

# VERBALIZATION OF CRITICISM AND PRAISE INTENTIONS IN GERMAN-LANGUAGE PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with the peculiarities of the German-language pedagogical discourse, in particular teachers' oral speech. Pedagogical discourse as a type of institutional discourse is characterised by a pronounced cultural component related to the differences in educational systems, traditions and modern practices of communicative interaction between teachers and students. The aim of the study is to analyse teachers' evaluative and facilitative strategies, which are implemented in the speech acts of criticism and praise. The examples under review are borrowed from German-language speech resources that teachers in German schools are recommended to use in class. To thematically differentiate between the objects of praise and criticism of students the article is based on contextual analysis, which helps to describe the speech acts of praise and censure, using the procedure of detecting teachers' intentions. The analysis of the grammatical and syntactic construction of the utterances makes it possible to determine the linguistic means of implementing praise and criticism in the German-language teacher discourse and to identify the corpus of linguistic means whose main function is to increase or decrease the semantic and emotional significance of the utterance components.

**Keywords:** German-language pedagogical discourse, teachers' evaluation strategies, speech acts, criticism and praise intentions.

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The features of pedagogical discourse have occupied Russian and foreign linguistics alike for some time now. In their study of the characteristics of educational discourse in an American high school, S. Berkner and B. Penkov identify the varieties of such discourse, namely discourse at the level of school administration, teacher, and student. Further, they note that educational discourse includes such multi-style elements as colloquial speech, common literary language, the professional language of teachers, and the official bureaucratic style of school administration (Berkner, Penkov 2003: 40). In another work, Penkov notes that teacher discourse is characterized by greater differentiation, due to the variety of situations in which the teacher finds him or herself and the goals of their speech activity. He distinguishes between oral speech (for example, in lessons, consultations, and conversations), and written speech (lectures, reports) (Penkov 2009: 64). He also notes that the teacher's behavioural strategies during lessons make up an important component of their discourse, aimed at maintaining discipline or to give encouragement or praise to students. The teacher's oral speech is characterized by the use of conversational vocabulary sprinkled with informal expressions (Penkov 2010: 18).

While numerous subtypes have been identified, researchers are unanimous in their opinion that pedagogical discourse has an institutional nature. Within the framework of this discourse, teachers, as representatives of a public institution, are called upon to teach and educate the younger generation (Karasik 2002). Recognizing the importance of the role that the teacher's personality plays in pedagogical discourse, V. Karasik points to the linguistic and cultural differences of this component in the educational systems of different countries, using the example of the United States and Russia. Karasik also analyses communicative interaction within the framework of pedagogical discourse and identifies certain explanatory, evaluative, controlling, facilitating and organizing strategies (Karasik 2002: 213), although he does not go into the details of their linguistic implementation.

In line with the goals of our study, we will explore the teacher's evaluative strategies, which include speech acts of praise and reproach. At the same time, we understand that in pedagogical discourse it is necessary to level out the linguistic asymmetry of positive and negative evaluation, given that words with negative connotations predominate in everyday speech (Skvortsova 2014: 342). To ensure effective communication between teacher and student, it is necessary to distinguish between assessing the performance of educational tasks and assessing the student's personality, so as not to harm their self-esteem. For this reason, public shaming is not practiced in educational institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom. Karasik connects the process of critically discussing the results of students' work with evaluative stereotypes characterized by a standard set of features, for example, a certain algorithm and the development of a solution to. Problem. In addition, evaluative stereotypes can also affect the recipient's system of values, for example, the ability to obey common rules and behave oneself. Differentiating between evaluative and facilitating strategies, Karasik

notes that the latter are based on the postulate that the speaker always be favourably predisposed towards the recipient in order to create optimal conditions for the student's personal development (Karasik 2002: 213).

