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Development

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# German Videos with German Subtitles: A New Approach to Listening Comprehension Development

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The opportunity for the use of audio-visual material in German language instruction today is widespread. Videocassette players and film projectors are available to virtually every teacher at any level, videodisc players with computer programmed random access and laser beam technology make interactive video possible on more and more college and university campuses, and satellites can bring American students instantly into contact with German TV programs—technology today makes real what yesterday was only a dream.

And yet, the adaptation of these technologies to the teaching of German at both the intermediate and advanced level has been slow and all too often nonexistent. To be sure, authentic German language video programs, i.e. video programs made for natives, are available in ever increasing numbers.<sup>1</sup> Live programs received via satellite also offer a variety of exciting new approaches to teaching German, both in the classroom and in the language lab.<sup>2</sup> But while technology provides for increasingly easier access to more and more authentic material, the actual application of these authentic programs with the specific purpose of teaching the language has received little attention<sup>3</sup> and has been almost unchanged for the past two decades.<sup>4</sup>

To teach German with the aid of authentic film or video material, the instructor has two options. The first is that the film or video program can be used as it is shown to natives, i.e. with the original sound track and no subtitles. In this case, the audience must have from very good to excellent knowledge of German, and the instructional value of showing the visual material lies mainly in refining the existing language competence and/or perhaps also in serving as a base for a follow-up discussion of nonlinguistic questions and ideas. This is generally the case in German literature and civilization courses.

The second option traditionally open to the German instructor is to show films or video programs with the original sound and English subtitles. In this case, the students are subjected to

several stimuli: they must follow the action, listen to the German sounds, and read the English subtitles. In order to comprehend and learn the spoken German, the students will attempt to achieve a meaningful synthesis of the spoken German and the written English text. But the utterance of the German words and the appearance of the English subtitles do not always coincide, and the spoken and the written elements hardly ever correspond linguistically. Furthermore, because the progressive action of the film does not allow for time to digest and reflect on what has been heard and seen, it is natural for many students, in order to make sense of the movie, to react to these various stimuli by either “tuning out” the sound or overlooking the subtitles. Since it is considerably easier for the learners to read English than to understand the spoken German, most students will rely on the subtitles to comprehend the film. At a recent meeting of foreign language instructors discussing the pros and cons of German subtitles, Heidi Galer, Head of the Foreign Language Department of West High School, Iowa City, Iowa, related that of her 34 German language students who had watched a German language movie with English subtitles, 32 admitted to having “given up” on understanding the spoken German after only a few minutes of viewing and to having instead relied solely on the English subtitles for the understanding of the language. By doing so, of course, they completely defeated the purpose of viewing the film.

Thus, what essentially could be an excellent approach to learning German, namely the combination of sight and sound, is made ineffective because the German language films and video programs are simply used in the classroom the way they are in the entertainment industry. Instructors seem to hope that somehow, magically or by osmosis, students will learn German. Although there is evidence that prolonged television viewing will result in some language learning,<sup>5</sup> it is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain concrete, measurable data that substantiates the

advantage of using general film and video material not specifically made for language learning in the foreign language classroom.

Does this mean, then, that modern technology cannot be used methodologically and pedagogically to improve the learning and teaching of German?<sup>6</sup> I do not think so, and to advance my point I would like to propose the use of German language video programs with *German* subtitles. In other words, to use a video program, originally intended to be viewed by natives, with the single purpose of teaching German, I suggest transcribing the spoken German words and making them appear on the screen the moment they are uttered.

Since the main purpose of using video programs in a German language classroom is to improve the students' listening comprehension, subtitles primarily play a supporting role. However, unlike English subtitles which shift the students' attention from the language to the plot, German subtitles focus attention on the meaning of the words. The supportive function of German subtitles is thus two-fold. One, they prepare the learner for the utterance. By reading very quickly, "skimming over" the text, the learner is set up or preconditioned for the following sounds. (It is obvious that this process takes place in a matter of seconds, in some cases even in fractions of a second, and mostly on a subconscious level. But as anyone who has ever watched television commercials will know, it is the written appearance of the "lesson to be learned," be it the name of the product, a price, or a telephone number, that unconsciously makes a much deeper and more lasting impression on the mind than the verbal message. It is also worth reflecting in this connection on the effectiveness of [illegal] subliminal advertisements by means of flashing split-second messages on the screen.)<sup>7</sup>

