Cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching and learning: an introduction

Judith Eberharter & Sascha Stollhans, Leeds

ISSN 1470 – 9570

Cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching and learning: an introduction

Judith Eberharter & Sascha Stollhans, Leeds

A decision to foreground cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching will have consequences for other content. How to fit it all in? What role should cultural and linguistic diversity play in the contemporary German language classroom? How is diversity represented, discussed and/or addressed in German language teaching and learning? What potential does the language classroom have to convey an 'authentic', modern and differentiated image of the German language and German-speaking societies in all their facets? What are the challenges and limitations? To explore some of these questions, this special issue brings together theoretical reflections, academic studies, and evidence-based case studies by authors based in Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Topics under investigation include cultural and linguistic representation in contemporary textbooks, multilingual writing, dialects and regional variation, learner language as a model, taboo language in the classroom, gender-fair language, and intercultural reflection within telecollaboration projects.

1. Background and context

The study of languages is a pathway to intercultural understanding and global engagement. Studying German, just like any other language, provides unique opportunities for learners to encounter cultural and linguistic diversity. This diversity, encompassing a broad spectrum of linguistic and cultural features, is not only a reflection of the German-speaking world but also of the multicultural and multilingual composition of language classrooms worldwide. Exploring cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching and learning can be a rich opportunity, whilst it also comes with challenges and implications for curriculum and material design, pedagogical practices, student engagement, and broader societal outcomes. Some of these themes are being explored in this special issue.

In order to set the scene for the articles in this special issue, we will begin by briefly outlining some areas of cultural and linguistic diversity within the German-speaking world. We will then turn our focus to pedagogical considerations, including potential challenges and concerns. Finally, we will provide an overview of the articles included in this special issue.

The German language, like any other language, is as diverse as the people who use it. German holds official status in five European countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. Additionally, German is a regional or minority language in a number of other countries, including Brazil, Italy, Namibia, Poland, Romania and Ukraine. The linguistic landscape of the German language is characterised by a significant degree of variation, including within its three standardised forms Austrian Standard German, German Standard German, and Swiss Standard German. This pluricentric nature of German having more than one codified standard is considered *asymmetrical*, as the German Standard German is typically afforded a higher status over the other two standard varieties (Ammon 1995). On a more granular level, regional variation in German is characterised by a multitude of dialects, representing various regions (and their customs) in the German-speaking world (see Schenker's article in this special issue).

However, language use is not only determined by regional factors; rather, it also varies depending on the language users' social characteristics, such as age and gender, as well as the medium and intended audience. A prominent example of this is youth language, which tends to attract a lot of interest from the general public, as evidenced e. g. by the popularity of the annual *Jugendwort des Jahres* ('youth word of the year') competition run by the *Langenscheidt Verlag*[1]. *Kiezdeutsch*, a multi-ethnolectal variety of spoken German by young people in urban settings (Wittenberg & Paul 2009) has gained much scholarly attention since 2006 (cf. Wiese 2012) and is now used more widely as a synonym for urban contact dialects in metropolitan areas (Şimşek & Wiese 2022).

Within a given context, language users also vary their registers, i.e. they adapt their language use depending on the situation and communicative purpose. Whilst it may be considered appropriate to use slang or 'taboo language' (see Horan's article) in certain situations with certain people, a more formal register will be required in other situations. The use of language on social media and other online contexts and its effects on language use more generally is of increasing interest to researchers (cf. Page et al. 2022) and offers interesting insights into language change over time.

In addition to this, a significant number of second-language speakers of German (more than 15 million people are learning German outside of Germany according to a 2020 study

[1] https://www.langenscheidt.com/jugendwort-des-jahres

by the German Foreign Office[2]) represent valuable varieties in their own right – which can also be a rich resource for other language learners, as Bavendiek et al. argue in their article.