The strategic aspect of the interaction between teacher and student has been the subject of numerous works in linguo-pragmatic studies. For example, in his work on the linguo-pragmatic aspects of didactic communication, M. Oleshkov classifies the strategies of pedagogical discourse in accordance with their goals and identifies information-argumentative, manipulative-consolidating, expressive-appellative, and control-evaluative strategies. The expressive-manipulative strategy includes tactics such as evoking a positive emotional response (compliment) or discrediting the student (through insults, ridicule, disapproval, etc.), while the evaluative strategy combines tactics for assessing how well the student absorbs the information, their behaviour, and their attitude towards learning, with an emotive assessment of their performance in the form of praise or censure (Oleshkov 2006).

Studies into the problems of pedagogical discourse note the differences in the verbal behaviour of teachers from different linguistic and cultural communities. For instance, E. Kovaleva and O. Ryzhkina studied the speech of English- and Russian-speaking English language teachers in classes given to native Russian students, noting considerable differences in the communicative behaviour of these groups of teachers. One such difference is that English-speaking teachers use expressive lexical units and speech formulas to say "well done," thus offering praise and encouragement to their students. Conversely, Russian-speaking teachers tend to focus on the positive traits of the student that helped them cope with the task. As for criticism, English-speaking teachers prefer to use softer and more roundabout language, while Russian-speaking teachers are more direct and to the point. In general, English-speaking teachers tend to take a more personalized approach to students, seeing the learning process as a partnership of sorts. This is why they use tactics of praise and censure that do not affect the self-esteem of students (Kovaleva, Ryzhkina 2009).

Similar conclusions are drawn by L. Osinovskaya (Osinovskaya 2012) in her analyses of the features of pedagogical discourse in Russian and American linguistic cultures. She notes the traditional nature of official relations between teachers and students in Russia and contrasts this with the combination of polite communication and communicative democracy that is typical of American pedagogical discourse. It should be noted that the teacher's personality and how he or she interacts with students are often a determining factor in terms of motivation to learn (Osinovskaya 2012: 157). In this regard, it is worth looking at the research of Minna Maijala, who comes to the conclusion based on surveys of Finnish students studying German as a second foreign language that one of the primary motivating or demotivating factors in the learning process is the teacher and his or her communicative behaviour (Maijala 2012).

An important aspect of communicative interaction in pedagogical discourse that has been identified in studies is the (non-)categorical nature of the teacher's speech behaviour (Becker-Mrotzek 1993; Spiegel 2006). Specifically, Fan Fang and Renate

Freudenberg-Findeisen, describing the types of errors that Chinese students studying German make, warn teachers against using categorical formulations when assessing student performance and correcting errors, as this has a negative effect on motivation and undermines the students' self-confidence (Fang, Freudenberg-Findeisen 2019).

Thus, the theoretical foundations of this type of discourse have been developed in detail in the scientific literature on pedagogical discourse, and the communicative strategies and individual tactics and types of speech acts of teachers have been identified and analysed. Researchers note the important role of the personal and emotional component of the teacher's communicative behaviour, identifying its characteristics in different cultures and offering comparative analyses of the features of national pedagogical discourse.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the teacher's evaluative and facilitative strategies implemented in the speech acts of criticism and praise intentions in German-language pedagogical discourse.

### **Research Methods and Materials**

The material used for the study was the *Unterrichtssprache Deutsch* (Butzkamm 2011) collection of communicative situations of speech interaction between teachers and students, which contains speech means and clichés recommended for use in the classroom by German teachers. Approximately 250 examples were selected for linguistic analysis that reflect the teacher's intentions in terms of praising or criticizing students.

The method of contextual analysis of the selected speech samples was used to perform a thematic differentiation of the objects of criticism and praise, and the procedure for identifying the teacher's intentions was then employed to differentiate speech acts of praise and criticism. An analysis of the grammatical and syntactic structure of speech acts made it possible to determine typical linguistic means of implementing praise and criticism in German-language teacher discourse.