The second function of German subtitles is to serve as a source of instant verification for aural comprehension. With the aid of German subtitles, the learner may check whether he/she indeed heard what was thought to be heard. Again, the time is only seconds. But no matter how brief their appearance, German subtitles provide the learner with immediate feedback. It is a well-known fact that learners experience native or advanced-level speakers as talking much too fast, primarily because of the learners' need for time to transform abstract sounds into concrete concepts.<sup>8</sup> As a result, much of the spoken text is frequently lost on the learner, which in turn leads to frustration and a negative attitude toward foreign language learning. The visual appearance

of the language in form of German subtitles prevents this; it keeps students from "losing the thread." Research also has established that while young children learn more easily aurally, i.e. through listening, people after the age of 12-15 learn more easily visually, i.e. through reading.<sup>9</sup> German subtitles build a bridge that leads the learner from the familiar, self-paced reading process which allows each student to pause for review or to consult a dictionary, to the unaccustomed experience of having to follow a progressive string of fairly rapidly emitted sounds in an uncontrollable, no-stop, no-return situation.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, the question may be asked, how does one get German language video programs with German subtitles, and how have they been applied methodologically, under what conditions, and with what results.

Many colleges and universities have media centers and video studios equipped with sophisticated editing machines. These studios are staffed by qualified employees and supervised by faculty members who can, without great difficulty or expense, put subtitles on video programs. Since these subtitled programs generally will be copies of purchased or otherwise legally obtained programs and be made for in-house use and educational purposes only, it is highly unlikely that using these modified versions will entail legal complications.<sup>11</sup>

More challenging and rewarding than to have professional technicians do the work is to assign advanced students of German (majors or graduate students) the task of putting German subtitles on selected German language video programs. Guided by a faculty member and supervised and trained by staff technicians, these liberal arts students will acquire first-hand experience with modern technology through such a project. This work will also increase their involvement with the language, giving them a feeling of accomplishment. Because the completed projects serve as instructional material, these accomplishments also might inspire other students to pursue the study of German beyond the mere fulfillment of a requirement.

Such a project has been under way for the past two years at Pomona College. Supported by a grant from the Hewlett-Mellon Foundation, German language subtitles have been put on several German language video programs and used in intermediate level classes. The video material consists of two series of 12-15 minute German language programs entitled *Wand an Wand*, available from the Goethe Institute, and *Lauter nette Leute*, which can be purchased at the Ger-

man Language Video Center.<sup>12</sup> Some of the titles are: "Klavier im Haus," "Besorgter Vater von nebenan," "Nachbarschaftshilfe," "Der Büroboote," and "Der Störenfried." All programs were originally shown on German television and have been converted to the American NTSC standard.<sup>13</sup>

As a first step, the audio portion of the program was taped (with a portable tape recorder placed next to the video monitor). Then, two or three students, individually and jointly, transcribed the text. Next, the written text was checked and compared with the video by the faculty member and the students together. This part of the project proved to be extremely fruitful because it led to an in-depth analysis of language understanding and because the co-operative nature of the work challenged and brought out the best effort in the students.

After the text was typed into the computer and several printouts were made, the work shifted to the video studio. There, two copies were made of the video program (on 3/4" U-Matic cassettes), and time codes were put on the second audio track of each copy with a time code editor. Then, with the use of a microcomputer (Sony), a video editor and video titler software, the beginning and the end of a segment of speech were determined in time code numbers, typed into the microcomputer and projected onto the video screen. From the source copy, the appropriate portion of the video program was then cut and superimposed onto the recorded copy. This work was done first by an experienced student working regularly in the video lab, with two German language student apprentices assisting and gradually learning the editing process. Although understandably slow at first, these students quickly became proficient in their work, so that the time needed to edit one program now is about fifteen to twenty hours. Obviously, as many copies as desired can be made from the completed videocassette with German subtitles, the only costs being the price of blank cassettes.<sup>14</sup>

The subtitles, in order to be clearly legible against both a bright and a dark background, should be made of white, antiqua-type letters with a black background. The spelling should be according to the rules governing the language, for example with Umlaut (not *oe* or *ae*), capitalization of nouns, and the *ß* (not *ss*). Separation of words at the end of lines should be avoided. Whenever possible, the subtitles should appear on the screen a fraction of a second before the words are spoken and also remain visible for the same length of time afterwards. It is also more

beneficial to the learner to leave a short question or comment on the screen when a rejoinder is added. This will allow for a "recall" and increase the comprehension of the entire episode.

When the programs are shown to larger groups, the monitor screen should be at least 19" wide diagonally. More important in a foreign language classroom, the loudspeaker should face the audience (and not be on the side of the monitor). The recorder should have a remote control and at least five video heads, otherwise the picture will be partly erased by streaks when in the freeze-frame mode, making it impossible to read the subtitles.

