

CONFERENCE PAPER

## The Teaching of Urdu at Heidelberg University<sup>1</sup>

URDU TEACHERS IN GERMANY have to face the fact that hardly any German has ever heard the name *Urdu*. There is very little interest in modern South Asian languages compared with languages like Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic. The overwhelming impact of Sanskrit studies continues to be felt in many German universities. Students, if they turn to modern South Asian languages at all, mostly prefer to study Hindi. This preference has to do, to a considerable degree, with the persistence of the traditional image of India and a corresponding lack of interest in Pakistan. Both the rich literary heritage of Urdu and its importance as a spoken language in the region are widely unknown. As a result, Urdu is often learned—and taught—as an appendix to Hindi studies.

The majority of Urdu students in Germany are Germans. Indians or Pakistanis constitute a small minority among them.

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent letter (10 July 1995) Dr. Oesterheld informs the editors of the *AUS*:

[The following report] reflects the situation as it prevailed at our institute till summer 1994. Since then, a full chair for modern languages and literatures has been established in our department and the staff has been increased. For the last two semesters, we have thus been able to teach beginners and Hindi-knowing students in two separate Urdu classes. As before, the main stress is on Hindi. We plan to introduce a new curriculum in the near future which will require all students of Hindi to learn Urdu as well. Those students who want to learn Urdu only will be offered a separate course on a comparatively limited scale (as is the case with languages other than Hindi, i.e. Bengali and Tamil as well). Due to lack of funds, we will not be able to offer courses in Urdu completely apart from Hindi, as suggested by Dr. Desoulières. It is much more economical to combine courses of Hindi and Urdu on the elementary level.

Under the German academic system, students are required to study two main subjects or one main subject and two subsidiary subjects for a “Magister” (almost equivalent to a M.A. or M.Sc.). Students taking up Modern Languages and Literatures in the Department of Indology as their main subject have to study two languages. Those opting for Hindi quite often choose Urdu as the second language. At present, we have no students studying Urdu as their main subject and/or their first language. Some students learn Urdu as a substitute for Latin, which is a degree requirement in our department.

In view of the overall situation briefly described above, Urdu teaching faces the following problems:

The basic course comprises four semesters for beginners and two semesters for students who have completed the basic course in Hindi. Both types of students have to be taught in the same class because we cannot afford to run two separate classes for them.

The first difficulty which all students alike face is learning the Urdu script. Introducing the script goes hand in hand with teaching basic structures of the language and elementary vocabulary. Here, the disparity between beginners and Hindi-knowing students creates a problem: the sentences and texts we use in the first two semesters are either too simple and therefore boring for the Hindi-knowing group, or too complex and difficult to understand for the “real” beginners. It is quite difficult to find a compromise between these two extremes.

### Basic Course

For the past four years, we have been trying different methods of introducing the Urdu script—the systematic approach according to letter groups in alphabetical order, and the didactic approach proceeding from the simpler to the more complex letters. So far, we have not been able to find any discernible difference in the results. It would be very interesting and instructive to learn about the experience of other teachers of Urdu in this regard.

Another issue which might be discussed at the conference is the question of spelling. There are several disparities in the rules of spelling formulated by different authors on the one hand, and between those rules and common practice on the other. As a rule, we try to follow the current usage as far as possible, but at the same time pointing out controversial spellings.

### Advanced Level

As mentioned above, most of our students learn Urdu as a second language. They aim at a basic knowledge only, devoting less time to Urdu than to other subjects. As a result, the progress made in reading and writing often is too slow to take them above the level of textbooks and adaptations.

Students who reach the advanced level (from the fifth semester onwards) are offered courses in prose reading (short stories, newspaper articles) and seminars on the history of Urdu literature and on selected periods, genres, or topics of Urdu literature. These seminars, however, do not attract more than three or four participants. The majority of our students do not acquire a level of proficiency which would enable them to enjoy classical Urdu poetry or to familiarize themselves with the diversity of styles and modes of expression in classical and contemporary literature. Even at the advanced level, the knowledge of the language remains very uneven due to the different aims and priorities of the students.

Finally, let me point to one more problem: the lack of proper instructional materials and dictionaries. So far, we have made do with materials in the English language and English-Urdu/Urdu-English dictionaries, supplemented by handouts giving explanations and exercises in German. A German-English dictionary [?] has recently been published in Islamabad. But this can be taken as a first step only. Urdu-German and German-Urdu dictionaries should be compiled by German scholars in close cooperation with Indian and/or Pakistani scholars.

Another major field, apart from teaching, is translation work. Translating classical and modern Urdu literary works into German is no less important a task than the teaching of Urdu, since translations may reach a far wider public than academic activities.

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