

Heritage Voices: Language – German

About the Author: Dr. Renate Ludanyi



Dr. Renate Ludanyi is a faculty member at Western Connecticut State University and co-founder and principal of the [German School of Connecticut](#) (GSC). GSC was a reaction to the decline of the teaching of German in Connecticut schools in the late 1970s. Since its founding in 1978, Dr. Ludanyi, in collaboration with parents and many volunteers, has made the GSC a success and was able to strengthen cultural ties among members of the German-speaking community in Connecticut. She is the president of the umbrella organization, the [German Language School Conference](#) (GLSC). In this connection, she also works with the German school authorities and government agencies in the Federal Republic of Germany responsible for German schools abroad.

Dr. Ludanyi is creating a network of community-based heritage language schools in Connecticut and has created a network among German schools in the United States. She firmly believes that "the cultural heritage of the German-speaking countries of Europe and their language should not be lost among the German-speaking descendants in the United States, and that knowing German opens doors to global commerce and science." She is the director of the German Studies Center and a professor of German at Western Connecticut State University. Her research includes demographic data in regard to the students in the German heritage language schools and issues regarding curriculum, teaching, testing, and teacher training specifically in the area of German heritage language schools. She has given workshops and lectures on these topics in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. She has co-developed the only manual and teaching material for young children in American German heritage schools, which was funded by the Central Agency for Schools Abroad, Cologne, Germany, and published by the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG).

Dr. Ludanyi describes her connection to the German language and culture: "Born in Silesia, Germany, a region that today belongs to Poland, and living in the United States, it is the German language and its content that connects me to my heritage and my homeland. This content comprises more than the artistic products of literature, history, culture, and a large musical repertoire. It also includes scientific and modern information as well as the language and dialects of my German family and friends. The German language connects me emotionally and professionally to a world that is important to me and that plays a significant global role. I started to work with the German heritage language schools to provide German language and

culture exposure to my then small children and today, many years later, I am still working with these institutions. It is my belief that language maintenance and intergenerational transfer of language and culture in a country where the home language is not dominant greatly depend on the specific heritage language community. The host country, however, benefitting from the influx of foreign talent and work power, needs to offer support. I am striving to generate an understanding of the value of heritage language community-based schools (not only of German) within the mainstream school system of the United States.”

About the German Language

German is a West Germanic language closely related to English and Dutch. There are about 90 million native German speakers in the world and another 20 million nonnative speakers who use German on a regular basis. It is the most frequently spoken mother tongue in the European Union (EU) and the most useful language after English in 14 of 29 European Union nations (Special Eurobarometer, 2006). German is the national language of Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, and Luxembourg, the largest official language in Switzerland, and an official language in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and Poland, as well as a minority language in many other countries around the world. German once was, and to some extent still is, a *lingua franca* in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe.

The German language has a long history dating back to the eighth century (Ager, n.d.). It possesses the oldest written literature on the European mainland (Stark, 1993) and is an important component of the intellectual history of central Europe (Földes, 1993). The formation of the language as we know it today took place between the eleventh and fifteenth century, during which time the Holy Roman Empire developed a written language combining different dialects of Middle High German (“German Language History”). At the time, standard German was only used as a written form, and dialect varieties from north to south of the region were immensely diverse, sounding similar to different languages (“History of German Language”). It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that people began to learn how to speak standard German (“History of German Language”). The language’s grammatical rules were first recorded in the Duden Handbook at the end of the nineteenth century, which set the standard for the German language and remained unchanged until the German spelling reform (“German Language History”). Dialect variations still exist today with over fifteen different dialects spoken throughout Germany, ranging from Bayerisch, Badisch, and Alemannisch in southern parts of the country, to Hamburgerish in the north and Berlinerisch in the east (Infos24 GbR). Hochdeutsch or High German is known as the national standard form of the spoken and written language (Ager).

The German Spelling Reform took place in 1996, when German speaking countries convened in Vienna to discuss ways to simplify the language and create a set of official set of grammatical and lexical rules to be used in all German speaking schools (Upward, 2006). The reform changed the spelling of words used in everyday speech, which brought about not only confusion but also harsh criticism from the public. In the year 2000, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (newspaper)

decided to go back to their own spelling standards that were in place before the reform, complaining that the new system was worse than the old (Miles, 2000). A survey by the Institut fuer Demoskopie Allensbach in 2005, shows that 61% of the German population was still against the reform. The rules created by the reform include always changing the letter *ß* (known as 's-tset') to *ss*, except when following a long vowel (Upward, 2006). This means the spelling of commonly used words changed. 'Daß,' meaning 'that,' suddenly changed into 'dass' (Upward, 2006). In addition, the spelling reform changed the spelling of compound words and various other spelling rules (Upward, 2006). Though these rules upset many, the system did create an updated German standard to be used across the country.