Since the attention span for any learner is limited, it is advisable to use video programs that are not longer than thirty minutes. Indeed, shorter programs allow the instructor to halt or rewind the tape occasionally for explanation or for immediate review. Because few students learn all the language elements in a program by viewing it only once, short, 10-15 minute programs also have the advantage that they can be shown several times. To vary the approach and to challenge the students more, the program can be shown once without subtitles. Although in my experience there is no evidence that indicates showing an subtitled program first to be more effective than the other way around, it seems to be advantageous from a pedagogical point of view to show the subtitled version first, for the student interest in the program's plot fades after the content is known. Once they are familiar with the action, though, the learners can concentrate more on the language and respond more readily to the challenge of comprehending the text without any aid.

To facilitate the comprehension process, I supplement the showing of each video program with handouts listing colloquial expressions, idioms and rarely used words. Again, there is no data yet to indicate whether it is more effective to prepare the students with the handout in advance or to follow up with it after the viewing.

One very effective and fun method of reinforcing the use of the vocabulary, though rather difficult and time consuming, is to turn the sound down and have students speak for the actors. The subtitles then take on the function of cue cards.

To vary the approach, video programs with German subtitles were used last semester in the language lab. Traditionally, third-semester German students at Pomona College are required to attend the language lab twice a week, each time listening to a short story and filling out an answer

sheet with questions on the content. After the first six weeks last semester, the audio-tape programs were discontinued and replaced by video programs. The students continued to attend the lab two times a week, but were required to work with one video program twice. First the students viewed the program with German subtitles; the second time they had the choice of watching the subtitled version again or viewing the program untitled. As an aid, the students were given a list with idioms and difficult words and expressions. At the end of the week, the students had to submit a one-page summary (written in German, of course). They were encouraged to use the newly acquired vocabulary.

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to evaluate the language lab programs. As expected, all students preferred working with video programs to listening to audio tapes. Typically, the audio tapes were found to be "so boring," while the video programs represent "real life" and "made the lab much more enjoyable." Since our students are required to attend the language lab three times a week during the first year, listening to the audio tapes that accompany the basic textbook, the video programs were welcomed by these third-semester students as a "nice change" and "something different."

The students were also extremely positive about the German subtitles, commenting for example, "A great idea"; "They seemed to help, really"; "The subtitles helped me a lot. They were useful especially when the actors spoke so quickly that I couldn't catch all the words. Seeing the dialogue helped reinforce what I was hearing." The general consensus was that the German subtitles help to improve listening comprehension development. As another student commented, "After a while, it's easier to understand."

The written summaries of the week's program turned out to be a very valuable component in the instructional process, although it is work for both the students and the instructor. As one student put it, "A pain, but a good exercise." At first I only corrected spelling and grammatical errors. Then I began to challenge the students to use more appropriate and difficult linguistic forms. For example, when a student simply quoted and wrote, "Der Mann sagt: 'Ich weiß das,'" I suggested using the past form, subordinating conjunctions or the indirect discourse, "Der Mann sagte, daß er das wüßte (gewußt hätte)." To facilitate rewriting, the students were requested to type their assignments on a word processor. The writing proficiency of all students increased significantly. More importantly, in writing, the students

used the newly acquired vocabulary actively, thereby raising the level of retention considerably. As the students wrote in their evaluations, "I usually understood the story better when I wrote it. I also find that I remember the vocabulary better if I use them in my writing. I guess the summaries are a way to make sure that people watch the programs"; "It's very useful and a good way of picking up some of the new vocab. in each story."

The most rewarding result of using German subtitled video programs in the classroom has been the truly positive response from the students. Being able to hear and read the German language simultaneously gives them confidence; they acquire a heightened sense of having understood the foreign language, which in turn, of course, makes them feel good and creates a more positive attitude toward the learning process. There also seems to be a greater recall of words and expressions in subsequent discussions and a better retention rate over a longer period of time when compared with the use of English subtitled programs. However, because of the relatively brief duration of the project so far and the limited number of students involved, these early findings, while promising, must be considered tentative at this time. In fact, it is the purpose of this article to direct attention to this method of teaching German in the hope that it will find application elsewhere and that other experiences will supply data supporting and confirming these preliminary results.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For video material: German Language Video Center, 7625 Pendleton Pike, Indianapolis, Indiana 46226. Other sources: Video Europe, 12021 Wilshire Blvd. #326, Los Angeles, CA 90025. Facets European Cinema and Fine Arts, 1517 West Fullerton Ave., Chicago, IL 60614; (800) 331-6197. Home Film Festival, 305 Linden St., Scranton, PA 18503; (800) 258-3456. Pics International Video, 405D Jefferson Bldg., The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, 1-800-ALL-CALL, ext INTV. Also see *Applications of Technologies: Planning and Using Language Centers*, edited by Jerry W. Larson, CALICO Monograph Series, vol. 1 (1986) 169-76.

