



11th Biennial Graduate Conference in Germanic Studies (GCGS 2026)
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Keynote

Dr. David Birdsong, University of Texas at Austin

Working Memory and Second Language Acquisition Over the Lifespan: The Quest

This presentation is intended to illustrate a sweeping scholarly quest: From looking anew at foundational disciplinary questions, to targeting gaps in the literature, to application of novel methodologies to existing data, to the unanticipated discovery of principled relationships between Working Memory and L2 learning over the lifespan.

While numerous studies have demonstrated that Working Memory (WM) is a component of second language learning ability (e.g., Linck et al. 2014 ; Wen 2016), few (e.g., Shen & Park 2020) have examined possible correlations between WM performance as a function of chronological age (WM/age) and second language attainment [i.e., outcomes] as a function of age of acquisition (L2A/AoA).

The starting point for this investigation is two largely uncontroversial generalizations: WM test performance increases between the ages of 6 and 16, then declines steadily thereafter. In contrast, studies on L2 morphosyntactic acquisition reveal performance levels close to ceiling at early AoAs, followed by a persistent decline. In this study, we bring more granularity and substance to these two generalizations.

A second objective, to date relatively unexplored, is to establish the characteristics of dispersion (inter-individual variability in outcomes) in the relationships of age to WM scores and AoA to L2 attainment.

We pursue these two objectives by comparing WM/age data and L2A/AoA data side by side. Our WM data are Digit Span Backward (DSB) scores (reverse digit span task; $n = 2200$, US residents) from WISC-V (Wechsler, 2014) and WAIS-IV (Wechsler, 2008). The L2 attainment data are scores on a test of morphosyntactic knowledge in English L2 ($n = 240$, Korean L1) from Flege et al. (1999).

Our comparison reveals: (1) a misalignment of raw WM/L2A performances at early ages-AoAs, followed by convergence, and then a crossover around age 18; (2) a misalignment of WM/L2A dispersions at early ages-AoAs, followed by convergence around age 16; (3) a general alignment of WM/L2A performance at more advanced ages-AoAs; (4) a general alignment of WM/L2A dispersions at advanced ages-AoAs.

The observed non-isomorphism between DSB scores and L2 morphosyntactic scores at early ages - AoAs is consistent with evidence of limited WM resources and implicit learning during childhood. At more advanced ages, isomorphic outcomes are consistent with the role of WM as a potential asset in types of explicit learning in adults. This finding would appear to stem from very nature of the WM task, which requires both information storage and active manipulation and connection of information, i.e., precisely the skills that support associative learning among adult L2 learners (Ellis, 2008; Gao & Ellis, 2021).

Because of limitations in the examined data that make our findings inconclusive, we emphasize that the value of this exercise should be understood primarily in heuristic terms, that is, as a model for disciplinary exploration and as springboard for future research. With this in mind, we conclude by relating the current results to unpublished large data on the level and dispersion of results in broader WM tasks.

Presentations (in order of schedule)

Amanda Pascali – University of Texas at Austin

Translating a Sicilian Requiem: Rosa Balistreri's Forty-Minute Protest Song and the Global Fight Against Femicide

Emerging from groundwork laid during a Fulbright fellowship, this paper provides the first English translation of Rosa Balistreri's profound Sicilian folk song, *Un Matrimonio Infelice*, as an act of urgent cultural dissemination and a bold protest against femicide and social injustice. The project's focus is the translation of songs written in Sicilian, declared a "vulnerable" language on the UNESCO endangered languages list. Based on current trends, only a third of the population on the island will speak Sicilian at the end of the 21st century. Sicilian is a minority language, enriched by centuries of Arabic, Greek, French, and Spanish influences, and its marginalized status often compels its songs to serve as powerful conduits for addressing critical social issues.

Rosa Balistreri (1927-1990) was an iconic figure and one of the first Italian women to publicly protest social inequality through music. Her song, *Un Matrimonio Infelice*, is delivered in the ancient *cantastorie* (story-singer) style, an enduring tradition akin to American blues, where the narrative is primarily spoken rather than sung to amplify its raw, testimonial power. The song is a deeply personal and tragic account of her sister's murder by her abusive husband, which also led to their father's suicide. In a world where one woman is killed by an intimate partner or family member every 10 minutes, with 55% of all murders of women and girls committed by family members or intimate partners, this song remains tragically relevant. The monumental nature of this work is juxtaposed with its near-invisibility in public and academic spheres; this study presents the first transcription of its previously untraceable, unarchived, and largely inaccessible forty-minute Sicilian text. The translation of this song into English, the world's most widely spoken language, largely by non-native speakers, amplifies the narrative's reach beyond its minority language origins. This step transforms the powerful Sicilian story into a universally accessible statement against a global, ongoing crisis.