German Pronunciation Chart

Vowels											Diphthongs		
Short	a	e	i	o	u	ä	ö	ü	er	ei/ai/ay	au	eu, äu	
	[a]	[ɛ]	[ɪ]	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[ɛ:]	[œ]	[ʏ]	[ɐ]	[ai]	[au]	[ɔi]	
Long	a/aa/ah	e/ee/eh	i/ih/ie	o/oo/oh	u/uh	ä/äh	ö/öh	ü/üh					
	[a:]	[e:]	[i:]	[o:]	[u:]	[ɛ:]	[ø:]	[y:]					
Consonants													
	b	c	ch	ck	d	dt	dsch	f	g	h	j		
	[p/b]	[k/ts]	[ç/x/k]	[k]	[t/d]	[t]	[dʒ]	[f]	[k/g]	[:h]	[j/ʒ]		
	k	l	m	n	ng	p	pf	ph	qu	r			
	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ŋ]	[p]	[pf]	[f]	[kv]	[ʁ/R/e/Ø]			
	s	sch	ß (ss)	t	ts	tsch	v	w	y	z			
	[z/s/f]	[ʃ]	[s]	[t]	[ts]	[tʃ]	[f/v]	[v]	[i/y]	[ts]			

Source: Omniglot

For native English speakers, the hardest sounds to pronounce are ö and ü (Infos24 GbR). The two dots above each letter is called an "umlaut." To say the letter ö, say the English word 'urn,' round your lips and keep your tongue forward (Dodd, 2003). The letter ü may be the hardest to pronounce. Say "ee" as in "seen" and then round your lips (Dodd, 2003).

German Nouns

All German nouns are associated with a gender (feminine, masculine, or neutral) and are always capitalized (Infos24 GbR). Gender is reflected most clearly by the definite article in the nominative case: *die* (feminine), *der* (masculine), and *das* (neutral). There is natural gender: *die Frau* (the women), *der Junge* (the boy), etc. and grammatical gender. Examples of grammatically feminine words include, *die Blume* (the flower), and *die Katze* (the cat). Some grammatically masculine words include, *der Garten* (the garden), and *der Fußball*. Grammatically neutral nouns include *das Buch* (the book), and *das Tier* (the animal). -. Many English speakers

find it difficult to remember which gender is associated with which noun, but it is a crucial step in learning the German language.

Compound words are a common feature of the German language (Infos24 GbR). Multiple roots or words can be linked together to create a new word. For example the word "Arztinformationssystem" can be broken down to mean doctor "Arzt," "information," and "system." The gender of compound words is denoted by the article of the last word (Durrell). Because "system" is neuter, the entire compound word is neuter. The German language has no clear definition of what can and cannot constitute a new compound word (Infos24 GbR). There is freedom to combine different words, creating wild and out-of-the ordinary compounds such as "Armbanduhr," "arm" "band" "watch" (wrist watch) and "Dreibettzimmer," "a room with three beds."

One of the curiosities of German compound noun creation has to do with the Spelling Reform, which allows three of the same consonants or vowels in a row. This happens when the first part of the compound ends with a double letter and the second part of the noun starts with the same letter.

Das Teeei (Tee -Ei, literally: Tee egg) Tee infuser
Der Balletttänzer (Ballett - Tänzer) Ballet dancer

German Grammar

The German language has four grammatical cases, including nominative (case of the subject), accusative (case of the direct object), dative (case of the indirect object), and genitive (possessive case). The latter is used much less than in English (Dodd, 2003). Sentence structure is not as strict as in English, because all adjectives, nouns, pronouns, and articles change depending on the case they are in ("Learning German: sentence structure"). Keeping this in mind, a basic acceptable word order is nominative + verb + dative + genitive + accusative or accusative + genitive ("Learning German: sentence structure"). The only exception is the verb, which must come second in the sentence or first when asking a verb question. An example is, "Er (he) *gibt* (gives) *mir* (me) *das Auto* (the car) *seines Bruders* (of his brother, actually, his brother's).

German Phrases

German (deutsch)	English
Guten Tag	Good day, afternoon.
Guten Abend	Good evening/night.
Bis später!	See you later!
Auf Wiedersehen	Goodbye.
Danke schön	Thanks very much.
Ich weiß nicht	I don't know.
Entschuldigung	Sorry.
Ich verstehe nicht	I don't understand
Wie viel kostet ... ?	How much is ...?

Wo ist ... ?	Where is ... ?
Mein Deutsch ist nicht sehr gut	My German isn't very good.
Können Sie mir bitte sagen ...	Can you please tell me ?
kein Problem	No problem
Rauchen verboten	No smoking

Source: speakgerman.co.uk

German in the United States

German is one of the oldest heritage languages in the United States. Its presence dates back to colonial times: German craftsmen helped build the first American settlement in Jamestown in 1608. By 1790, 141,000 German settlers lived in Pennsylvania, 28,000 in Virginia, 26,000 in New York, 24,000 in Maryland, and 1,000 in Ohio. Today the United States has the largest population of German speakers outside of Europe. The greatest influx of Germans to the United States, 37.4 percent of all immigrants, took place between 1870 and 1879. Between 1900 and 1929 it subsided, but it surged again in 1930–1949, and in 1950–1959 it reached 23.1 percent, equaling the immigration of 1830–1839 (Adams, 1993).