The diversity of the linguistic landscape is naturally intertwined with the diversity of the people who use and learn the German language, the cultures, societies and social groups they engage in and represent. For instance, in recent years, the rise in use of gender-fair or gender-inclusive language, in German often subsumed under the derogative term *gendern*, has been an ongoing controversial topic in current affairs (although a recent volume (Balnat et al. 2025) reveals that the debates are far from new and in fact date back more than 2000 years). While research into the use of gender-inclusive language evidences the impact language use has on the mental representation of people read as male or female (cf. Stahlberg et al. 2001), policies from conservative and centre-right parties ban the use of such language in any official communication. Addressing subjects like these in language classrooms provides genuine and authentic opportunities to foreground societal debates, and discuss the complex and fascinating relationships of language, society and identity (see Preseau's article).

It is, therefore, not surprising that cultural and linguistic diversity should be at the forefront of language educators' minds, particularly given the rising awareness of, and recent developments in, the field of critical pedagogies in language education (cf. Hird 2023). Indeed, embedding cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching and learning may offer a multitude of benefits.

First, it aligns with the broader mission of universities and educational institutions to foster 'global citizenship' (cf. Lütge et al. 2022) and intercultural competence. Language learning is not merely about mastering grammar and vocabulary; it is about understanding the worldviews, histories, and social norms embedded within the language. By exploring it through the lens of diversity, learners can be supported to develop an appreciation of the complexities of languages, cultures and societies.

Second, an emphasis on diversity acknowledges and validates the experiences of students from varied backgrounds. Language teaching and learning has often adopted a monolithic view of culture, focusing on a standard version of the language and a narrowly defined

[2] https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2344738/b2a4e47fdb9e8e2739bab2565f8fe7c2/deutsch-als-fremdsprache-data.pdf.

national culture (cf. Uzum et al. 2021). For German, this has usually meant prioritising Standard German and the cultural norms of Germany, sometimes to the exclusion of other German-speaking regions and diasporic communities. Broadening the scope to include diverse linguistic forms and cultural perspectives not only enriches the curriculum but also fosters a more inclusive learning environment.

Finally, by recognising and incorporating students' own linguistic repertoires, teachers may facilitate more effective learning. For instance, a student who speaks a language with a case system, may find parallels in German grammar that can ease their learning process. Similarly, engaging with culturally diverse, 'authentic' materials – such as Swiss literature, Austrian film, or the music of German-speaking immigrant communities (see Ludewig's article) – might well, we would argue, spark learners' interest and motivation.

The incorporation of cultural and linguistic diversity into German language teaching and learning, therefore, has transformative potential for classroom practice. One significant implication is the need to adopt a pluralistic approach to the language itself. This involves exposing students to variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax from different German-speaking regions. Such exposure not only prepares students for real-world communication but also challenges the notion of a singular "correct" form of German, fostering a prescriptive rather than descriptive mindset (cf. Sheehan et al. 2024). The Common European Framework places importance on *sociolinguistic competence*, which it defines as "the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use", including "linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; register differences; and dialect and accent" (Council of Europe 2020: 136).

When depicting 'culture', textbooks and learning materials should aim to reflect the richness of the German-speaking world, moving beyond stereotypes and canonical works to include voices from marginalised groups and contemporary social issues (see the article by Becker and Ernst). Instead, textbooks often represent a "national paradigm" constituting a standard language and mainstream culture (Risager 2007: 191) reducing the complex linguistic and cultural landscape to a homogeneously standard German-speaking, white and able-bodied one.

A frequently expressed concern about the integration of (in particular linguistic) diversity into language teaching relates to cognitive overload. For beginners, the introduction of regional dialects or non-standard varieties of German might be perceived as complicating their efforts to master foundational grammar and vocabulary (cf. Stollhans 2015).

Approaches that include careful scaffolding (cf. Hammond 2001) and striking a balance between fostering awareness of diversity and ensuring clarity seem essential.

Another potential concern is that emphasising diversity might dilute the focus on Standard German as the lingua franca of the German-speaking world. Employers and academic institutions may expect proficiency in Standard German, and students may prioritise this goal over exploring linguistic variations. There are also concerns about students being penalised for using non-standard linguistic features in assessments, particularly in the secondary education sector (cf. Stollhans 2020).

Additionally, there is a very real risk of tokenism or superficial engagement with diversity. To avoid this, teachers may aim to integrate diverse perspectives systematically and critically, ensuring that they are not treated as add-ons but as integral to the curriculum, which is an approach for which the articles in this special issue advocate and provide examples.

