FORUM

THE STATE OF LATIN INSTRUCTION IN GERMANY TODAY

This article seeks to give a short overview of the development of Latin instruction in Germany from 1963–2003 mainly as it is reflected in the number of students learning Latin.[1] In order to fully understand the role of Latin at German schools, we consider it necessary to first sketch the German school system as a whole. The second section will provide statistical material from 1963 through 2000 that will demonstrate a general numeric downward trend and try to give an explanation for it. A third section will present more recent figures (2001–2003) that indicate a slight upward trend. Final remarks will try to put the learning of Latin into a larger context: in a globalized world and a unified Europe, Latin faces challenges and opportunities alike.

1. The structure of the German school system

Like the United States, Germany is characterized by a federal political system; it comprises sixteen states, the *Bundesländer*. The fact that the state governments are responsible for school education results in a highly diversified school system.

In contrast to the American school system, the majority of the German states do not run comprehensive schools. Exceptions are to be found in states traditionally governed by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

After four years of elementary school training (ages 6 to 10), all parents, in close cooperation with the teachers, try to find the best way for their children to advance in their further school career. In

[1] Privatdozent Dr. Stephan Kipf, Freie Universität Berlin, has written an in-depth monograph, titled "*Theorie und Praxis des altsprachlichen Unterrichts in der Zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Grundzüge – Probleme – Analysen*," tracing the development of Latin didactics in Germany from the 1960s through the present. We owe many thanks to him for providing us with extensive statistical data. We are also indebted to the *Statistisches Bundesamt* and the *Deutscher Altphilologenverband* (DAV) and its respective representatives in some states, Prof. Bernhard Zimmermann, Harald Kloiber, Renate Albler, Dr. Uwe Petersen, Prof. Jürgen Leonhardt, Leif Berling, Dr. Walter Jarecki, Hartmut Loos, Walter Siewert, Sabine Blatt, Kristine Schulz, Dieter Meyer. Special thanks go to Dr. Helmut Meissner, currently head of the DAV, for providing the most recent figures.

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this process a child's talents, abilities and school performance are taken into consideration. It is important to note, however, that the decision made at this stage is not irreversible; the system is flexible and opens up many possibilities for a teenager to change to a different type of school later. On behalf of competitiveness and assigning the appropriate school form to the individual child, there are three basic types of school:[2]

The *Hauptschule* provides a fundamental education and prepares its students mainly for blue-collar jobs. Students usually graduate at the age of fifteen, thus fulfilling the minimum compulsory school attendance time of 9 years altogether. Often graduates of this type of school go for an apprenticeship and undergo a three-year period of training on the job combined with parallel instruction at a technical school.

The students at a *Realschule* are, as the word "Real" indicates, prepared for a career in "real life", e.g., office jobs in banks, business and industry. These students graduate after ten years of school-attendance at the age of 16. In both the *Haupt-* and the *Realschule*, English is obligatory as a foreign language and is taught throughout the years of attendance.

Latin is almost exclusively taught at the *Gymnasium* level.[3] The *Gymnasium* is the most demanding type of school and prepares its students primarily for academic careers by giving them the university entrance qualification (*Abitur* or *Allgemeine Hochschulreife*) at the age of 19. The roots of the German *Gymnasium* lie in the early nineteenth century, when Germany was in need of a well educated governing elite after the Napoleonic wars. The educational ideals were derived from the Enlightenment and mainly embraced the study of the ancient languages Latin and Greek.[4] Since those days the *Gymnasium* has undergone many changes. Today, there is a variety of types, each offering different programs and advertising specific profiles. What all *Gymnasien* have in common, however, is that taking at least two foreign languages is the minimum requirement and that English is obligatory at each and every school. Basically, the number, choice and sequence of languages depend on the branch one chooses. Many students are in programs that require three foreign languages, and at most schools more languages are offered as additional options. Given this diversity, it comes as no

[2] The German school system is far more complicated than sketched here, but this is not the place to give a detailed overview of the whole system.

[3] Besides the *Gymnasien* and *Abendgymnasien*, Latin is also taught at some *Abendrealschulen*, *Integrierte Gesamtschulen*, *Waldorfschulen*, and so-called *Kollegs*.

[4] This is not the place to delve into the history of the German *Gymnasium*. Fuhrmann (1999[2]) offers a comprehensive introduction to this vast field of research.

surprise that many language teachers find themselves in competition with colleagues trying to recruit as many students as possible.

