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Translating words into action

Language can be either a barrier or a bridge in recruitment. In German-speaking countries, there are examples of it being both. A recent report from the European Commission (EC) shows how language can be an obstacle. The report examines where postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows end up under the EC's Marie Curie Fellowships, which enable young scientists to study in European countries other than their own. Only 10% of the 2,080 fellowships awarded between 1999 and 2001 were used to study at a German university, research institute or industry research programme. In response, German researchers say that language difficulties are partly to blame (see *Nature* 415, 945; 2002).

But in recent visits to Germany and Austria, I saw how operating labs under a common language — English — can have the opposite effect. Visits to the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg and the Research Institute of Molecular Pathology in Vienna were, to me, telling.

Both labs employ an international mix of young scientists, some of whom said that the English-based science culture was instrumental in attracting them to their current posts. The need to learn German from scratch in order to work at either of the labs would have been an impediment, they said, although they were interested in learning the language to help them with everyday life outside the lab.

Choosing English as a scientific language can sometimes be controversial. Perhaps that's because cultural identity and linguistic identity can get completely confused. Although it may be better to tackle Goethe in German, it might be more practical to discuss the intricacies of cell signalling or gene expression in English. And opting for English as a common language may help to attract a more international mix to the lab.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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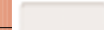
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