

## Can German Remain a Vital Heritage Language in the United States?

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### Abstract

The demise of German as a pervasive language for 300 years in the United States is due to historical and demographic reasons. Creating an awareness of Germany as an important country and strengthening the role of German teaching has gained advocates in educational and political circles in Germany as well as in the United States. Less understood and supported is the situation of German as a heritage language, despite a multitude of native German speakers who reside in the United States, in part due to global economic needs and who continue to be attracted to German as a language of use. This article describes the work of private German language schools to develop language proficiency, opportunities to use German, and a desire to speak it, and pleads for more research on German as a heritage language and interest in German language conservation. Although Austria and Switzerland also contribute to the preservation of their culture and language abroad by maintaining schools, cultural forums, etc., this article will focus primarily on Germany's efforts to develop German language instruction in the U.S.

### Introduction

Complementing the many theories of language teaching in various school settings, the concept of heritage language (HL) learning has come of age (Brinton, Kagan, & Bauckus, 2008). In addition to Fishman's theories (Fishman, 1991, 2001; García, 2006), additional concepts regarding HLs, HL speakers, and HL learners have been formulated. Grin (1990, 2003), for example, discussing the vitality of minority languages in Europe, refers to Fishman's (1991) graded intergenerational disruption scale (GIDS), which assesses the language behavior of larger groups, i.e., language commonly used in the home, school, community, by governments and in the media rather than by individuals. If a language is spoken by a group of insulated old people (Stage 8, Fishman (1991)) the chances of survival of the language are slim or non-existent. In contrast, if the language is used in higher level educational, occupational, media services, etc. (Stage 1, Fishman (1991)), the survival potential of the language is positive. Grin (2003) also contends that while the language behavior of groups is primarily responsible for the maintenance and vitality of minority languages, groups do not bear the only responsibility. He identifies three conditions that "constitute a necessary and sufficient set" (p. 46) for language preservation: capacity development, the development of advanced language proficiency and the ability to use it; opportunity creation, creation of domains that give speakers opportunities to use the language naturally; and the desire to invest time and effort to learn and use the language, because it brings certain rewards (p. 43). Grin's work concerns the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which aims to create environments where these conditions can be applied. The Council of Europe monitors these applications, works with experts and government authorities, and publishes briefs on this topic.

Lo Bianco (2008a, b) elaborates on Grin's work, which focuses on Europe, and relates it to the case of HL speakers in the United States, which is not covered by the same policies. German in

the United States, therefore, does not enjoy the same support as it does in some of the European countries where it is a minority language. This issue will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

### Use of German in the United States

German is the language of one of the oldest and largest immigrant groups to the United States. Germans came with a group of Englishmen and Poles in 1608 and helped establish the first settlement of Europeans in Jamestown, Virginia. In 1683, thirteen Mennonite and Quaker families came to Pennsylvania and created Germantown, the first German settlement in this country. The first U.S. census (1790) reported 600,000 German immigrants in this country (Faust I, p. 17). Of the total immigration to the U.S. between 1820 and 1988 (49,758,412 persons), 7,028,258, or 14.1%, were German. While fewer Germans immigrated after 1900, the years before, during, and after World War II saw a surge in German immigration. From 1930 to 1939, 17% of total immigration was German. From 1940 to 1949, the proportion was 14%, and from 1950 to 1959 it rose to 23% percent (Adams, 1993). Today, German is still the largest ancestry group in this country and includes 50,708 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

In the tercentennial celebration of German immigration to the U.S. held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on October 6, 1983, it was proudly noted that 28.8% of Americans claimed German heritage, according to the census of 1980. Three hundred years of German-American relations were recounted, festivities and exhibitions were staged, and the mutual influence of Germany and the United States was noted, but the question of teaching, learning, and maintaining the German language did not prominently come to the fore. An exhibition of 400 books by German writers organized by the Publishers and Booksellers Association of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Goethe House, New York, included books on German-American relations, history, politics, and German-American literature and culture but few “textbooks and other materials for the study of the German language -- suitable for Americans” (*Germans in America*, 1683-1983). It appears that the euphoria of the day and the still widespread use of German at that time did not stimulate a more serious concern for the teaching of German in the public schools or universities, nor did it motivate an interest in preserving the language once widely spoken in the U.S.