Keywords: *ethnomusicology, translation, minority languages, Italy*

Elsa Porges-Bernsteins „Dämmerung“: Die Musikszene der Moderne als naturalistischer Schauplatz gesellschaftlicher Kritik

Durch Dramen wie „Wir Drei“ oder auch „Königskinder“ wurde die deutsch-österreichische Autorin Elsa Bernstein-Porges unter dem Pseudonym Ernst Rosmer in den 1890er Jahren zu einer bedeutenden literarischen Persönlichkeit. Das belegt auch die Beliebtheit ihrer Theaterstücke, die zu Lebzeiten der Literatin noch in Aufführungsorten wie der Freien Bühne in Berlin, aufgeführt wurden. Ihr künstlerisches Werk ist weitgehend der Bewegung des Naturalismus zuzuordnen. Aufgrund der stilistischen Vielfalt ihres Oeuvres ist sich die Forschung diesbezüglich aber uneins.

Der Vortrag zeigt anhand ihres Theaterstücks „Dämmerung“ (1893), wie Bernstein die ikonischen Persönlichkeiten der musikalischen Moderne geschickt verarbeitet, soziale Fragen erörtert und die gesellschaftliche Realität am Beispiel einer Künstlerszene darstellt. An zahlreichen Textstellen finden sich Belege für eine kritische Haltung gegenüber einer Vielzahl an gesellschaftlichen Themen ihrer Zeit. So nimmt Porges-Bernstein Stellung zu Aspekten wie dem Frauenbild und der Wissenschaft, bewertet aber auch die Beziehung zwischen den Geschlechtern und das für den Naturalismus typische Thema der Vererbung. Anhand historischer Kontexte und textnaher Figurenanalyse wird gegen die Deklaration ihres Werkes als nicht-naturalistische Arbeit argumentiert, indem die literarisch geschaffenen Parallelen Bernsteins zu prägenden musikalischen Persönlichkeiten wie Richard Wagner und Franz Liszt analysiert werden. Somit wird ihr Rang als Vertreterin des Naturalismus belegt.

Die Untersuchung trägt damit zu einer musikalisch-literarischen Neubewertung von Elsa Bernsteins künstlerischer Arbeit bei und soll die Erkenntnisse zu dieser wissenschaftlich noch vergleichsweise wenig beleuchteten Schriftstellerin erweitern.

Cultural Translatability in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus: Navigating Igbo Cultural Elements in German Translation

The translation of African literature presents unique challenges in conveying culturally embedded elements across linguistic boundaries, particularly when rich cultural specificity encounters the demands of accessibility in a target language. This study examines how Judith Schwaab's German translation *Blauer Hibiskus* (2015) navigates the cultural translatability of Igbo-specific elements in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), a novel that incorporates language, proverbs, food, rituals, and traditional practices that often resist direct translation.

Using comparative textual analysis and applying cultural translation theory, sociolinguistic frameworks, and Venuti's domestication/foreignization concepts, the presentation analyzes cultural elements including code-mixing, food references (fufu, okpa), music, proverbs, and traditional rituals (ima mmuo, itu-nzu). The findings reveal that while universal themes such as family dynamics and identity translate effectively, culturally specific elements pose significant challenges. Schwaab predominantly employed foreignization strategies, retaining Igbo terminology and expressions to preserve cultural authenticity, though certain idioms, proverbs, and ritual contexts remain only partially translatable, requiring thoughtful contextual adaptation.

The study ultimately reveals inherent tensions between maintaining cultural fidelity and ensuring comprehensibility, demonstrating that successful translation requires deep cultural knowledge and strategic decision-making. These findings contribute to our understanding of cultural translatability in postcolonial literature and highlight the translator's crucial mediating role in cross-cultural literary communication.

