

Grammar Instruction in Germany¹

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Grammar instruction is a stable component of German studies, at least in primary and in secondary school (through 10th grade). In the upper grades (grades 11–13, where pupils are prepared for university), language lessons focus on models of communication or common theories of language rather than on core grammar.² An examination of curricula and anecdotal reports from undergraduate students of German philology support the conclusion that grammar is mainly a topic in primary and secondary school. Thus, grammar instruction ceases to take place just around the time when pupils develop the cognitive abilities required to approach grammatical phenomena in a more analytical and theoretical manner.

1 Development of didactic concepts

Grammar instruction for native speakers has been criticized since at least the nineteenth century (cf. Bredel, 2013; Ossner, 2014). Especially in the 1970s many scientists, teachers and politicians advocated that grammar as a topic of German studies be replaced by an approach called ‘language reflection’. This approach emphasizes semantic and pragmatic aspects of language rather than grammar (cf. Ingendahl, 1999; for a comprehensive summary see Riegler, 2006).

Nevertheless, a variety of didactic concepts for grammar instruction have been proposed in the last half century. One person who had an enormous impact on the modern theory of grammar instruction in general was Hans Glinz. In his book *The Inner Form of German (Die innere Form des Deutschen)* (1952), Glinz was the first to adopt a structuralist methodology for language teaching in Germany by integrating a set of linguistic operations into grammar instruction. The so-called Glinzian operations (*Glinz'sche Proben*) were meant to provide pupils with the opportunity to actively participate in the examination of language structures and were adopted (more or less prominently) in all subsequent didactic concepts (cf. Funke, 2012; Gornik, 2003).

In the late 1960s and in the early 1970s a phenomenon termed the ‘linguistization of grammar instruction’ (*Linguistisierung des Grammatikunterrichts*) resulted from scientists’ desire to approximate grammar instruction to scientific grammar theories. There was a lively debate about which grammar model should be the basis of grammar instruction, which led to attempts to implement theories such as generative grammar directly in grammar lessons. On the other hand and in opposition to these attempts, Boettcher and Sitta (1978) proposed a concept they called *Situation-oriented Grammar Teaching (Situationsorientierter Grammatikunterricht)*. This concept mainly focused on the treatment of spontaneously emerging communication problems, thereby eschewing a systematic approach to linguistic phenomena.

Köller (1983) proposed a concept called *Functional Grammar Instruction (Funktionaler Grammatikunterricht)*. He allocated a broad functional analysis of verbal

¹ I’d like to thank Ursula Bredel and Reinold Funke for their helpful notes and suggestions.

² Even though there are some differences between the federal states, the German school system can be described roughly as follows. All pupils attend the same primary school for four years (*Grundschule*). From fifth grade onward, pupils attend a *Hauptschule*, a *Realschule*, a *Gymnasium* or a *Gesamtschule*. Traditionally the *Gymnasium* (grades 5–12) is meant to prepare pupils for university, the *Realschule* (grades 5–10) is meant to provide an extended general education and the *Hauptschule* (grades 5–9) is meant to impart a basic general education. The *Gesamtschule* was an attempt to combine these three types of schools and thus to overcome the socio-economic separation accompanying the traditional German school system.

categories such as tense and voice to sensitize pupils to the use of language phenomena in order to improve their writing skills. Köller defined the term ‘function’ with respect to cognition and communication, but there is a whole range of other functional approaches with a wide interpretation of that same term (cf. Wieland, 2010). One that has been influential in Germany is *Functional-pragmatic Grammar* [FPG] (*Funktional-pragmatische Grammatik*). In FPG, language – or, rather, language use – is viewed as a communicative (inter)action. The role of grammar is to provide procedures which contribute to the execution of different action types. From this point of view grammatical analysis is necessarily tied to an understanding of the communicative actions that grammar helps to constitute (for a didactic concept based on FPG see Hoffmann, 2006, 2007).

Eisenberg and Menzel (1995) called their concept *Grammar Workshop* (*Grammatik-Werkstatt*). In contrast to Boettcher and Sitta (see above), the authors emphasized the need for grammar instruction with regard to the systematic structure of linguistic categories, or of language. Moreover, they pointed out the intrinsic value of learning about grammar (independent of its use for solving communicative tasks) and attested to the significance of grammar instruction in scientific propaedeutics.

