Geist

This bulletin was written somewhere between Switzerland, Scotland and Serbia by a native English-speaker who frequently finds herself operating in that liminal space between languages. The author would like to thank Axel Humpert and Tine Melzer for help with the German language text.

Cover set in Fette Fraktur, designed by Johann Christian Bauer, 1850

Mastering a language is like building a mechanical horse. You must first assemble a structure, slowly fill it in with many thousands of finely calibrated and interrelated cogs, then learn to steer it well if you're to give off the illusion of naturalistic movement. For German, with all its linguistic mechanics, the metaphor is particularly apt. My own **Pferd** can, as yet, only manage a clunky limp. **Ich habe schon Pferde kotzen sehen** literally means "I've seen horses puke," and is a proverb used to express that something impossible has occurred — similar to the English proverb "pigs might fly." It is both a summation of how I feel about ever mastering the German tongue and a good example of the kind of language games that sustain me in that process.

Like any beleaguered student of German, I spend a lot of time perusing the user-generated online dictionary leo.org, a veritable *wunderkammer* for German learners. Apart from anything else, it offers approximate translations of common sayings. So when you type "The grass is always greener," you get the German equivalent, which is **die Kirschen in Nachbars Garten schmecken immer ein bisschen süsser**, or "The cherries in your neighbor's garden always taste that little bit sweeter." "Not the sharpest tool in the box" becomes **nicht die hellste Kerze auf der Torte**, or "not the brightest candle on the cake." Then there are some nice German proverbs that we lack in English: **nah am Wasser gebaut** means "built close to the water," and describes someone who is easily moved to tears. Or **auf dem Zahnfleisch gehen**, which translates as "to walk on your gums," describes a feeling of severe depletion and desperation. In English one could talk about being "brought to one's knees," but how much more viscerally disturbing to be "brought to one's gums." And so on. Every so often, leo.org will toss up a wonderfully absurd confluence of maxims, like the German phrase **erzähl mir keine Märchen**, which simply means "Don't tell me fairy-tales," but for which one leo.org user gives the English equivalent as "Don't piss on my back and tell me it's raining."

There is a droll but dumb saying attributed to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, which goes: "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." Presumably this selfsame emperor spoke Latin to his genetic abnormality specialist, but the statement does capture something of the biases that characterize the major European languages. You need a dogged discipline to master German, yet once

you have all the pieces in place, German advances a more controlled articulatory style than English with its verbose effusions. This makes it famously good for capturing the fumes given off by complex psychological states, though the German tongue is a minefield of potential mistakes for any budding jockey, as one contends with three genders; four cases, each with their respective adjective declination; verbs that saw themselves in two; reflexive verbs; and compound nouns so letterful they strike fear into the heart of any dyslexic, my favorite being **Verbesserungsvorschlagsversammlung**, which means "an assembly for suggestions for improvement."

In his essay "The Awful German Language," Mark Twain quips that, "I would rather decline two drinks than one German adjective." He complains (rightfully so) that the personal pronoun **Sie** can mean you, she, her, it, they, or them. And then in his famously curmudgeonly tone, Twain concludes, "a gifted person ought to learn English in thirty hours, French in thirty days and German in thirty years." By this measure, I am one-tenth along my way to learning German, still half a lifetime from that dreamed-of moment when German listeners won't need to politely stifle winces while I mangle their language, and I will finally claim full control of my horse.

We have no polite form for addressing strangers or elders in English. For the most part we are forgiven our indiscretions, but that doesn't make it any less mortifying to realize you've just used **du** with someone's grandma — the equivalent of greeting her for the first time with a high-five. My paranoia at making mistakes induces mild Tourette's syndrome. I try so hard to say the right thing that the wrong thing inevitably comes tripping out. I mix up certain profanities with their more mundane phonetic doppelgängers. Words that have caused me particular angst are **Fotze** (cunt) and **Pfütze** (puddle). I have found myself warning small children "not to step in that cunt," much to my horror and their amusement. I also have problems with **wichsen** (to masturbate) and **wechseln** (to change), which once resulted in me asking a checkout lady, "Could you masturbate that for me?" On the flipside, two of my favorite anecdotes about German-speakers misusing English are the German art history professor who kept referring to the Trinity as "the holy threesome" and one from my stint teaching English to German children in which a particularly precocious

pony-club girl announced that she liked to "ride whores," when of course she meant "horses."