A rude awakening came many years later, after the beginning of the new millennium, when it was realized that the use of German had been declining not only in the United States but worldwide. The number of speakers fell from 120 million to 90–98 million (Gordon, 2005). In 2006, German Minister of State Cornelia Pieper called this an alarming sign (German Embassy Freetown, n.d.).

According to Ammon (1991), the number of speakers of a language determines the number of contacts made in the language and, thus, its relevance in international communication and economic importance. In addition, minority HL speakers abroad in interaction with majority language speakers serve a *Vermittlungsdienst* [intermediary service] (p. 88), assist in intercultural understanding, and benefit both countries.

A paucity of information exists (other than U.S. Census data) concerning to what degree, when, for what purposes, and how often more recently arrived native German speakers in the United States (who are mostly bilingual), German HL speakers, or speakers of German as a second language use German on a daily or occasional basis. Motivational research has found that desire to do so is not a stable construct. To learn or maintain a language and to use it involves a number of phases and depends on multifaceted community influences and personal choices (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). In a noteworthy study regarding German language learning, Noels (2005) asserts that contact with the German community in Canada contributed significantly to that community's motivation to speak German, primarily for HL learners, thus confirming Fishman's, Grin's, and Lo Bianco's tenets.

This article uses Grin's and Lo Bianco's COD framework and discusses German language teaching and learning in the United States and recent planning strategies of some German government agencies to maintain German teaching and learning in this country. It also offers observations regarding German HL maintenance with examples from the education arena.

### **Early German Schooling in the United States: A Failure to Create Capacity, Opportunity, and Desire**

In his study "Language loyalty in the German American church: The case of an over-confident minority," Harold Schiffman (1987, 1998) poses the question of why the "bilingual" schools of the nineteenth century, when German immigration was at its peak, were not able to "produce stable community bilingualism" and intergenerational language preservation among the Germans. Realizing the decisive role that a formal education system plays in language capacity creation, he investigated the educational systems operated by the Missouri Lutherans, Evangelical Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and other churches. Although these schools catered to the German-speaking population of that time, which was bilingual, they did not prevent the integration into English of the "largest body of non-English-speaking immigrants that the US has ever had to deal with" (Schiffman, 1998, p. 1).

Schiffman rejects the sociolinguistic argument advanced by other researchers that the enormous assimilative powers of U.S. civilization were solely responsible for the failure of language maintenance. Instead, he points to the faulty language policy followed by the churches and their educational branches. He contends that these institutions put their religious and ideological concerns first, admitted English speakers into their congregations to fill their ranks, and did not pursue a focused language policy. They did not realize that although the official language of their institutions and their followers was German, they themselves helped reduce the "actual de facto language preference" (p. 2) of their members by failing to strengthen opportunities to utilize the HL and providing no rewards that would generate a desire to maintain it.

Schiffman offers a *Stundenplan* [class schedule], published in the *Pädagogische Zeitschrift* [Pedagogical Journal] of 1893, as an illustration. Half of the school day was devoted to subjects taught in German, the other half to those taught in English. German subjects included the Bible, catechism, penmanship, reading, singing, and spelling. English subjects included arithmetic, geography, reading, writing, and spelling. This made English the language of daily practical use. Fishman's (1974) often-quoted claim that a fully "balanced bilingual speech community seems

to be a theoretical impossibility” (p. 5) because no society needs two languages for the same set of functions supports Schiffman’s conclusion. It also validates Lo Bianco’s claim that the opportunity to use the language in natural settings is paramount. Schiffman admits that such thoughts were not known at the time, nor were today’s methods for successful bilingual teaching. Thus, “the linguistic policy of these schools may have been not only ineffective but in fact unwittingly contributory to eventual linguistic assimilation in America” (1998, p. 2).