According to the 2000 Census, 15.2 percent of all United States residents (42.8 million) claimed German heritage, but German was only the fourth most-commonly spoken non-English language in the country. It is projected that it may drop to fifth or sixth place, after Tagalog and Vietmanese. in the 2010 Census. The change in total numbers, however, is small.

Interestingly, two immigrant groups that spoke Western German language variants were successful in creating lasting social and linguistic communities: Yiddish speakers and Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, etc.). Yet standard German has lost its importance in the public and private school systems as a result of complex sociocultural and political factors and shifts in focus in language education in the United States.

Today, immigration from Germany represents only 1–2 percent of all immigration to the United States. In addition to immigrants, the United States takes in a large number of German expatriates (people residing in this country while they work for German, U.S., or international firms in scientific or other capacities). Many of these expatriates are bilingual or multilingual and will live in the U.S. for the rest of their lives, but German, their language of heritage, remains very important to them.

Private German Language Schools



Private German language schools are creating new opportunities to maintain or relearn German in the United States. The oldest continuous operating schools are in Boston (opened 1874) and New York (1892); however, most of them opened after World War II and are Saturday schools. Further capacity was created in 1977 when, under the

auspices of the Consulate General in New York, the private German language schools united to create an umbrella organization, the German Language School Conference. [See a video](#) about this program.

[View the profile](#) of this organization in the Online Collection of Heritage Language Program Profiles.

By offering professional development for teachers, organizing materials and curricula for classes, and assisting the schools with credentialing and student attitude improvement, this organization has become the cohesive inner force of these schools. In the near-absence of German education in the public and private schools in many areas in the United States, these schools teach the language and culture of the German-speaking countries of Europe to students with a wide variety of ages, needs, and proficiency levels. They also promote a sense of ethnic identity among German-speaking communities by providing programs and offerings such as films, lectures, and cultural festivities. They serve the wider community as well with multiethnic information and resources.

Private German language schools are incorporated, tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations. They have a board of directors, frequently parents. Parent volunteers also do most of the quotidian administrative work. The schools charge tuition; pay rent, insurance, custodians, and books; often buy their own equipment; and recruit and pay their faculty. Faculty are usually native German speakers, most of whom are professional language teachers.

These schools often offer continuous instruction from pre-K or kindergarten through high school. Many schools also offer adult education and culture classes that help to reinforce the European heritage of the participants. They have access to and are supported by their ethnic community. They demonstrate well the five C's of the standards of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1996).

If there is local testing available, such as the New York State Regents Exams, the students in these schools take the tests. Nationwide, they take the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) tests as well as the Advanced Placement (AP) tests and the SATs, and most score higher than the average student population. Some private German language schools also administer the very demanding German state-sponsored language examinations (*Deutsches Sprachdiplom* I and II) that may qualify a student to enter a German university without further language qualifying tests.

The German School of Connecticut



[The German School of Connecticut](#) is one of the larger private German schools in the United States, with two teaching sites (Hartford and Stamford), over 360 students ranging from preschool to adult, and over 30 professional teachers.

[View the program profile](#) in the Online Collection of Heritage Language Program Profiles.

Read the [Heritage Voice: Program – German School of Connecticut](#).

The school was selected, in 1982, by the German School Authorities in Cologne (*Zentralstelle für das Auslandsschulwesen*) to administer the first examinations of the *Deutsche Sprachdiplom* in this country. Operating in an area with a large number of Austrian, German, and Swiss companies, it caters to many expatriates as well as to interested members of the community at large. Classes are offered for beginners, providing the excitement of learning a new language, and for German speakers -- heritage learners who need language maintenance and improvement. Many of the school's graduates enter the top universities in the United States and excel in advanced German university courses. A number of them study in German, Austrian, or Swiss institutions of higher learning. In addition to being affiliated with the German Language School Conference, the school works with the Goethe Institute, German American Exchange Service, German Consulate in New York, and the German School Authorities in Cologne and its consultants. It has been awarded the distinction of being one of the 1,300 Partner Schools of the federal government of Germany worldwide (German Missions in the United States). The school contributes to the international atmosphere of Connecticut and benefits the multiculturalism of the surrounding communities.

One factor that contributes to the success of this and other German language schools is the international status of German as a language. German business contributes to U.S. job growth and prosperity, and Germany is one of the leading markets for American investment and trade (*Facts about German-American investment and trade*, 2008). Many expatriates in the vicinity of New York support the school for the benefit of their children, who may become world citizens living and working between the German-speaking countries of Europe and the English-speaking countries of the world.

In 1985, Joshua Fishman predicted that the role for German would continue "when the quadricentennial of German immigration [which took place in 2008] is being celebrated," and he was right. He added that there is "far more life on the German scene" in the United States than meets the eye.

With Austria, Germany, and Switzerland physically as well as emotionally and financially closer today, and with the capacity to keep in language contact by telephone and the Internet, FaceBook and blogging, the remoteness experienced by earlier immigrants has diminished. The German School of Connecticut strives to remain one of the many German community schools in the United States that provides the capacity, opportunity, and attitude needed for language maintenance.

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The German language section of the Heritage Voices Program Profile on German was written by Simone Hrouda for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC.

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