When I moved to Germany in 2008, one of the first things that struck me about German popular culture was their prolific consumption of detective fiction. *Krimis*, as they are called, are ubiquitous. German bookshelves and television channels are laden with Krimis. Once a week, millions of Germans ritually sit down and watch the feature-length police show *Tatort* (crime scene), which has been running since 1970. Several Germans I've met have been eager to discuss with an English-speaker their love of Miss Marple, Colombo, and Hercule Poirot. I asked a German friend of mine why she thought the modern German imagination was so captivated by detective fiction. Her answer was two-fold. She explained that, on the one hand, Germany is emerging from a dense trauma that has involved years of penetrating soul-searching for the answers as to how they allowed the horrors that were perpetrated under fascism to occur. In her opinion, just being German is confusing, so of course they enjoy mysteries that resolve themselves with a neat pirouette of the plot: murder is solved, bad guys get what they deserve, etc. But her second reason was even more intriguing: "Some people say we love a good crime story because in German we put our verbs at the end, so you always have to wait until the end of the sentence to find out how a thought resolves itself." She claimed there is a basic suspense built into the syntax. Linguistic anthropologists call this "syntactic iconicity," and it refers to the natural resemblance between syntactic structure and the conceptual structure in people's minds. In other words, the shape of your thoughts is reflected in your means for expressing those thoughts.

Apparently, when Alzheimer's disease sets in, the last facet of language one loses is syntax. As nouns decay, one's sentences maintain their structure but become void of articulated objects, like empty trains. If German is your native language, then, do you experience Alzheimer's differently? If your trains-of-thought are traveling towards (not away) from the verb, is it easier for you to preserve the momentum of your sentences for longer?

One should caution against the temptation to take linguistic anthropology too far. No one would suggest that English, as one of the world's most

word-heavy languages, inflicts a systemic dyslogia, or overwhelming glut of lexical possibilities, on those who use it to express themselves. Yet there are some prejudicial theories that Nazism was aided and abetted by the language itself, that German, with its reverence for order and clarity, somehow mirrored the systematic and clinical cruelty of the Nazis. In fact, the opposite is true. The Nazification of German involved the implementation of textbook Orwellian doublespeak — the creation of new, euphemistic ways of discussing their special brand of methodological brutality. To give two obvious examples: **sonderbehandlung**, which means "special treatment," was their euphemism for execution; and **Endlösung** — "final solution." But in a subtler way, they also reassigned words with new meanings. Victor Klemperer, a Jewish linguist protected from the camps by his non-Jewish wife, made a famous study of the language of the Third Reich. He observed how they manipulated the simple word **aufziehen**, which means "to wind up something mechanical," but which can also be used pejoratively, as in English, to talk about winding up a person. The Nazis used it without this pejorative association simply to indicate how something was "set up." Klemperer sees the misappropriation as symptomatic of the Nazis' tendency to swamp the language with mechanistic expressions, an attempt to realize their industrial utopian vision.

German is, in fact, a highly emotional language, with single words to describe states of mind for which we have to collate entire sentences in English. One could go so far as to say German is the language for empathy, with a litany of words to express different kinds of pain — both your own pain and the pain you feel on behalf of someone else. When you apologize to someone, the stock phrase is **es tut mir leid**, which translates literally as "it pains me." You take your transgression upon yourself as a source of suffering. German has the word **Weltschmerz**, which is a depression caused by the disjunction between how you would ideally like the world to be and the way you actually experience it. Then there is the word **Lebensmüde**, which I once saw translated as "world-weary," but which is much more dramatic than that. It's more of a nihilistic abandon. They have not one but two words for "processing one's history in order to come to terms with the past:" **Vergangenheitsbewältigung** and **Geschichtsaufarbeitung**. There are no fewer than seven words for "sympathy" — **das Beleid, das Mitgefühl, das Mitleid, das Verständnis, die Teilnahme, die Anteilnahme**, and **die Zuneigung**. **Fremdschämen** is

"the shame you feel on behalf of another." There are so many different types of shame in German, shame is characterized as an exposed piece of skin or an unhealed sore. I once read a warning sign on the side of an art exhibit intended to indicate that it might cause offense, which had been translated as "some viewers may find this hurts their sense of shame."

Indeed, German seems to proliferate words for the most important things. There are eight words that mean "create" — **erschaffen**, **erzeugen**, **anlegen**, **entwerfen**, **erstellen**, **gestalten**, **gründern** and **kreieren**. Yet each one of these words also has another meaning, investing creativity in each respective activity. **Erschaffen** also means "fabricate;" **erzeugen** means "manufacture;" **anlagen** means "construct;" **entwerfern** is "to design;" **gestalten** can also mean "to carve," and so on. In English, these are words for processes, often mechanized, which we do not necessarily associate with unbridled ingenuity. In this sense, German has the concepts of inventiveness and inspiration built into its mechanical language in a way that English doesn't.

"Onomatopoeic" in German is **lautmalerisch**, which, with that deft Teutonic logic, literally means "painterly sounds." They have different spellings for those purely onomatopoeic words that convey the sound of animal noises: "woof woof" becomes **wau wau**, and "baa" becomes **mäh**, and "cock-a-doodle-do" becomes **kik-e-riki**. English is again outdone by the German **das Gewieher**, which is not just a horse's neigh but a horse's laugh.