The virulent and prejudiced persecution of everything German in the United States at the outbreak of World War I has been well documented (Kloss, 1963/1998; Luebke, 1980, 1999; Rippley, 1984; Schach, 1980; Toth, 1990; Wiley, 1998). German instruction collapsed and has never regained its former position. The percentage of high schools offering German language instruction in 1910 (23.7) fell to 0.6% in 1922 (Draper & Hicks, 2001). German language use in the family was abandoned as well.

As demographics change and new immigrant groups come to the United States, new languages become more prevalent. According to U.S. Census figures, German language use at home has changed again, from 1.4 million speakers in 2000 (Shin & Bruno, 2000) to 1.1 million in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a).

### **German Schooling in the United States Today**

Recognizing the decline in the instruction and use of German worldwide, the German government has undertaken some long-overdue steps in language policy planning. In late 2007, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then foreign minister of the Federal Republic, created a government-sponsored campaign called “Schools: Partner for the Future –PASCH” (Goethe Institute, 2008). It was designed to build a worldwide network of at least 1,000 partner schools, later to be increased to 1,500, to awaken young people’s interest in learning German (Pfaeffle, 2009). In 2012, 85 such schools were named in the United States. They included five Auslandsschulen (German schools abroad) for German students living in the United States temporarily due to their parents’ assignments, nine Goethe Institute partner schools that were mostly immersion elementary and middle schools, and 45 privately operated community-based German language schools, mostly Saturday schools. Steinmeier’s successor, Guido Westerwelle, continues this campaign. His website advocates that the program should “inspire young people to learn German, which would open doors to German culture, science, and business” (Goethe Institute, 2011). Today, according to Harald Leibrecht, Coordinator for Transatlantic Cooperation at the Federal Office, the number of these PASCH-schools will increase even more (Leibrecht, 2012).

Consequently, the summer of 2010 saw enhanced policy-creating activity originating also from the German Embassy in Washington, DC. A group of U.S. Germanists, activists, and representatives of schools and organizations involved in German language instruction collected enrollment data and offered suggestions to increase German teaching in this country, which was represented as being in crisis (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache in den USA in der Krise?*, 2010). A strategy paper and follow-up documents were sent to the German Foreign Ministry and distributed to additional stakeholders (Hamilton & Legutke, 2011). National conferences in New York in September 2011 and 2012, sponsored by the Goethe Institute, focused on better advocacy for German, language training for practical opportunities, more systematized

cooperation, networking, and teacher training (Goethe Institute, 2011, 2012). All of the parties involved agreed that the need to learn German and the opportunity to use it have not diminished, as Germany continues to play a vital role in the world economic and political arenas and needs the international dialogue that cannot be conducted only in English, the lingua franca of today. German in U.S. high schools and universities still occupies third place in foreign language enrollment (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). It was hoped it could maintain this position and that enrollment would increase. However, German as a HL or as a *Herkunftssprache* (the German equivalent) was only of marginal interest.

In accordance with the Council of Europe for Regional and Minority Languages and its Charter, Germany supports the heritage of its language in the eastern countries of Europe and Central Asia for historic and economic reasons. (*Annual Payments: Berlin Helps Ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe*). This includes promoting the language and maintaining ties with Germany. Germany was one of the first signers of this charter in 1992 and also promotes the learning of a number of minority languages within its own borders. These activities are carried out through the Department of the Interior.

Efforts to stem the declining use of German outside of Europe and Central Asia, on the other hand, are the charge of the German Foreign Ministry. To back the teaching of German as a HL and to support and promote it as a minority language in the United States are not included in its mandate. On the contrary, as a consequence of the strategy paper, the declaration to further the German Language in the U.S., it is seen as a goal not only to attract more English speakers but also other world language speakers in the United States to learn German. Thus the Goethe Institute, a non-governmental German organization, which receives its funding from the German government, now offers a program called “Todo Aleman” (Goethe Institute, 2013), an intercultural program that seeks to attract Spanish speakers to the learning of German.