Since the 1990s the debate has been less concerned with the development of comprehensive concepts for grammar teaching, focusing instead on the empirical investigation of both classroom practice (e.g. Kleinbub, 2014; Stahns, 2013) and of students’ learning processes. Funke (2005), for instance, examined the relationship between implicit and explicit grammar knowledge. His findings point to the conclusion that reliable access to syntactic information is a prerequisite for the development of explicit knowledge. Reliable access to syntactic information can also be considered to play a key role in the development of writing and readings skills – in this case, the capitalization of nouns in German orthography (cf. Funke & Sieger, 2012).

2 The practice of grammar classes

Even though the scientific debates about grammar instruction have been very prolific in recent decades, their influence on teaching practices seems to have been negligible. Empirical evaluation of actual grammar lessons is still sparse but a study from 1999 that asked students about their ‘grammar biography’ suggested that a traditional approach to grammar instruction prevailed at that time (cf. Bremerich-Vos, 1999). The characteristic features of this approach include deductive teaching methods and a focus on word classes and on parts of sentences (*Satzglieder*) such as subject, predicate and object. In addition, documents from more recent practice – mainly transcripts of grammar lessons (e.g. Granzow-Emden, 2008; Kleinbub, 2014; Stahns, 2013) as well as anecdotal reports from undergraduate students – offer little hope that there have been substantial changes. Insight into teachers’ attitudes offers less hope still: Studies suggest that many teachers resist grammar to a certain degree, because they do not believe that grammar instruction generates sustainable knowledge (cf. Bremerich-Vos, 1999; Ivo & Neuland, 1991).

3 The educational standards – general perspective

In response to the findings of the PISA study in 2001, German politicians initiated a major revision of curricular guidelines. In the national educational standards (*Bildungsstandards*), grammar is no longer conceptualized as an autonomous domain of learning, but rather as a supporting system for other domains (namely spelling, writing and reading). On the whole the new guidelines stand out due to a change in their basic orientation from input to output. At the

center of this change are pupils' competencies, which are defined by Weinert (2001, p. 27 f.; transl. H. H.) as "those learnable cognitive abilities and skills needed to solve particular problems, as well as the motivational, volitional and social preparedness and abilities required to make successful and responsible use of problem-solving strategies in variable situations"³.

The educational standards divide German instruction into four competence domains: "Speaking and listening", "Writing", "Reading – dealing with texts and media", and "Analyzing language and language use". While the standards conceptualize the first three domains as autonomous, they understand the fourth as interacting with the other domains. On the one hand, this means that the first three domains are inexorably associated with language awareness; on the other hand, the educational standards assume that the analysis of language provides linguistic skills.

However, it is doubtful whether this last assumption is accurate given the educational standards' overall conservatism. For one thing, the description of the domain "Analyzing language and language use" includes the traditional topics and methods. Moreover, the subdomain "Basic linguistic structures and terms", for example, lists the conventional inventory of terms for word classes and parts of sentences even though studies (mainly from Anglophone countries) suggest that writing skills may be enhanced by linguistic exercises that directly affect the writing process rather than by an analytic approach towards grammar (cf. Funke, 2012, p. 194; Funke, 2014, p. 438 ff.).

3.1 The educational standards for primary school

The educational standards for primary school define word classes and parts of sentences as the central subjects of grammar instruction (cf. KMK, 2005, p. 14), but they do not describe how to work with these topics in detail. Reports of actual practice (see above) and the analysis of schoolbooks (see below) show that the topics are predominantly treated from a semantic perspective. The term 'verb', for instance, is introduced as a *Tuwort* (word that expresses activity) and adjectives are treated as *Eigenschaftswörter* (words that refer to properties). Parts of sentences are conceptualized as answers to questions like 'Who is doing something?' or 'What is being done?' The predominant function of grammar instruction is support for spelling instruction: The noun for example is considered merely as a grammatical category on its own and its definition is immediately connected to spelling regularities, given that nouns are capitalized in German. Occasionally capitalization is even introduced as a criterion for the identification of the word class 'noun' (and not vice versa).

3.2 The educational standards for secondary school

In the educational standards for secondary school (*Sekundarstufe I*, grades 5–10) we also find the traditional subjects of grammar instruction such as word classes and parts of sentences. Furthermore we see an attempt to incorporate the different didactic concepts mentioned in section 1 of this essay into the specifications of the domain "Analyzing language and language use". One of the competencies within this domain is described as: "using grammatical categories in situative and functional contexts"⁴ (KMK, 2004, p. 16; transl. H. H.). Examples of those categories include gender and case. However, it is by no means possible to identify a relationship between gender and case to functionality or situativity.