To explore some of these themes in greater depth, we hosted a symposium on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the German language classroom at the University of Leeds in September 2023. The symposium, generously funded by the Association for German Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, the German Academic Exchange Service and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds, was attended by UK and Irish university and schoolteachers of German. The event was the springboard for this special issue and some of the articles, which we summarise in the next section, were presented and discussed there.

2. Overview of the articles

This special issue contains seven articles exploring the theme of "cultural and linguistic diversity in German language teaching and learning" from a variety of angles in different contexts and settings. It includes theoretical reflections, academic studies, and evidence-based case studies by authors based in Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Topics under investigation include cultural and linguistic representation in contemporary textbooks, multilingual writing, dialects and regional variation, learner language as a model, taboo language in the classroom, gender-fair language, and intercultural reflection within telecollaboration projects.

Becker and Ernst examine the status quo by scrutinising two textbooks that have recently been approved by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) for so called 'integration courses': *Die neue Linie 1* (Ernst Klett Verlag) and *Miteinander!* (Hueber Verlag). Drawing on a multilevel analysis approach, they show that while there are clear attempts at representing a pluricultural and diverse society, an insufficient understanding of the concepts of plurality and diversity persists. Furthermore, by omitting linguistic varieties in the audio texts, students are only exposed to a normative Standard German, which contradicts the concept of plurilinguality altogether and also fails to portray the linguistic reality for German as a Second Language (DaZ) learners.

Using Ukrainian-German writer Dmitrij Kapitelman's creative works, **Ludewig** explores the creative linguistic possibilities that multilingual writers employ. By combining and therefore creating phrases and expressions from their heritage languages to the adopted language, Kapitelman enriches and expands the German-language literature. In analysing the text, Ludewig situates the innovative neologisms linguistically and puts them in a theoretical and cultural context, opening up possible applications for the German language classroom.

Three articles (Schenker, Bavendiek et al., and Horan) deal with different types of language variation and discuss how these can be leveraged to enrich the classroom:

Schenker argues that German teaching in the United States typically emphasises Standard High German, with limited focus on regional dialects. While textbooks may mention Swiss or Austrian German, students rarely explore the diverse linguistic landscape or understand the cultural significance of dialects. To address this gap, Schenker reports on two projects initiated as part of an advanced German course at a private US college. One involved student-led interviews with dialect speakers, followed by analysis, website documentation, and presentations. The other featured videoconferences with German senior citizens. The article discusses these initiatives, student feedback, and recommendations for integrating dialect studies to offer a richer perspective on German language and identity.

Bavendiek, Jones and Strigel outline the development of an open-access online resource designed to enhance German conversational skills. The project addresses the lack of emphasis on spoken German in UK higher education and uses advanced students as models rather than first-language speakers of German. The resource highlights key linguistic features for successful interaction and employs corpus linguistics to identify

frequent conversational patterns. In their paper, the authors also explore theoretical challenges encountered during the project and the strategies used to overcome them.

Focusing our attention on the linguistically and culturally rich field of 'taboo language', **Horan** discusses the role of swearing and cursing across different communicative contexts. Her article highlights the lack of focus on this topic in German language classrooms in UK higher education and discusses the challenges of introducing it. Drawing on a linguistic-cultural approach, Horan showcases selected resources that feature taboo language and offers strategies for integrating them into teaching. She argues that addressing taboo language is essential for mastering diverse registers and understanding the communicative, sociolinguistic, and cultural implications of its use or avoidance.

Starting with Judith Butler's 2024 book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, **Preseau** provides an overview of discourses, public reactions and legal frameworks surrounding the teaching of gender-just language in several countries around the world; in her study Preseau particularly investigates anxieties, fears and hate within German teachers' discourses around trans-affirming and gender-non-conforming language teaching. Embedding the study in the legislation relevant to divisive concepts in education settings in Ohio and Iowa, Preseau outlines best practices for queer pedagogy in the German classroom in the current political climate.

Finally, **Link and Lewis** report on an intercultural teaching project bringing together German students from two different universities to enhance critical thinking, collaboration and intercultural awareness using the Intercultural Reflection Team method. This method is based on peer supervision to foster dialogue and exchange of ideas; in this application of the project, it was used as an example of telecollaboration between upper-intermediate (B2) students at Durham University and the University of Urbino, discussing meta-linguistic issues students encounter as language learners.