Keywords: *Cultural translation, Igbo culture, Purple Hibiscus, foreignization*

“You Dance on My Living Room Table?”: Questioning Citizenship and Belonging in German Coming-Out Film Comedies

German film has long played a major role in documenting evolving intersections of identity and culture. For example, in 1919, Richard Oswald and Magnus Hirschfeld directed one of the earliest portrayals of same-sex desire in *Different from the Others*, which explicitly called for the change of penal codes that harshly persecuted gay men. Yet, the rise of National Socialism in 1933 brought more traditional depictions of women, such as mothers confined to the home in Douglas Sirk’s *La Habanera* (1937). In the 1970s-1980s, West German Cinema formed into an explicitly queer era of film, particularly those from the internationally celebrated auteur Rainer W. Fassbinder. It also marked a boom in films that explored Turkish-German identity after West Germany created its “guest worker” program. Today, German cinema continues to capture ever-evolving representations of social identity in contemporary film. Specifically, it continues to grapple with depictions of transnational identity and what it means to be “German” in a “postmigrant condition” (a term used to describe the impact of previous and ongoing migration on society, culture, and the arts).

This presentation reveals how contemporary German film explores intersections of identity and culture in a global context by turning to Florian Dietrich’s 2021 Afro-German comedy, *Toubab*. If coming-out is generally understood as an experience specific to LGBTQ+ identity, Dietrich’s film reveals how it is relevant in broader social contexts. This talk, which is adapted from the third chapter of my dissertation on contemporary German coming-out film comedies, will discuss the qualities of the film that make it so politically engaging. It will uncover how the film uses comedy for viewers to establish empathy for the main character who is threatened with deportation to a “supposed homeland.” It will also examine depictions “outing,” as well as intercultural clashes on the basis of queer allyship and societal expectations. Ultimately, when we dissect these interpersonal conflicts and character arcs in *Toubab*, we can understand coming-out as time and space in which one negotiates individual identity among and within a larger community. In doing so, *Toubab* demonstrates how contemporary understandings of belonging in a “postmigrant condition” allows viewers to question established citizenship laws. In a conference about the “connections between languages, spaces, and cultures,” this presentation brings the perspective of queer film studies and looks forward to creating dialogue with scholars in the fields of linguistics, literature, culture, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: *German Film, Queer Studies, Citizenship, Belonging*

Vergleich der Darstellung des Fremden vor dem historischen Hintergrund des Nationalsozialismus und des Neuen Deutschen Films

Diese Präsentation beschäftigt sich mit der filmischen Darstellung des „Fremden“ in *La Habanera* (Dir. Detlef Sierck, 1937) und *Angst essen Seele auf* (Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974). Im Mittelpunkt der Analyse steht die Frage, wie beide Filme gesellschaftliche Einstellungen gegenüber dem Fremden zeigen und wie diese Darstellungen mit ihrem jeweiligen Erwartungshorizont der Zeit, dem Nationalsozialismus und dem Neuen Deutschen Film, zusammenhängen.

Anhand der Figuren Don Pedro de Avila und Ali, sowie ihrer Beziehungen zu Astree bzw. Emmi wird untersucht, welche Bilder des „Fremden“ in den Filmen konstruiert werden. In *La Habanera* wird Don Pedro zunächst als exotisch, leidenschaftlich und faszinierend dargestellt. Im weiteren Verlauf wird er aber als Gefahr entlarvt, wodurch Astrees Rückkehr nach Schweden als Wiederherstellung der „richtigen“ Ordnung erscheint. Das Fremde wird hier also letztlich überwunden. In *Angst essen Seele auf* dagegen ist Ali keine zunächst idealisierte Figur, sondern ein gewöhnlicher Mensch im Alltag, der vor allem wegen seiner Herkunft ausgegrenzt wird. Emmi und Ali bleiben zusammen, auch wenn sie von ihrer Umgebung stark abgelehnt werden. Der Vergleich soll zeigen, dass beide Filme gesellschaftliche Ausschlussmechanismen thematisieren, diese aber unterschiedlich bewertet sind. Während *La Habanera* fremdenfeindliche Denkweisen im Sinne der NS-Ideologie bestätigt, kritisiert Fassbinder diese offen. Ziel der Präsentation ist es zu zeigen, dass rassistische und fremdenfeindliche Denkmuster auch nach 1945 fortbestehen - wenn auch in veränderter Form! Obwohl Gastarbeiter zu dieser Zeit offiziell gebraucht werden, sind sie gesellschaftlich oft nicht wirklich akzeptiert, besonders dann, wenn kein persönlicher Vorteil daraus entsteht – wie der Fall von Emmi und Ali veranschaulicht. Fassbinder hält der deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft mit seinem Film einen kritischen Spiegel vor und merkt an, dass die deutsche Gesellschaft ihre Vergangenheit noch nicht vollständig aufgearbeitet hat.

