collaborated with the chauvinistic Germanist, Wilhelm Scherer, on the book series, *Forschungen zur Sprach- und Culturgeschichte der germanischen Völker*, and engaged in glorifying German scholarship and derogating or belittling English colleagues such as Henry Sweet, Walter W. Skeat, or Henry Bradshaw. Without a large number of students, ten Brink was not able to capitalize on his institution’s early acceptance of the subject of English. Moreover, Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, and others soon caught up with and outdid Strasbourg, and after 1918, when the institution had once again become French and German professors had been expelled, most German-speaking achievements were silenced, just as “German(ic) philology” was generally seen as synergistic with the war effort. Still, Strasbourg's unilateral move brought attention to the opportunities of an independent study of English and quickly inspired other institutions to follow suit: By 1900, Germany boasted eleven universities with full professorships and nine with associate professorships; Austria three universities with...
full professorships and one with an associate professorship; and Switzerland three universities with associate professorships.

Haas and Hamm’s well-researched case study of the genesis of English Studies at Strasbourg provides any number of fascinating insights. It reminds us of the fervent nationalism at work in establishing the foundational structures and practices in literature and language study according to national origins and assists us in understanding how the political and intellectual competition between France and Germany was conducive, albeit not without ironic deviations, to the institutionalization of English Studies. Most importantly, perhaps, the authors’ meticulous and lucid scholarship can help us avoid simplistic monocausal explanations about a disciplinary history that still permeates our present. Thus, Haas and Hamm deserve high praise for presenting a narrative that makes us aware of the longue durée of nationalist presuppositions in our fields and encourages us to bridge the chasm between philological disinterestedness and thoughtfully engaged and creative academic practices that opened up during the very period investigated in this volume.

**KEYWORDS:** History of English Studies, University of Strasbourg, Language and Literature Study in Alsace-Lorraine

**REVIEWED BY:** Richard Utz

**AFFILIATION:** Western Michigan University

**E-MAIL:** richard.utz@wmich.edu