References

Ammon, Ulrich (1995) *Die deutsche Sprache in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz. Das Problem der nationalen Varietäten.* Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Balnat, Vincent; Kaltz, Barbara (eds) (2025) *Genus und Geschlecht in europäischen Sprachen: Geschichte und Gegenwart.* Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.

Council of Europe (2020) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. www.coe.int/lang-cefr

Hammond, Jennifer (ed.) (2021) *Scaffolding: Teaching and Learning in Language and Literacy Education.* Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association.

Hird, Derek (ed.) (2023) *Critical Pedagogies for Modern Languages Education: Criticality, Decolonization, and Social Justice.* London: Bloomsbury.

Lütge, Christiane; Merse, Thorsten; Rauschert, Petra (eds.) (2022) *Global Citizenship in Foreign Language Education: Concepts, Practices, Connections.* New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003183839

Page, Ruth; Barton, David; Lee, Carmen, Unger, Johann Wolfgang; Zappavigna, Michele (2022) *Researching Language and Social Media: A Student Guide (2nd ed.).* London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003121763

Risager, Karen (2007) *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm.* Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599613

Sheehan, Michelle; Havinga, Anna D.; Kasstan, Jonathan R.; Stollhans, Sascha; Corr, Alice; Gillman, Peter (2024) Teacher perspectives on the introduction of linguistics in the languages classroom: Evidence from a co-creation project on French, German and Spanish. *British Educational Research Journal,* 50(4), 1935-1961. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4009

Şimşek, Yazgül; Wiese, Heike (2022) Germany: Kiezdeutsch. In: Kerswill, Paul; Wiese, Heike (eds): *Urban Contact Dialects and Language Change: Insights from the Global North and South*. New York: Routledge. 300-321.

Stahlberg, Dagmar; Sczesny, Sabine (2001) Effekte des generischen Maskulinums und alternativer Sprachformen auf den gedanklichen Einbezug von Frauen. *Psychologische Rundschau,* 52(3), 131-140. https://doi.org/10.1026//0033-3042.52.3.131

Stollhans, Sascha (2015) „Ich bin dann mal Deutsch lernen!“: Der Absentiv im DaF-Unterricht. *German as a Foreign Language,* 2015(1), 44-71. http://gfl-journal.de/article/ich-bin-dann-mal-deutsch-lernen/

Stollhans, Sascha (2020) Linguistic variation in language learning classrooms: considering the role of regional variation and ‘non-standard’ varieties. *Language, Society and Policy.* https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.62274

Uzum, Baburhan; Yazan, Bedrettin; Zahrawi, Samar; Bouamer, Siham; Malakaj, Ervin (2021) A comparative analysis of cultural representations in collegiate world language textbooks (Arabic, French, and German). *Linguistics and Education,* 61, 100901. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2020.100901

Wiese, Heike (2012) *Kiezdeutsch. Ein neuer Dialekt entsteht.* München: C. H. Beck.

Wittenberg, Eva; Paul, Kerstin (2009) „Aşkım, Baby, Schatz ...” Anglizismen in einer multiethnischen Jugendsprache. In: Pfalzgraf, Falco (ed.): *Englischer Sprachkontakt in den Varietäten des Deutschen.* Frankfurt am Main u. a.: Peter Lang. 95-122.

Biographical Information

Judith Eberharter is a Lecturer in German Language and Austrian Culture at the University of Leeds. In her research she addresses the intersection between sociolinguistic theory and foreign language teaching and the practical application in the foreign language classroom. In 2024 she co-founded the Yorkshire Language Teaching Research and Scholarship Network.

Sascha Stollhans is Professor of Language Education and Linguistics as well as Pro-Dean for Student Education in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures at the University of Leeds. His research focuses on the interface between linguistics and language education, linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as digital pedagogies. Together with Anna Havinga (University of Bristol), he co-leads the German strand of Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages, a project that explores the potential of linguistics for school-based language learning. He is the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Association of German Studies in Great Britain and Ireland (AGS).