³ "bei Individuen verfügbare oder durch sie erlernbare kognitiven Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten, um bestimmte Probleme zu lösen, sowie die damit verbundenen motivationalen, volitionalen und sozialen Bereitschaften und Fähigkeiten, um die Problemlösungen in variablen Situationen erfolgreich und verantwortungsvoll nutzen zu können" (Weinert, 2001, p. 27 f.)

⁴ "grammatische Kategorien in situativen und funktionalen Zusammenhängen verwenden" (KMK, 2004, p. 16)

The predominant goal of grammar instruction in secondary school is to support the writing of texts. As mentioned above there are, however, serious reasons to doubt whether an analytical approach to grammar is of any use for the development of writing skills.

3.3 The educational standards for upper grades

The domains mentioned above (“Speaking and Listening”, “Reading”, and “Writing”) also appear in the guidelines for upper grades (*Sekundarstufe II/Oberstufe*, grades 11–13). However, the domain “Analyzing language and language use” is renamed “Reflecting upon language and language use” and conceptualized differently: “In the guidelines for primary school and secondary school the domain ‘Analyzing language and language use’ has a largely ancillary function. By contrast, in the guidelines for upper grades, the domain ‘Reflecting upon language and language use’ gains a new, autonomous quality. This corresponds with the goals for the upper grades.”⁵ (KMK, 2012, p. 14; transl. H. H.)

In commentary on the domain “Reflecting language and language use”, the guidelines point out that the pupils comprehend language as a system. However, the concretization of grammar and grammatical structures and terms shows that – compared to the structures and terms for the primary and secondary school – the range of grammatical phenomena is not enlarged. In fact, it seems that the application of grammatical phenomena is still foregrounded: Within the description of the basic level of competence we read that pupils could “explicate language structures and meanings with recourse to a solid knowledge of grammar and semantic categories”⁶ (KMK, 2012, p. 20; transl. H. H.). With reference to the higher level of competence, the pupils should be able to “argue with grammatical and semantic categories in suitable contexts”⁷ (KMK, 2012, p. 21; transl. H. H.).

4 The Register of Basic Grammatical Terms

One document in particular that has affected the conceptualization of grammar instruction in Germany to date is the *Register of Basic Grammatical Terms (Verzeichnis grundlegender grammatischer Fachausdrücke)*, which was approved by the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States of Germany in 1982. The main goal of this register was the standardization of grammatical terms used in grammar classes. Thus, it is an important foundation for the development of curricular guidelines (cf. Bremerich-Vos, 2012).

The authors of the document intended to avoid the incorporation of a specific grammatical theory and thus stuck to the use of terms such as subject, predicate and object instead of actant, complement or argument. As Bremerich-Vos (2012, p. 5) has pointed out, the former, of course, are also tied to a specific grammatical theory, the only difference being that this theory had already been traditionalized while dependency grammar and generative grammar were relatively new phenomena.

According to modern linguistics, the list is too small and omits many relevant terms and concepts. This applies above all to phrases and their inner structure (*Wortgruppen*)⁸ and

⁵ “Während der Kompetenzbereich ‘Sprache und Sprachgebrauch untersuchen’ in den Bildungsstandards für den Mittleren Schulabschluss eher instrumentellen Charakter hat, besitzt der Bereich ‘Sprache und Sprachgebrauch reflektieren’ in den Bildungsstandards für die Allgemeine Hochschulreife eine eigene Qualität, die den Zielsetzungen der gymnasialen Oberstufe entspricht.“ (KMK, 2012, p. 14)

⁶ “sprachliche Strukturen und Bedeutungen auf der Basis eines gesicherten Grammatikwissens und semantischer Kategorien erläutern“ (KMK, 2012, p. 20)

⁷ “in geeigneten Nutzungszusammenhängen mit grammatischen und semantischen Kategorien argumentieren“ (KMK, 2012, p. 21)

⁸ German grammar instruction mainly deals with word classes (such as noun and verb) on the one hand and parts of sentences (such as subject, predicate, object) on the other; it does not attend to phrases in the sense of NPs VPs or PPs.

to the regularities of word order as they are captured by the model of topological fields (*Topologisches Feldermodell*)⁹. Thus, in 2009 a study group of linguists and pedagogic scientists started to prepare a new proposal which includes the terms missing from the 1982 list. In addition it enriches the 1982 list of simple terms with definitions, explanations, examples, commentaries and hints for the analysis of grammatical phenomena and structures (<http://www.grammatischeterminologie.de/index.htm>).