Keywords: *La Habanera, Angst essen Seele auf, Erwartungshorizont des Nationalsozialismus' und des Neuen Deutschen Films, filmische Darstellung des Fremden*

Operation Backtalk and the Amerikahäuser as Instruments of Re-Education in Postwar West Germany

Established by the U.S. Military Government between 1945 and 1947, the Amerikahäuser initially functioned as centers of democratic re-education, presenting exhibitions on American society, politics, and culture. This presentation argues that with the launch of Operation Backtalk in 1947, the Amerikahäuser were deliberately transformed into instruments for fostering and amplifying anti-Communist sentiment among the West German population.

As tensions between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union intensified, American information policy shifted from countering National Socialism to confronting Communism. Operation Backtalk mobilized the Amerikahäuser as controlled spaces for ideological instruction, using public lectures, guided discussions, and the distribution of millions of anti-Communist brochures. These activities contrasted Western democratic systems with Soviet Communism, which U.S. authorities depicted as a “police-state” that denied individual rights and dignity, while American and British democracy were presented as their political and moral alternative.

By tracing this shift in the content and function of Amerikahäuser activities, the presentation demonstrates how these institutions became key instruments of U.S. anti-Communist re-education and contributed to the Cold War reorientation of West German political consciousness.

Keywords: *Amerikahäuser, Cold War Germany, Re-education policy, Anti-Communism*

East German Studies in the Twenty-first Century Classroom

In a post-Cold War era that defines cultural winners and losers, how do we teach students about the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in a way that neither glorifies nor demonizes the lived experiences of former East Germans? Our curricula often marks East German literature and cultural productions as “East German” connoting state propaganda with little value, condenses it into “The GDR unit” or omits it from syllabi altogether. Resources for teaching about the GDR are also scant and often recapitulate the East/West, winner/loser binary. Additionally, instructors have limited time to develop new course materials, especially when they may lack background in GDR studies. My dissertation project proposes a shift from the Cold War binary by providing teaching and learning resources to include and uplift voices and lived experiences of people living on the margins of GDR society such as contract workers of various nationalities, LGBTQ+ people, groups formed under the aegis of the Protestant church, and subversive music scenes such as heavy metal aficionados. The project takes a material culture approach to foreground individual agents, their experiences and voices via objects and activities centered on subjects’ physical and abstract living spaces. This project will take the form of an open-access website with activities I create for use with a curated collection of objects housed in existing digital repositories such as the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, materials from my archival work at the Schwules Museum, and photographs of objects from private collections. Instructors can use the didacticized materials with the objects on the website in an off-the-shelf fashion, or to enhance teaching materials they have already created. This open-access website places ready-made teaching materials into the (digital)hands of 21st century students so they may engage with the Alltag of voices that the Cold War binary elides.

Language and Gender Ideologies: Linguistic Politeness

Several scholars have attempted to bring the discourse of politeness into the study of language and gender to build a framework of differences between the speech acts of men and women. The motivation for this study stems from the need to examine the intersection of linguistic politeness strategies and gender while focusing on their impact in professional, social and academic settings. Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this research investigates how men and women employ negative and positive politeness tactics to navigate conversations and maintain "face." This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining observations, interviews, and surveys to collect data from diverse participant groups. Key findings are expected to reveal gender-specific patterns in politeness strategies and highlight how cultural and organizational contexts influence these dynamics. By analyzing speech acts across genders, this research contributes to understanding how language reflects and perpetuates societal expectations of gender roles. The proposed findings will have practical implications for fostering inclusive interactions and redefining gendered communication norms in contemporary society. This study will also provide a framework for analyzing the functional application of politeness theories in diverse conversational contexts.

Keywords: *linguistics politeness, strategies, ideologies, face, gender, language*

Triangular Pedagogies- Mediating Language And Culture For American Learners As A Nigerian Instructor Of The German Language

This study seeks to highlight what happens when German is taught in a classroom shaped by three cultural worlds rather than the usual two. Rather than assuming a simple exchange between German culture and the learner's home culture, this research examines the triangular dynamic that ensues when a Nigerian German instructor teaches American students.

While research on German as a foreign language often assumes a binary relationship between German culture and the learner's home culture, this study seeks to draw on intercultural pragmatics, language socialization, theory and classroom observation to explore how the tutor's Nigerian cultural background influences their teaching practices, explanation of German norms, approaches to error corrections, strategies for negotiating politeness, hierarchy and directness and how then the learners communicate, negotiate and interpret these explanations through their own cultural experiences and expectations creating moments of friction, humor, misunderstandings and insight in the classroom. This research paper would seek to explore how the tutor then functions not only as a language instructor but also a cultural mediator who bridges the gaps between these multiple linguistic worlds, with their Nigerian worldview.