Before we look at figures for a more detailed picture, a look at the position of Latin amidst other languages being taught at the *Gymnasium* seems to be appropriate here. Whereas in the past Latin used to be the leading first language taught at the *Gymnasium*, and no student could finish the *Gymnasium* without having learned Latin, the focus has completely shifted. At many schools Latin is not offered any more as a first foreign language, so that nowadays at most *Gymnasien* students start their exposure to foreign languages by learning English first. This corresponds both to many parents' belief that English is the unquestioned world language their children have to know best and to the children's great enthusiasm in learning English. English has enjoyed by far the highest popularity among every young generation in post-war Germany. No other language has influenced and penetrated German to a higher degree than English; no other culture has shaped modern Germany more profoundly than American pop culture. English is attractive, sounds swift and fancy to German ears, and allows teenagers to understand songs. Understandably, this upturn in English has not been without serious consequences to the other foreign languages taught at German schools. As the figures will show, Latin lost ground dramatically, whereas Spanish has been more and more introduced as a third language, often relegating French to an optional rank.

2. Number of students learning Latin 1963–2000

The *Deutscher Altphilologenverband* (DAV) provides figures concerning the learners of Latin covering 1970 through 2002 (in the five Eastern states—Thuringia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania—the teaching of Latin was introduced after the German reunification of 1989; statistical material is available from 1992 onwards):[5] in 1970 6.84% of all students in secondary schools, not just at the *Gymnasien*, learned Latin; in 2002 6.69% did so. As mild as this decrease may seem, we should keep in mind that there has been a recent upward trend over the past couple of years. Bavaria has traditionally taken a leading position, being topped only by the Saarland between 1970 and the early 1980s regarding the number of pupils learning Latin. Bremen ranked lowest.

The 32 year time span between 1970 and 2002 was not characterized by a steady trend, but rather by many ups and downs.

[5] Statistics provided by Dr. Helmut Meissner, head of the *Deutscher Altphilologenverband*. For the most recent data see section three of this article.

1985 saw the peak of Latin instruction in German schools: in Bavaria 11.46% of all pupils learned Latin, directly followed by North Rhine-Westphalia with 10.72%. At the very bottom ranked Bremen with 4.57%. The reasons for this countrywide upsurge can only be speculative: after Helmut Kohl from the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) became chancellor in 1982 and head of a conservative coalition, a rather conservative movement spread in German schools. Politically, things seemed to have calmed down after the turbulent late 1960s and 1970s. The instruction of Latin may have benefited from this conservative trend in German society emphasizing traditional values. Since Latin had not been taught under the communist regime in East Germany (GDR), the German reunification in 1990 brought about the sharpest drop in percentages. Given the fact that the new states were without Latin, it comes as no surprise that in 1991 only 6.04% of all students in Germany were enrolled in Latin courses. It has been only very slowly and gradually that the learning of this ancient language has recovered. The most successful of the new *Länder* is Thuringia, where 6.38% of the student body were learning Latin in 2002 (starting from zero in 1991), thus surpassing the western states of Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, and Bremen.

Having dealt so far with figures coming from all school types, we can now focus on the *Gymnasium*, where the instruction of Latin has traditionally been housed. This takes us to the core of learning Latin in Germany and its manifold ups and downs. The following figures, significantly higher than those taking into consideration all school types as mentioned above, are based on the data collected by Stephan Kipf,[6] and the material covers the years 1963–2000.[7] The most significant drop occurred in 1971/72, when the percentage of pupils learning Latin at a *Gymnasium* (all grades taken together) dropped from 43.54% to 26.61%. After a vigorous upturn in 1974/75 from 25.11% to 36.89% the figures remained stable at roughly 38%. Whereas the generally resurgent interest in Latin in 1985 (see above) did not find its echo at the *Gymnasien*—which means that in 1985 Latin boomed at the comprehensive schools—the sharp downturn in percentages in 1990/91 due to the reunification did affect the *Gymnasien*, too. The figures dropped by more than 5%, from 34.13% to 28.79%. In spite of the moderate upward trend from 2001 on (see below), it is sad to notice that in 2000 only 25.82% of all *Gymasium* students were enrolled in some Latin courses, the figure thus falling below that of 1991. Given the manifold initiatives to build up and

[6] Cf. note 1.

[7] Fachserie A, Bevölkerung und Kultur, Reihe 10, Bildungswesen, Allgemeinbildende Schule des Statistischen Bundesamtes, Stuttgart 1963–.

promote the teaching of Latin in the new German states (sometimes with remarkable success, as in Thuringia), it must be noted that the instruction of Latin in the German East still faces enormous challenges. At the same time the continuing interest in Latin in some Western states is not strong enough to make up for the low figures in the East so as to produce a net gain in enrollments.