5 Schoolbooks

Schoolbooks can be viewed as another significant influence on classroom practice. Research about the use of schoolbooks in German instruction in general and in grammar instruction in particular is (also) sparse: An older study by Killus (1998) found that the use of schoolbooks varies with school form: in the *Gymnasium* and the *Gesamtschule*, German teachers make little use of schoolbooks, while teachers of the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* use them frequently. Teebrügge (2001) found that German teachers use schoolbooks mainly as collections of texts rather than as tools with which to plan and structure lessons.

With respect to grammar instruction, Häcker (2009) reports on a study of 219 teachers, 47% of whom reported that their grammar lessons rely heavily on the schoolbook, while 63% mainly used self-designed material. In response to Gehrig's (2014) survey of teachers from all Bavarian *Gymnasien*, 3.4% reported daily use of the schoolbook in their grammar lessons, 81.6% reported frequent use, and only 13.9% reported infrequent use. No data was gathered about the kind of use, but the majority of the teachers were satisfied with the quality of their schoolbook (cf. Gehrig, 2014, p. 230 ff.) In recent decades a few analytical investigations into the grammar content of schoolbooks have criticized the books' linguistic and didactic flaws as well as the predominantly deductive format of their tasks and their lack of problem orientation (cf. Hlebec, forthcoming; Menzel, 1975; Ossner, 2007; Ulrich, 1996).

6 Teacher instruction

Given the problems of grammar teaching it may not come as a surprise that research into the grammar knowledge of undergraduate students also leads to problematic findings: An inquiry among first-semester students by Risel (1999) found a substantial lack of knowledge about morphology and syntax, accompanied by negative self-assessment: "Many students lack confidence with respect to grammar."¹⁰ (Risel, 1999, p. 59; transl. H. H.) Bremerich-Vos and Dämmer (2013) report some findings of the TEDS-LT-project (Teacher Education and Development Study – Learning to Teach) with respect to undergraduate students in semesters 3–5 and 6–8 who were qualifying for a teaching position at the *Gymnasium* or the *Haupt-, Real-,* or *Gesamtschule*. The authors do not report the final results of the study but the examples given suggest a lack of extended grammatical knowledge among the students. For example, only 36% were able to explain a syntactic ambiguity using traditional terms such as subject, predicate, or object (cf. Bremerich-Vos & Dämmer, 2013, p. 46). The authors also note that no meaningful growth of linguistic knowledge could be found among the students of higher semesters (cf. Bremerich-Vos & Dämmer, 2013, p. 50).

⁹ The model of topological fields was developed by Erich Drach (1937) to capture the specifics of linear structure in German sentences. One of its core assumptions is that German sentences can be divided into different fields which determine the type and the number of constituents that can occur in a certain position (for details see Wöllstein, 2010).

¹⁰ "Viele Studierende trauen sich auf grammatischem Gebiet nichts zu." (Risel, 1999, p. 51)

Undergraduate students' linguistic skills are also viewed critically by many University professors, fueling a debate about the need for admission tests. With regard to a study among students of the University of Duisburg-Essen, Bremerich-Vos (2016) writes about the lacking literacy "of a considerable proportion of the students"¹¹ (Bremerich-Vos, 2016, p. 12; transl. H. H.). These deficiencies appear in connection with low-hierarchy processes such as spelling as well as in connection with the task of identifying and reporting the main thesis of an argumentative text (cf. Bremerich-Vos, 2016, p. 10ff.)

Taking all this into account, grammar instruction might get caught in a downward spiral in which insufficiently trained teachers teach pupils, some of whom then become insufficiently prepared students, and so on. In light of this situation it seems obvious that the problems discussed above have to be addressed by universities as part of students' training. Meanwhile, the question of how to address these problems (in light of current university policy) remains open.

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¹¹ „als mangelhaft einzustufenden schriftsprachlichen Fähigkeiten eines beträchtlichen Teils der Studierenden“ (Bremerich-Vos, 2016, p. 12)

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