

125 Years of German Examined in South Australian Schools

The text a speech on the occasion of the closing ball of the Goethe Institut Inter Nationes National Conference for Teachers of German, July 10th 2002, the same year the Network of Australian Teachers of German (NATG) was founded

Michael Parfitt

King's Baptist Grammar School

President of the South Australian German Teachers' Association

Vice President of the Modern Language Teachers' Association of South Australia

According to Dr. Eppeneder, one difference between German and Australian speakers is that the Germans use statistics, whereas the Australians tell jokes. I'm not going disappoint that stereotype, so I will begin with a joke.

An Australian man went into a tourist shop in Germany and asked the lady behind the counter what colour the German flag was. The assistant was patient with the man's ignorance and told him politely that it was black, red and gold. "Great," said the tourist, "they will make excellent gifts for the people at home. I'll take two black, three red and one gold!"

Some of you have heard me use this next story before, in which case I repeat it unashamedly. It concerns a phenomenon which has swept the nation by storm, and that is the *Big Brother* phenomenon. No-one admits to watching it, but people either love it or hate it.

On one of my visits to Germany two and a half years ago *Big Brother* was polluting the German airwaves for the first time. Although I didn't see an episode, the story of one of the housemates was told to me several times and it had almost become an urban legend. His name was Sladco, and he was nationally famous for his laughable ignorance. He knew nothing of anything the others were talking about. One day the name Shakespeare came up in conversation, and Sladco asked: "Who's Shakespeare?" Talk of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* meant nothing to him, but when someone mentioned *Romeo and Juliet*, that was it – the penny had dropped. Shakespeare had to be the Hollywood producer who directed the Leonardo de Caprio film. Sladco became an overnight success. There were even t-shirts printed with a picture of Sladco's face above the inscription "Who's Shakespeare?" The whole German nation found Sladco to be laughably ignorant when he asked that question. This conference is a Goethe Institut conference. How many Australians would find another Australian laughably ignorant were he to ask "Who's Goethe?". Or "What colour is the German flag?"

A computer network manager I know was putting together a links page for some German software. He came and asked me what colour the German flag was. I replied that it was black, red and gold. The following morning when I got into school, I logged on and found the page. There, in full computerised animation, billowing in the wind, was the Belgian flag. Laughably ignorant? No. He is very clever and gifted man in the area of computer management. It's just a different area of education.

Our Year 10 students have just completed a week of work experience and are naturally thinking about the workforce and careers. On the first German lesson back at school, one of my more gifted students put up his hand and asked me, "How is this going to help me get a job?" My response to the boy was spontaneous. "You play football on a Saturday, don't you? ... How is that going to help you get a job? You will go home tonight and watch TV. How is that going to get you a job?"

I have used many arguments to justify learning a language, but never the economic rationalist argument. People are not machines. Why is there the misconception that everything we do in school is supposed to be specifically career oriented? Of course I could name many jobs where German is needed, many more where any language would be useful, but it is not career, rather other benefits that I see I learning a language.

1. In education we should learn to appreciate the vast diversity and beauty of the world. This includes art, music, drama, language, culture and literature. Mark Twain once said, “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t.”
2. In learning a language we learn other sorts of thinking and analytical skills, as well as learning more about our own language.
3. Once we have tried to learn a language, we can better appreciate the struggle of many foreigners whom we so ethnocentrically expect to know English.

But why do we have to justify learning a language? Last year I was fortunate enough to attend the International German Teachers’ Association (IDV) conference in Lucerne, Switzerland. There were many teachers from eastern Europe and Africa who were lamenting that these days, with the trend to learn English as a first foreign language, German was relegated in schools to second or third foreign language. Most of my international colleagues were scandalised by the notion that in Australia it is not usually a question of first or second foreign language, rather of whether one learns a foreign language at all. When I was in Year 12 I took Pure Maths, Physics, English, Music and German. Since leaving school I have not used my Year 12 Pure Maths, nor my Physics, but just about every day I use my English, Music and German. That is not to say I should not have studied the other subjects. The skills and knowledge I learned from them helps me understand and appreciate the world far beyond a basic understanding. This is learning that will stay with me throughout my life. But it does belie the fallacy that certain subjects are more useful in life or careers than others.

It was at this point in writing my speech that I realised that I had failed to address my actual given topic, viz. 125 years of German in South Australian Schools. Or have I? German, along with Latin, French and Greek, has survived 125 years as a publicly examined subject in our schools. During that time there have been numerous social and political climates, including two world wars with Germany as the aggressor. And now we have an attitude of apathy from various quarters towards languages; an administration which on the whole did not learn a language well and thus can see no point in it; a society which expects everyone to learn English without ever empathising with foreign language learners. What needs to happen is a shift in attitude and culture, as has happened both for and against languages at various times in our history.

And, of course, our best resource is a human one – the strength, competence and dedication of our teachers, advisers and support organisations. Thus we need to be in there in support of each other and show the education systems in which we work the value, importance and strength of language learning.

I wish to conclude with a poem, not by Goethe, but by his contemporary and friend, Friedrich von Schiller. It is called *Sehnsucht*, or *Longing*.

Ah, if I could only find the way out
Of the depths of this valley,
Which is oppressed by a chilly fog,
Ah, how fortunate I would feel!

Over there I can see lovely hills,
Eternally young and eternally green!
If I had pinions, if I had wings,
I would travel to those hills.

I hear harmonies sounding,
Tones of sweet repose,
And the gentle breezes waft
Balmy fragrances toward me.
I see golden fruits gleaming,
Beckoning amid the dark foliage,
And the flowers that bloom there
Do not fall prey to any winter.

Ah, how beautiful life must be
There in the eternal sunshine,
And the air on those heights,
Oh how refreshing it must be!
But I am blocked by the raging of the stream
That furiously roars in between;
Its waters have risen so high
That my soul is frightened.

I see a boat tossing,
But the ferryman is gone.
Into it briskly and without hesitation!
Its sails are full of life.
You must believe, you must take chances,
For the Gods make no pledge;
Only a miracle can carry you
Into the beautiful world of miracles.¹

¹ Translation taken from Appelbaum, S. - *Great German Peoms of the Romantic Era* (Dover, New York, 1995)