A breakdown into different grades and age groups within the *Gymnasium* confirms the picture established so far. Almost always the figures rise from grade 5 and reach their peak in grade 9. After the completion of the *Mittelstufe* many students drop Latin to concentrate on other subjects. Yet the general downturn over the years is remarkable: in 1963 a total number of 29,019 pupils enrolled for Latin in grade 5, the beginning of their *Gymnasium* career; this amounted to 22.3% of all *Gymnasium* students. The constant downturn with its sharpest decrease between 1966 (20.16%) and 1973 (7.47%)—a blow from which the figures never recovered again—was only halted by an upturn in 1973/74, when the figures surprisingly rose from 7.47% to 12.93%. During the 1980s the figures remained stable around the 11% range until they dropped again in the wake of the German reunification. In 2000 6.1% of the student body began their *Gymnasium* career with opting for Latin as their first foreign language, which amounts to a decrease of almost 50% compared to the 1980s.

Similar proportions are to be found for grades 7–13. Whereas in 1963 68.6% of all *Gymnasium* 9th graders learned Latin, the percentage dropped by more than 26% to 41.94% in 2000. Even more dramatic is the extent to which Latin has lost ground in the final grades, i.e. grades 10–12/13. While in 1963 51.04% of all *Gymnasium* seniors were still enrolled in Latin in grade 13 (i.e., more than half of all *Gymnasium* students graduated in Latin), only 9.09% in 2000 did so, a decrease of more than 40%.

What are the reasons for these dramatically changing habits of learning Latin at German schools? In 1963 pupils and parents lived in a world different from ours. At the peak of the cold war, there were certainties like the confrontation between East and West, the iron curtain separating the two German states, the Bundesrepublik Deutschland firmly embedded within NATO and large portions of its popular culture oriented towards the model USA. Europe as a tighter political union was a distant dream. The learning of Latin seemed to be a relic from the past, still cherished by a bourgeois educational elite. The necessity of English and French was beyond doubt. But it was from the 1960s on that Latin gradually lost ground due to general trends in German society. Many parents have taken on a highly utilitarian attitude, thinking that learning Latin, a "dead" language, as they have called it, is so time-consuming that there

might be not enough time for the acquisition of modern spoken languages. A steadily growing number of parents and students alike have considered Latin to be useless, superfluous and a waste of time for future success in the highly competitive and globalized business world. They have failed to see to what extent a profound knowledge of Latin facilitates and speeds up the process of learning modern languages.[8]

3. The most recent trend (2001–2003)

Since 2001 Latin has enjoyed a resurgence. In 2001/02 the number of pupils learning Latin in Germany rose by 1.38%. In 2002 there was an increase of 4.29%, in 2003 of 3.83%. This means 6.98% of the whole German student body is currently learning Latin.[9]

Given the fact that the total number of students attending a *Gymnasium* only increased by 0.5%, it is obvious that the rise of Latin is above average. In all states, apart from Saxony-Anhalt where the figure remained stable, the number of Latin-learners increased proportionally.

At the *Gymnasien* the percentage increase looks as follows: in 2000 25.8% of all students enrolled at a *Gymnasium* learned Latin, in 2001 25.9%, in 2002 26.8%, and in 2003 27.7%.

A breakdown into different grades might be helpful again in assessing the trend. Concerning Latin as a first foreign language in grade 5, the figures have been stable from 2000 on: 0.16% of all *Gymnasium* beginners have been opting for Latin as their first foreign language. Since the total number of students has been rising, the trend also means a slight increase in raw figures of 5th graders learning Latin. Over the last three years the percentage of students being enrolled in Latin courses in grade 7 of all the different school types increased from 1.11% to 1.19% and has reached 1.24% in the meantime. The figures are similar for Latin as a third language (all school types taken together), rising from 1.17% in 2000 to 1.23% in 2001 and on to 1.27% in 2002. The numbers of students still enrolled in grade 12 has experienced an upturn, too; 0.3% of the student body learned Latin at grade 12 in 2000, 0.29% in 2001 and 0.32% in 2002.[10]

[8] In order to ease the competition Latin is exposed to mainly due to English, it should be made clear to parents that it is precisely the learning of Latin that is highly helpful to the study of English. Cf. Weeber (1998).

[9] Information taken from an official letter written by Dr. H. Meissner on January 10, 2004 to all members of the *Deutscher Altphilologenverband* (DAV) based on data collected by the *Statistisches Bundesamt* in Wiesbaden. Schöneich (2004) 103–8, especially 103; figures for 2003 were kindly provided by Dr. H. Meissner.

[10] Schöneich (2004) 103–4.