<sup>2</sup>For information about receiving foreign language TV programs directly, contact SCOLA, Creighton University, 2500 California Street, Omaha, Nebraska 68178, (402) 280-4063. Also see Beverly D. Eddy, "Live from Germany: A Look at Satellite Instruction," *Unterrichtspraxis* 19.2 (1986): 213-19.

<sup>3</sup>See Winnifred Adolph, "In Defense of the 'Old Media': German of the News Media, an Advanced Skills Course," *Schatzkammer* 13.1 (1987): 37-48; also Sture E. Svensson, "Video, Authenticity, and Lan-

guage for Special Purposes Teaching," *Foreign Language Annals* 18 (1985): 149-52; and Timothy Scanlan, "Teaching French Language and Culture with French Feature Films on Videocassettes," *The Journal of Educational Techniques and Technologies* 21 (1988): 55-63.

<sup>4</sup>PICS (see footnote 1) has just produced a half-hour TELEJOURNAL with selections from German language TV news on a videodisc. This undoubtedly opens a variety of new pedagogical and methodological approaches to the teaching of foreign languages, but for several reasons (costs, copyrights, availability of multi-standard hardware and sufficient software) it will take years before the videodisc will be a generally accessible teaching aid for foreign language instructors in high schools and colleges.

<sup>5</sup>A few years ago, the student commencement speaker at the City College of New York was a young immigrant from Asia. When asked how he had learned English so well in such a short time, he replied, "I watched a lot of television." See also Gilbert A. Jarvis, "The Psychology of Second-Language Learning: A Declaration of Independence," *The Modern Language Journal* 67.4 (1983): 393-402.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of different methodologies, see Alice C. Omaggio, "Methodology in Transition: The New Focus on Proficiency," *The Modern Language Journal* 67.4 (1983): 330-41.

<sup>7</sup>In the feature article of *Newsweek* magazine on Sept. 29, 1986, entitled "Memory, New Insights Into How We Remember and Why We Forget," the authors state that "visualization is one of the most powerful tools of memory" (54). The visualization of the spoken language in the form of foreign language subtitles is probably one of the most effective, yet least understood and still largely unexplored mnemonics in bringing about global comprehension of a foreign language.

<sup>8</sup>By "abstract sounds" I mean the differences in every human voice, different accents, differences in speech patterns, etc. It is not uncommon for students

to get so used to one teacher's voice that they fail to understand even simple utterances in German if spoken by someone else.

<sup>9</sup>J. Donald Bowen, "Visual vs. Aural Dominance in Language Acquisition," *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics* (1978): 489-503.

<sup>10</sup>"Uncontrollable, no-stop, no-return" refers to a group (classroom) viewing session, where only the instructor can stop and rewind the video. In an individual viewing situation (in a carrel), the learner can, of course, manipulate the program. With the aid of the videodisc and interactive video this problem will, I hope, be addressed much more effectively in the not all too distant future.

<sup>11</sup>According to information I received from the National Caption Institute in Washington D.C. (the company that puts closed captions for the hearing impaired on public television programs), permission to put subtitles on TV programs has never been denied. In some cases it may take a while, with a few extra phone calls to be made and letters to be written, but no legal problems have ever been created on account of subtitling for nonprofit purposes.

<sup>12</sup>See footnote 1. Two other series of programs also well suited for this kind of project are called *Jakob und Adele* and *Ravioli*, both available at the German Language Video Center.

<sup>13</sup>German video is made in the PAL mode, which is unfortunately incompatible with the American NTSC. A video program made in Germany can therefore not be shown in the US unless it is converted to the American standard. Although multi-standard videocassette recorders are available, they are rather expensive, as is the process of converting a program from one standard to another.

<sup>14</sup>Colleagues interested in receiving a copy may write to me: Jürgen Froehlich, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Pomona College, Claremont, CA 91711.



The GERMAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION will hold its thirteenth annual conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin October 5-8, 1989. The program committee invites proposals on any topic in German studies, including history, *Germanistik*, political science, sociology, philosophy, pedagogy, and the arts. Proposals for entire sessions and for interdisciplinary presentations are encouraged. The deadline for proposals is Feb. 15, 1989. Early submissions are most welcome. For application materials and information, contact Eric D. Kohler, History Dept., Box 3198, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071. For those using BITNET or compatible transmission systems, please contact userid ULYANOV@UWYO.