### **Community-based German Schools: Demographics and Challenges**

HL learning is different from learning a foreign language. Foreign language learning is essentially one-directional, starting from a novice position and proceeding to linguistically more complex language. HL learning is multidirectional. Although HL learners vary in their level of proficiency, they share a kinship to their HL and often have considerable cultural knowledge. In a study of German-speaking Bosnians (not classical German HL learners), who arrived in large numbers in the St. Louis area in 1993, after having lived in Germany for several years, Wolf (2002) corroborates observations by Valdés (1997) that HL learners often possess skills in communication and pronunciation that traditional learners would require hundreds of hours of instruction to acquire, if ever. However, they lack advanced vocabulary, have incomplete knowledge of morphology and syntax, and need help with improving their literacy and progressing on the continuum from oral and personal to written and literate expression (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Such students do not share an easily definable starting point for instruction.

When creating an educational design for HL learners, the home-community nexus that creates the initial language capacity and the opportunity to use the language in a natural environment has to be taken into account. Fishman (1991) places the home and community at the center of his



GID scale. Therefore, as much as he supports the necessity of schooling, he is also aware of the challenges and limitations of schooling alone. Schiffman and other scholars agree that top-down efforts by policymakers and schools alone are not sufficient.

Intergenerational transmission of language needs to be nurtured as well by a bottom-up endeavor emanating from the HL home and community. Wang (2011) maintains that the macro and micro environments of school and home are both essential. Lo Bianco (2008a, 2008b), who stresses the creation of language capacity as a prerequisite for maintaining sustainable HLs in the United States, agrees and places the burden of achieving success equally on the shoulders of the school, the home, and the community.

Although the number of German immigrants has subsided since 1960, and since in 2010 German moved from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> place in terms of languages other than English spoken in the United States (behind Spanish, Chinese, French, Tagalog, and Vietnamese) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b), new German speakers are still coming to this country. In 1999 alone, 13,485 arrived, and in the following ten years, the total was 70,757 (German Consulate General, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) reports that the largest concentration of German speakers live in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC (Shin & Kominski, 2010). While they are dispersed and do not form nuclei, there are still more German people in the United States than in the small German federal state of Saarland.

Germans in the United States are often seen as abandoning German and even choosing to speak English among themselves. This, however, may change when they realize that their children are in danger of losing their HL language proficiency and thus the advantage of learning and possessing more than one language. Schooling becomes the answer.

Five of the community-based schools mentioned above have grown into full-time schools with an all-German curriculum and some subjects taught in English. These *Auslandsschulen* (in New York City, Washington DC, Boston, Portland, and Silicon Valley) straddle the German and American cultures and offer the best of both worlds. Indeed, they are able to create balanced or full bilingualism. Yet the total number of their students is a mere 1,429, of which 986 possess native or near-native German language proficiency, and 443 are defined as foreign language learners, who are expected to reach full bilingualism (Auslandsschulwesen, 2012).

The second type of community-based schools catering to HL learners are the *Teilzeitschulen* or private German language school, which are often Saturday schools. Some of these schools were established in the nineteenth century by citizens who were concerned even then with language maintenance (German Language School Conference, 2012). Most of them, however, were created by refugees during the heavy immigration before, during, and after World War II.

In an effort to gain more information about the clientele of these Saturday schools, the German Language School Conference (GLSC), the umbrella organization for these institutions, has collected demographic data about the students and their families (Mischner-Bang, 2005). Answering questionnaires were 363 students in five prominent Saturday schools. They specified the language range of 250 of their mothers and 238 of their fathers, from native speakers to only

some language proficiency. Seventy percent of the students were born in the United States, with 67% having lived here of all their lives. Sixteen percent were born in Germany, 4% in Switzerland, 2% in Austria, and 7% in other countries. Only 14% of the students born outside the United States had been living here for fewer than five years. Thirty percent of them said they speak German at home with at least one parent, and 20% said they never speak German at all. However, 82% had relatives in a German-speaking country, and 36% visited these relatives annually, 20% more often. Only 15% had never done so.