The reasons for this most recent upward trend can only be guessed. Interest in the ancient world has never really faded and instruction in the mother tongue no longer achieves what it used to do, i.e., the reflective and accurate use of one's own language and thus a solid foundation for the learning of foreign languages. Not only do students who do not know Latin lack a sufficient grasp and reflective comprehension of their mother tongue; without a profound knowledge of grammatical structures, which learning Latin easily provides, they are also deprived of a basic understanding of how languages work as a system. For everyone familiar with Latin it goes without saying that the efforts of studying Latin pay off on multiple levels. Parents seem to realize more and more that learning Latin is not an obstacle to their children's climbing the career ladder, but just the opposite. On a more general level, Germany was struck by its low score in the so-called PISA study.[11] The results, disconcerting for Germany, were broadly discussed in public and obviously made many parents believe again in traditional subjects of education, like Latin.[12]

4. Latin in Europe and in a globalized world: challenges and opportunities

In spite of this recent positive trend, we should watch out: in terms of percentages fewer pupils than ever learn Latin in Germany today. In addition, in some states (e.g., Hesse and Saxony-Anhalt) there is a serious shortage of well trained Latin teachers: due to financial distress many teaching positions that become vacant through retirements are not filled any more, although the number of students willing to learn Latin is on the rise.[13] Unlike in the 1960s, when Latin had to compete with only English and French and could enjoy a relative secure position in the curricula, Latin today has to compete with many modern languages that are all perceived to be important. The unification of Europe has brought about a huge marketplace of languages; globalization has demonstrated to everyone the importance of proficiency in as many foreign languages

[11] PISA is "an internationally standardized assessment that was jointly developed by participating countries and administered to 15-year-olds in schools. [The] survey [was] implemented in 43 countries in the first assessment in 2000. PISA 2000 [covered] the domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life" (http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pisa/summary.htm).

[12] We would like to thank Prof. Jürgen Leonhardt, University of Tübingen (Germany), for his willingness to discuss these topics with Werner Riess on the phone.

[13] Schöneich (2004) 105.

as possible. Standing its ground among these competing offerings will be the challenge Latin has to cope with in the future.

Yet there are some first signs that allow classicists to feel confident about the success of Latin. Nowadays, many children start learning English in elementary school. Most parents of pupils trained in this way have their children go for English as their first foreign language when they enter the *Gymnasium* so as to make the period of transition from elementary school to *Gymnasium* as easy and smooth as possible for them. As positive and useful as the learning of modern languages at a very early age certainly is, the teaching of English at elementary school was a big blow to Latin and its position as a language that had been taught at the *Gymnasium* as a first language. To liberate Latin from this curricular juggernaut, the so-called Biberach model has now a solution to offer. Children start learning English as 3rd graders in elementary school and continue studying English in grade 5, the first grade at the *Gymnasium*. Along with English (3 hours per week) the children also begin learning Latin (5 hours a week from the start in grade 5). Thus, according to this model, Latin is still studied from grade 5 on, as in the old days, but now as a second language. This model eases up on Latin, as parents and children do not have to face the difficult decision before entering grade 5 of which language to choose.[14]

At the same time the positive trend of recent years has found its echo in many local and regional efforts to stimulate ideas and discussion in order to come to a re-definition of the role Latin should play in 21st century Europe. One of the most influential colloquia was held in Karlsruhe (Baden-Württemberg) in 2002 under the auspices of Dr. Annette Schavan, secretary of education of Baden-Württemberg. The proceedings of this colloquium, published as "Europas Identität und das Erbe der Antike. Altsprachliches Symposium. Dokumentation und Perspektiven eines Europäischen Gymnasiums" (Weilheim/Teck 2003), sketch the idea of a new type of *Gymnasium* (esp. pp. 27–9), consisting of different branches and options for the pupils, that would successfully meet the challenges of the new century. This *European Gymnasium* would make two modern languages mandatory besides Latin and Greek. This means four languages would be obligatory, each to be learned in a certain chronological sequence. In grade 10 the instruction in one modern language would be replaced by the bilingual teaching of a subject like history or geography in that very language. In the final years the students would be obliged to take two languages, one of which would have to be an ancient language. It goes without saying that the widespread introduction of this type of school would boost the

[14] Schöneich (2004) 104.

study of Latin and Greek by firmly anchoring them in the curricula. To what extent this highly demanding type of school will appeal to parents and children remains to be seen. The good thing about this prospective *Gymnasium* is that its proponents in the political machinery seem to have realized that the ancient languages play a key role in shaping the future. So Europe and globalization constitute not only challenges to Latin, but also great opportunities. It will be the classicists' responsibility in schools and universities to participate in shaping the future by laying the cultural foundations, an integral part of which is the teaching of Latin and Greek. To achieve this ambitious goal "we must continue and intensify our efforts in developing and employing new, livelier, and more effective methods and resources, in constantly reinterpreting the Classics for an ever-changing audience, in promoting classical studies among the public at large, and in networking and collaborating."[15]

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[15] LaFleur (1997) 129.