

GERMAN IN THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES: LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AS A KEY TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

1. Introduction

This paper addresses a topic situated at the intersection of language, education, and culture: the German language as a medium of intercultural communication. In an era of global mobility and increasing cultural diversity, the question arises as to the significance of acquiring and mastering the German language for the dialogue between cultures – and to what extent linguistic competence can contribute to social participation, professional integration, and mutual understanding.

The aim of this contribution is to approach the German language not merely as a technical means of communication, but as a culturally shaped medium that conveys ways of thinking, values, and social norms. I intend to demonstrate that German philology can make a substantial contribution to the promotion of intercultural competence – both in theoretical discourse and in didactic practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange between people from different cultural backgrounds, in which linguistic, non-verbal, and contextual differences must be bridged. According to Glück/Rödel (2016), intercultural communication is understood as the speaking and acting (including forms of expression such as gestures, facial expressions, clothing, spatial usage, etc.) between people from different cultural spheres (in the narrower sense, also from different subcultures). Intercultural competence requires the ability to reflect on one's own cultural conditioning, to understand other cultural perspectives, and to respond appropriately to communicative challenges (cf. Bolten 2007).

Language, in this context, is by no means a neutral tool. Rather, as

Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasized in the 19th century, it reflects the “worldview” of its speakers. The German language carries cultural concepts, historical experiences, and societal models of order that must be taken into account when learning it. Thus, learning German is not only a linguistic process, but also a cultural learning process.

3. Language Competence as a Key

Language competence in German encompasses more than grammatical accuracy. According to the model by Canale and Swain (1980), later expanded by Byram (1997), the following components are distinguished:

- Linguistic Competence (vocabulary, syntax, morphology)
- Sociolinguistic Competence (appropriate language use in social contexts)
- Strategic Competence (bridging communication problems)
- Intercultural Competence (understanding culturally shaped communication styles).

In the intercultural context, it becomes clear how crucial pragmatic and cultural language competence is: for instance, in the interpretation of indirect speech acts, in dealing with politeness forms, or in the interpretation of non-verbal signals. The ability to recognize and consider these cultural subtleties is central to successful communication.

4. German in the Educational Context: Access and Participation

In the context of migration and international mobility, mastering the German language is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for educational success, professional opportunities, and social participation. Studies by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) show a clear connection between language competence and the integration process. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) also highlights in several “Education at a Glance” reports that language barriers constitute a central obstacle in the education system.

A practical example is the vocational language courses within

qualification programs funded by the government: here, it is evident that participants with sufficient German language skills find employment more quickly and integrate more easily into teams.

In the educational sector, language support programs such as “Deutsch & Integration” or German as a Second Language (DAZ) classes are essential for creating equal opportunities. The targeted promotion of German as a second or educational language thus becomes an investment in social cohesion.

At the same time, German is a language with broad international reach – not only as an official language in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland but also as a language of science, culture, and business. Therefore, acquiring the German language opens up not only local but also transnational perspectives.

5. The Role of German Philology

In this context, German philology has a dual role: on the one hand, the description and analysis of the German language and literature in their cultural depth; on the other hand, the co-shaping of teaching and learning processes that contribute to the development of intercultural competence.

In particular, intercultural literary didactics offers innovative approaches. By engaging with literary texts – such as works by authors with a migration background – learners can reflect on experiences of cultural foreignness and question their own perspectives. In the field of DaF/DaZ didactics (German as a Foreign or Second Language), approaches that integrate linguistic and cultural education are also increasingly coming into focus. German philology can bridge gaps: between theory and practice, between language and society, between tradition and change.

6. Challenges and Perspectives

Despite all progress, there are still challenges: the increasing heterogeneity of learners, institutional barriers, a lack of qualified teachers with intercultural competence, and political tensions in dealing with migration and multilingualism. Therefore, the teaching of intercultural language competence must be multidimensional: linguistic, cultural, emotional, and critical-reflexive.

It is also important to ask critical questions: How do we deal with multilingualism – as a richness or as a problem? Is language acquisition experienced as support or as pressure to conform? Intercultural communication requires a culture of mutual recognition, not unilateral expectations. Even within the German-speaking world, there exists significant cultural and linguistic diversity: the DACH region – Germany, Austria, and Switzerland – differs not only in pronunciation and vocabulary, but also in communication styles, language ideologies, and educational traditions. Reflecting on this diversity is just as essential to intercultural language education as considering other world regions.

The societal relevance of this issue is evident in current political and media discourses: questions regarding German language tests for citizenship, the position of the German language within the EU, the institutional recognition of multilingualism, and early childhood language promotion in educational institutions highlight that language is not only a reflection of social dynamics but also a means of integration and participation.

Foreign professionals require tailored programs to meet their specific needs. The Goethe-Institut is engaged worldwide in projects for intensive linguistic and intercultural preparation for the German job market – in cooperation with partners and in its own initiatives (GI projects). Projects such as “Language Creates Opportunities” demonstrate how targeted language support can strengthen intercultural competence, cultural openness, and democratic participation.

Looking ahead, German philology should further work at the intersections of social sciences, educational research, and media culture to address current societal discourses and contribute to communication in pluralistic societies.

7. Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that the German language plays a key role in the dialogue of cultures – not only as a means of communication but also as a carrier of cultural content. Language competence in German not only opens up

professional and educational opportunities but also provides access to active participation in social and cultural life. Those who learn German are not just learning words, but also cultural concepts, communication styles, and societal expectations.

German philology can and should actively contribute to shaping this dialogue: through well-founded language and literature instruction, through intercultural awareness, and through critical reflection on language, power, and identity. For language is not just a tool – it is a mirror of our world.

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