Learning the German language in such a culturally diverse classroom, can ultimately influence the absorption and interpretation of the target language i.e German. In such hybrid cases, this study argues that the classroom ultimately becomes a cultural space where new meanings of "German language learning" are negotiated, reshaped and reimagined.

By focusing on these three-dimensional cultural interactions, this paper would argue for a broader understanding of German language pedagogy, in which the identities and multiculturalism of the instructors help their students internalize the German language. This study would then serve as a medium of highlighting the value of diverse teaching identities in shaping multicultural competence by drawing on their full linguistic repertoire.

Cognate facilitation and processing in English-speaking learners of German

Within the field of second language acquisition, research finds that increased exposure to input results in improved proficiency, especially when those activities are challenging yet manageable for the language learner's current level. Because of this, listening exercises and speech processing are considered integral to language acquisition, even leading to recommendations of frequent, authentic use of the target language (TL). Instructors' TL authenticity is, however, sometimes stunted by the demand for comprehensible input and facilitation of classroom activities; they make use of simpler syntax, stronger enunciation, and more cognates (words sharing origins, meanings, and form across languages) than in casual speech.

This study, comprised of a listening task and post-task survey, therefore seeks to contribute to the fields of second language acquisition, psycholinguistics, and foreign language pedagogy by addressing German learners' auditory processing of cognates as it relates to useful and authentic TL use in the classroom. Ten students in beginner German courses listened to German words and provided their English cognates, in order to determine which factor(s) most impacted processing: phonological (dis)similarities, morphological (dis)similarities, or TL lexical (in)frequency. A linear mixed effects analysis found that lexical items with lower frequency coincided with higher response times, and the post-task survey focused on student perspectives indicated that participants consider longer words, varying types of context, and transfer from other languages (including the L1) to be most helpful in their TL development. Altogether, these findings suggest that the moderated use of cognates is most helpful in combination with other linguistic support such as body language, as well as learner strategies like segmentation, in order to take advantage of frequently occurring morphemes in the TL lexicon. This warrants more intentional stylistic use of the TL and classroom dictation exercises to up the frequency of exposure to TL sounds and lexical items.

Keywords: *second language acquisition, cognates, L1 transfer, comprehensible input, speech perception*

From Gemini to Confidence: AI Prep Talks for Novice Students of German (AiVE)

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of integrating conversation-based learning tasks into beginner-level language classes. These tasks often involve video-mediated conversations with an L1 speaker, which not only provide valuable opportunities for speaking practice but may also, learners to experience anxiety. As AI tools enter everyday classroom routines, they also create new possibilities for speaking practice and interaction. The aim of this study is to examine whether structured speaking practice via Gemini's voice function supports learners' readiness and thereby lowers anxiety in preparation for assigned video-mediated conversations with L1 speakers on the platform TalkAbroad.

Across multiple sections of beginner German at a large Midwestern university, the study compared learners' anxiety levels and self-reported experience in two groups of students: a) In the experimental group, in preparation for their TalkAbroad conversation with an L1 speaker, students completed short, repeated voice exchanges with Gemini aligned with upcoming TalkAbroad prompts. In the control group, students prepared through instructor-guided in-class brainstorming of likely topics and questions, work with sample dialogues.

Data sources included (a) survey-based measures of speaking-related anxiety and perceived preparedness administered before and after the preparation period, and (b) brief learner reflections on perceived usefulness. Results show a differentiated pattern: Some students reported clear benefits from AI voice practice, particularly as a low-pressure rehearsal opportunity. However, at the group level, the AI condition did not show strong overall advantages compared to traditional preparation. Traditional methods seemed to provide comparable support for many learners.

In relation to the conference theme "Connections — Between Languages, Spaces, and Cultures", this study examines how technology-created interactional spaces can facilitate new forms of connection and reshape the conditions under which speaking practice occurs. By situating AI-mediated practice alongside classroom preparation and TalkAbroad exchange, the project speaks to ongoing shifts in second language acquisition research and world language pedagogy as digitally mediated environments increasingly structure how learners encounter, practice, and sustain communicative interaction. The findings of the study at hand suggest that AI voice practice is not uniformly beneficial and does not yet account well for individual differences among learners.