The componential-semantic analysis of lexemes with gradation of actions and attributes was used to determine the influencing potential of praise or criticism directed towards the student by the teacher.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Verbalization of Intentions when Criticizing Students**

Our analysis of communicative situations of verbal interaction between teachers and students in German schools revealed that criticism is an important aspect of the educational process and can be directed at various types of student activities. Criticism is, first and foremost, a reaction to unsatisfactory performance, incorrect answers, the inability to learn the material, or to unacceptable behaviour in the classroom.

Negative feedback is a method utilized by teachers to indicate that the response to a question posed orally is not satisfactory, and is done in such a way as to avoid being categorical. The purpose of correcting errors is to motivate the student and teach them the correct model (Westdörp 2010: 4). This is done through the use of means of epistemic modality – the particles *doch noch*, *schon mal*, *nicht so*, and *ein paar*. In order to lessen the categorical nature of their criticism, the teacher can use comparative constructions such as *nicht so gut wie das letzte Mal*, as well as litotes constructed on the basis of the opposite, to soften the designated quality or property of *nicht so besonders / nicht so toll* (instead of *schlecht*). For example

*Das habt ihr schon mal besser gemacht.*

*Das ist nicht so gut wie das letzte Mal.*

*Das war nicht so besonders / nicht so toll.*

*Das muss doch noch besser gehen.*

*Da sind noch ein paar Schwierigkeiten / Probleme mit ...*

In softening the categorical nature of their criticism, the teacher also encourages the student to do better next time, using modal verbs and tense forms that indicate the future:

*Der nächste Versuch wird hoffentlich besser.*

*Ihr sollt nicht raten, sondern genau überlegen.*

The influencing potential of a teacher's reprimand is associated with the category of gradation – an increase or decrease in the semantic and emotional significance of the components of the statement. For example, when assessing students' work, the teacher can point out individual errors and how serious they are, grading them by using synonyms for the word *Fehler* (*Versehen*, *Schnitzer*), adjectives that act as definers (*leicht*, *klein*, *schwer*, *grob*, etc.), and verbs in their figurative meaning (*stecken*, *wimmeln*):

*Das ist ein Versehen / ein Schnitzer.*

*Das ist ein leichter / kleiner / mittelschwerer / schwerer / grober / schlimmer Fehler.*

*Die Arbeit ist fehlerhaft / voller Fehler / steckt voller Fehler / wimmelt von Fehlern.*

The only instance in which the teacher resorts to being categorical in their criticism is when the student demonstrates consistently poor results and their work is unsatisfactory. In this case, the teacher uses modal words and expressions with intensifying semantics, such as *sehr*, *völlig*, *einfach nicht*, *gar nicht*, and *nicht ausreichend*, as well as lexemes that convey disappointment (*lässt zu wünschen übrig*, *enttäuscht*, *nicht zufrieden*, *unakzeptabel*) to express their criticism:

*Ich bin von deiner Arbeit ziemlich enttäuscht.*

*Deine Leistungen lassen sehr zu wünschen übrig.*

*Unter dem Strich sind deine Leistungen einfach nicht ausreichend.*

*Das ist einfach unakzeptabel.*

*Ich bin mit deiner Leistung gar nicht zufrieden.*

*Das ist völlig daneben.*

Utter dissatisfaction with the student's work may cause the teacher to violate the maxims of politeness and the requirements of institutional communication, in which case he or she would typically resort to colloquial phraseological units (*keinen blassen Schimmer haben; unter aller Kanone*) or even invectives (*Blödsinn*):

*Du hast keinen blassen Schimmer.*

*Deine Arbeit war unter aller Kanone.*

*Das ist totaler Blödsinn.*

The principles of politeness as formulated by Robin Lakoff are violated when the teacher draws attention to the fact that poor answers may be a result of laziness, carelessness, inattention or lack of concentration on the part of the student. Such statements go against the rule of pragmatic competence ("Make [the person] feel good – be friendly!") (Lakoff 1973: 303). In the following statements, the teacher points to a lack of diligence, using negation to express the unacceptable quality of the student's work (*nicht sehr viel, nicht besonders*), as well as adverbs, pronouns and particles to soften or, on the contrary, intensify categoricalness (*etwas, wirklich zu*):