The socioeconomic status of these families was very high, with 20% of the fathers and 11% of the mothers having a PhD. Thirty four percent of the families stated that their income was above \$150,000. At the same time, a number of students received scholarships or were exempt from paying tuition. The main reason given by 70% of the respondents for attending the Saturday schools was to preserve the German language and culture and a sense of German identity. Additional reasons were a lack of German offerings in local public schools and a preference for the higher level demands of private schools.

Clearly these schools cater to a group of highly motivated parents and their children. Indeed, their test results on the examinations of the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), Advanced Placement (AP), and *Deutsches Sprachdiplom* C1 and B2 (German language examinations required for entrance to a German university) are considerably higher than those for students in mainstream German classes. Yet, despite the achievement of these schools and the strong commitment of their parents and communities, they are beset with difficulties, especially in finding teachers with the necessary linguistic ability, pedagogical background, and dedication to their tasks in these part-time schools. Other challenges include teacher development, curriculum creation, materials development, research, and advocacy. A lack of institutional, political, and financial support puts a further burden on these schools.

There are currently about 70 private German language schools in the United States, with an enrollment of about 7,000 students, although exact numbers are not available. Forty five of these schools are members of the GLSC. Most operate for a minimum of 30 weeks per year, with 3 sessions of about 45 minutes each, and offer continuous instruction in grades pre-K to 12 as well as classes for adults on all levels. Most schools separate students with previous knowledge of German from beginners. Cultural identity finds expression in the upholding of German customs and traditions and the celebration of German festivities. Additional contact with the language is fostered through the Internet, telephone, e-mail, television, and summer travel to visit family in the home country. German bands, films, soccer, and classical music are popular as well. While the parents create and support these schools, the schools often create and support a German community, creating camaraderie among parents, native speakers, HL speakers, and friends of the language. They broaden an often diminished domain for the natural use of the HL in public and generate opportunities that do not exist in connection with mainstream German language education.

Full bilingualism is usually not the goal of these community-based private schools but rather the attainment of good or as high as possible functional language proficiency, defined by Lo Bianco (2008a, 2008b) as the capacity to respond to a given purpose, task, and interlocutor in any given situation.

Gone are the overconfidence of the nineteenth-century German schools and a naïve enjoyment of German heritage in the United States. A new awareness of the connection between language and heritage has grown, and so has a fresh recognition of the ample rewards -- economic, professional, and emotional -- accruing to high language achievement. International mobility, good income, professional satisfaction and prestige, and a sense of accomplishment are some of the personal rewards mentioned by an increasing number of parents of German HL learners. Grin (2003) maintains that macroeconomic benefits flow from HL preservation and vitality as well. Considering these rewards, the community-based language schools can play a crucial role.

### **Conclusion**

Can German remain a vital HL in the United States? Fishman admits that German as a HL in the United States today is weak as compared to previous standards. Yet, as a language with still over 5 million speakers, its survival deserves study. This study, however, has not been conducted.

Language vitality and intergenerational continuity for German, as for any HL, in addition to accepting support from outside agencies, has been and is the responsibility of the ethnic community, its institutions such as schools and churches, and families. This must receive more interest from scholars, politicians, donors, and other stakeholders, in the United States as well as in German-speaking countries. Fishman contended in 1985 that German “among mainstream Germans ... is ... drastically underrepresented in connection with primary institutions,” but that the “anomaly characterizing German in the United States today is that it has such a major, vibrant sidestream alongside the mainstream” (pp. 262-263). By “sidestream” Fishman refers to the numerous Anabaptist populations, the Old Order Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites. Nothing has changed since then.

Fishman’s call for more research on the survival potential of German needs to be repeated. The large influx of Germans after World War II is aging. Yet many of their children and grandchildren, although bilingual and well established in U.S. society, still value their HL and culture and maintain ties with their homelands, which are strong enough for them to create, support, to return as teachers to, or to send the next generation to the German HL community schools. They are augmented by learners of German as a second language and by the ranks of the children of the considerable number of newcomers in the context of an increasingly evolving international workplace and the strong position of the German economy. This is promising. But better understanding of and support for German HL survival in the United States – for capacity development, domains for its use, and desire to use it – are still needed.

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