*Da hast du dir nicht sehr viel Mühe gegeben.*

*Du hast dich nicht besonders angestrengt.*

*Du tust wirklich zu wenig in der letzten Zeit.*

*Du bist in der letzten Zeit etwas faul gewesen.*

The teacher uses various speech means to implore students to be more diligent in their work. A common feature of these is the use of the comparative of the adverb *viel* (*mehr*) and the adjectives *gut* (*besser*) and *eifrig* (*eifriger*). For example:

*Du musst ein bisschen mehr üben.*

*Du musst dich mehr anstrengen.*

*Du musst dir wirklich mehr Mühe geben.*

*Du solltest dich wirklich mehr zusammenreißen, wenn du deine gute Note behalten willst.*

*Du musst die Vokabeln besser lernen.*

*Du könntest schon etwas eifriger bei der Sache sein.*

If the teacher does not resort to the use of means of epistemic modality, then his or her words typically contain a high degree of categoricalness, as in the following examples, where the teacher, noting the students' carelessness, does not use any means to soften lexemes that carry the meaning of inferiority of actions (*nachlässig, schluderig, nicht sorgfältig, schludern*). What is more, the teacher uses modal words (*zu, sehr*) to emphasize their dissatisfaction with the work of the students:

*Du nimmst das zu leicht.*

*Du hast sehr nachlässig / nicht besonders sorgfältig / (ugs.) schluderig gearbeitet.*

*Wenn du weiter so schluderst, bin ich gespannt, ob es mit deiner Versetzung klappt.*

In reprimanding students for not concentrating in class, the teacher may compare such lack of attention to daydreaming (*Gedanken... nicht bei der Arbeit*) or even sleeping (*aufwachen!*), or else call the offending student a fidget, using the precedent



phenomenon *Zappelphilipp* (a reference to the restless and fidgety character from the famous German children's book):

*Du musst besser aufpassen.*

*Du träumst Tom, aufwachen!*

*Ihr seid mit euren Gedanken nicht bei der Arbeit.*

*Du bist ein richtiger Zappelphilipp!*

In class, students are expected to maintain discipline – to arrive on time, not talk loudly, not bother other students, not interrupt each other, etc. This is an important aspect of the educational process. When referring to discipline, teachers sometimes use the infinitive form of verbs as an imperative. In the absence of epistemic means, such statements are characterized by a high degree of categoricalness and express extreme dissatisfaction and irritation on the part of the speaker:

*Nicht abschreiben!*

*Nicht reden!*

*Nicht vorsagen!*

*Nicht durcheinander reden!*

The use of an imperative construction in the form of a declarative sentence with the modal verb *sollen* is also a means of expressing the categorical requirement to follow the established rules:

*Ihr sollt nicht alle auf einmal reden.*

*Ihr sollt die anderen aussprechen lassen.*

*Ihr sollt den anderen nicht ins Wort fallen.*

Colloquial, emotionally charged words (*herumalbern*, *herumkaspern*, *herumkramen*), as well as words that carry a derogatory meaning, clearly indicate that the teacher is highly irritated:

*Hört endlich auf, herumzualbern / herumzukaspern.*

*Seid doch nicht so albern.*

*Hör endlich auf, in deiner Tasche herumzukramen.*

At the same time, indirect speech acts reduce the categorical nature of the statement somewhat. Saying “I’m not deaf” or “you’re disturbing others” to a student encourages him or her to not shout out the answer and suggests that they might be preventing others from learning and should therefore behave in a more disciplined manner:

*Ihr braucht die Antworten nicht zu rufen, ich bin nicht schwerhörig.*

*Du störst die anderen.*

Noise is without question one of the most irritating factors in a lesson. As a result, the means of speech used to ask or tell the students to be quiet are extremely diverse. The teacher may say, for example, that the noise is so loud that it is impossible to work, using the lexemes *Lärm*, *Krach*, and *laut*:

*Was ist denn das für ein Lärm?*

*Müsst ihr solchen Krach machen?*

*Macht nicht so viel Lärm / Krach.*

*Ihr seid so laut, man versteht sein eigenes Wort nicht mehr!*

The teacher requires silence in lessons, and, as such, uses the lexemes *Ruhe*, *Aufmerksamkeit*, and *leise*, as well as adverbs, pronouns and adjectives *ein bisschen*, *etwas mehr*, and *absolut* to indicate the degree of silence:

*Etwas mehr Ruhe, damit wir anfangen können.*

*Darf ich um etwas Ruhe bitten?*

*Ich warte darauf, dass hier endlich Ruhe ist!*

*Wir fangen nicht eher an, als bis ihr ruhig seid.*

*Absolute Ruhe bitte, damit wir weiterarbeiten können!*

*Darf ich um Aufmerksamkeit bitten?*

*Geht das ein bisschen leiser? Da fallen einem ja die Ohren ab!*

The use of indirect speech allows the teacher to diversify the ways in which he or she calls for silence, and their impact is enhanced when utilized in combination with irony and paradoxical statements (“with your permission”; “could you listen to me, for a change”)

*Darf ich – mit eurer Erlaubnis – anfangen?*

*Könntet ihr zur Abwechslung auch einmal mir zuhören? Danke für eure Aufmerksamkeit!*

Tardiness is also a frequent violation of discipline for which students are reprimanded. Along with the neutrally coloured indication of the student’s frequent lateness through the use of the softening modal word *mal* and the adverb *wieder*, the teacher can express extreme dissatisfaction, using, for example colloquial lexemes (*trödeln*), or accusing the latecomer of deception or lying about why they were late:

*Du bist mal wieder zu spät.*

*Ihr kommt aus der Turnhalle? Erzählt mir keine Geschichten, ihr habt getrödeln*

### **Verbalization of the Intentions Behind Praising Students**

Another important aspect of the communicative interaction between teacher and student in German-language schools is praise from the teacher. Just like criticism, praise can be directed at individual actions and behaviours. Praise typically focuses on the quality of answers given in class or the quality of written work produced and may be in relation to such aspects as creativity of ideas, accuracy of wording, or compelling argumentation. Students may also be commended for the diligence and social competencies.

When a student gives an incomplete, or not entirely accurate, answer, the teacher may in some cases prefer to point out the student’s mistakes only indirectly and emphasize his or her progress. In this case, the teacher employs such linguistic means



as adverbs denoting gradation (*fast, ein wenig, viel, wesentlich*) in combination with adjectives and phraseological units that are conceptual metaphors of direction, for example *auf dem richtigen Weg*:

*Diesmal war es fast richtig.*

*Das war schon ein wenig / viel / wesentlich besser.*

*Du bist auf dem richtigen Weg.*

When the student gives a perfect answer, the teacher using various gradations of the adjective *richtig* (*ganz, vollkommen*), or uses a compound with the component *gold-*, which gives their words the conceptual and metaphorical meaning of “excellent” or “fantastic,” while also using contextual synonyms. For example:

*Richtig. So ist es ganz richtig / vollkommen richtig. Da liegst du goldrichtig.*

*Genau. Stimmt (vollkommen).*

Assessing the quality of an answer or written assignment, the teacher may use adjectives that carry the meaning “excellent” or “exceptional,” as well as the phrase *mit Abstand* to denote gradation and the noun *Spitze* in the figurative meaning of “excellent”:

*Wunderbar! Ausgezeichnet! Einwandfrei!*

*Das ist eine hervorragende Antwort / mit Abstand die beste Antwort.*

*Das ist eine gelungene / großartige / vorzügliche / ausgezeichnete Arbeit.*

*Das ist Spitze!*

Beyond praising the student’s answers and/or their written work, the teacher can praise the student and note their progress or improved results in the given subject using various adjectives of gradation (*gute, enorme*), an intensifier (*rundherum*), the adjective *dick* in the figurative sense, emotionally charged adjectives (*erstaunliche, erfreuliche*) and nouns (*Anerkennung, Glückwunsch*), and the fixed phrase *Spaß machen* to express the teacher’s joy, satisfaction and admiration for the student’s success. For example:

*Du machst gute / enorme / erstaunliche / erfreuliche Fortschritte. Weiter so!*

*Ein dickes Lob für dich.*

*Meine Anerkennung! Mein Glückwunsch!*

*Ich bin mit deinen Leistungen rundherum zufrieden.*

*Es macht Spaß, wenn man eine so gute Arbeit in die Hand bekommt.*

The teacher can also use indirect speech acts that express not only the correctness, but also the utmost accuracy of the student’s answer as a way to praise the student, which could suggest that that the student prepared diligently for the lesson:

*Das ist genau das, was ich hören wollte.*

*Besser hätte ich es auch nicht sagen können!*

In addition to expressing general praise for the student’s performance, the teacher can also highlight certain aspects of his or her answer, for example, the absence of even a single error, the creativity and originality of their ideas, the preciseness of the language used, the persuasiveness of the argumentation, etc. In the corpus of sentences we analysed, for example, we found instances of the use of adjectives with the meaning

of infallibility or flawlessness, such as *fehlerfrei* and *einwandfrei*, as well as intensifiers such as the adjective *einzig*, to praise the written work or oral response of students that did not contain any mistakes:

*Die Arbeit ist fehlerfrei / einwandfrei.*

*Du hast keinen einzigen Fehler gemacht.*

In the following examples, the adjectives *interessant*, *bemerkenswert*, *vortrefflich*, *treffend* and *eigen* are used to say that the student's ideas are original and worthy of attention:

*Deine Beispiele sind interessant / treffend gewählt.*

*Das ist eine bemerkenswerte / vortreffliche Idee.*

*Erfreulich war, / dass sie auch eigene Vorschläge einbrachte.*

The adjectives *sehr schön* and *klar*, as well as the phraseological units *auf den Punkt bringen* and *den Nagel auf den Kopf treffen*, are used to praise answers that are particularly clear in terms of their wording:

*Sie haben das sehr schön und klar formuliert.*

*Sie haben die Sache auf den Punkt gebracht.*

*Das trifft den Nagel auf den Kopf.*

In the corpus of texts we looked at, teachers tend to praise well-reasoned and compelling arguments using the participle *überzeugend* and the adjectives *klug* and *vernünftig*, reinforcing their meaning with the adverb *sehr*:

*Das klingt überzeugend.*

*Ich finde, du hast da sehr klug argumentiert.*

*Was du sagst, hört sich sehr vernünftig an.*

## Conclusion

Our analysis of the speech behaviour of teachers in German classrooms demonstrated that an extensive range of linguistic tools are used to implement the intention to criticize or praise students, the main function of which is gradation, that is, to increase or decrease the semantic and emotional significance of the components of an utterance. Teachers use adverbs of degree of action, as well as other nominations – nouns, adjectives and participles that act as conceptual metaphors (ABOVE–BELOW, FAR–CLOSE, MORE–LESS, FULL–EMPTY, and others) – to implement this function. The deliberate use of nominations refers students to conceptual metaphors in the form of designated oppositions and forces them to associate their failures and successes to one of the poles in those oppositions. When criticizing students' work, the teacher tries to organize his or her speech behaviour in such a way as to create a contrast between the assessment of the students' school performance and existing ideas about successful learning. At the same time, the teacher expresses their despondence at the poor performance of their students. When praising students, the teacher selects linguistic tools that indicate the students are acting in accordance with accepted norms, and to demonstrate their satisfaction with the students' performance.

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