But for the German learner, **die Lautmalerei** takes on an entirely new role. When learning a new word for the first time, you turn it around in your mouth to combine the sense and the sound so that the word sticks. My memory is a moving target. Some days it soaks up everything I hurl its way. Other days, I can feel the new words come unstuck from my brain like the cheap post-it notes they're written on. By this process, I have found that onomatopoeia works both for and against me. Some words sound like what they are: "jagged" is **gezackt**, "sudden" is **plötzlich**, **Schluckauf** is "hiccup." Some other words, it seems, take ages to learn because (to my English ear) they just don't sound like what they are. **Grausam** means "cruelty," but to me it sounds way too soft. "Kill" is **umbringen**, which sounds far too helpful. **Verhaftung**, which means "arrest," sounds too affectionate. It took me ages to come to grips with

the word **das Schicksal**, which means "destiny." I kept hearing "chic-sal," and this always evoked a mirrored salon. In the end, I conflated the two by imagining a drag queen named Destiny dancing beneath a giant glitterball on an empty dance floor.

One thought has sustained me through endless hours of tedious language classes and pages of infantilizing or otherwise banal textbooks. In the words of Goethe, "He who does not know another language does not know his own." I have become fascinated with the intersections and divergences of English and German. For instance the word **Glück** means both "luck" and "happiness." Linking these two concepts in one word fundamentally changes the idea of both, as each acts upon the metaphorical import of the other. For German speakers, one is lucky to be happy. Happiness, like good fortune, is susceptible to the vagaries of fate and is therefore precious. Similarly, the notion of luck is somehow more humane, less about gambling to win, more about just having everything you need to lead a happy life.

There are also many words built along similar metaphorical lines in both languages. "Artificial" in German is **künstlich** — the word for "art" in both languages has become the word for something wholly manmade. Similarly, "discover" in German is **entdecken** (**die Decke** is a blanket). To discover a new particle or place on the map in both languages is bound up in the idea of "uncovering" something that was already there. In this sense, all knowledge is a gradual process of enlightenment (**Erleuchtung**). Or, take **Drucken**, which in German means "to print" or "to impress." A printer is a **Druckerei**, but — similar to English — ideas are also "impressions" (**Eindrücke**), and one literally can be "impressed" by something (**beeindruckt**). In this sense, the idea or the thing is stamped into one's mind. One uses these commonplace words without thinking of their dormant conceptual-metaphorical import, but seeing them in a foreign language renews their strangeness in one's own tongue.

Frankly, some German words are just better than ours. Take "slow-motion," which in German is **die Zeitlupe**, literally "a time-magnifying-glass." **Die Stimmung**, which comes from **Stimme**, meaning "voice," translates as "atmosphere," "mood," and can refer to a piece of music or to a place — as though every space has a voice for which we are the

echo chambers, a metaphorical acoustics where place resonates within us. German also has myriad words for which we have no translation. **Verschlimmbessern** is when you try to make something better and end up making it worse. **Schmunzeln** is somewhere between a secret smile and a knowing look. **Rausch** is a word for the elated buzz you get off alcohol or any other stimulating substance, which is also related to the word for the white noise that comes from an untuned radio. The word **gemütlich** is a wonderful synthesis of warm, cozy and comfortable, plus jovial and unhurried, all at once.

Ein Feingeist, a "refined spirit" is a word for a sophisticated and elegant gentleman (or lady), and is bound up in the many-faceted word **Geist** which means variously: mind, spirit, soul, ghost, intellect, phantom and psyche. In some cases, German has many words for one thing, but **Geist** is one word in which many things again become metaphorically conjoined. Madness is **Geisteskrank**; enthusiastic is **begeistert**; to inspire is **begeistern**; the humanities are **Geisteswissenschaften**; and we all know the word **Zeitgeist**. **Geist** encapsulates the alchemy of persona that constitutes our fundamental humanity, of the Cartesian split between thinking and being—a way of imagining how our subjective souls haunt our earthly bodies, and we receive new ideas into those bodies like mysterious guests.

For all the German vocabulary I've acquired, I still cannot get my head around the gendering of nouns. Germans have told me that the sex of a word bears no relation to the word itself. You just have to think of its gender as being part of the way the word is spelled. Certainly, there is no real rhyme or reason to the way words are gendered, but gender undoubtedly plays a role in our relationship with a word, adding some kind of synaesthetic layer to the noun. A gendered word becomes cross-pollinated with our associations about gender. To give some examples of this, heaven (**Himmel**), angel (**Engel**), devil (**Teufel**), and god (**Gott**) are male. Sin (**Sünde**) is female, and so is snake (**Schlange**), but then, so are love (**Liebe**), and knowledge (**Erkenntnis**), and soul (**Seele**). A sexist (**Sexist**) is male, as is an idiot (**Idiot**) but so, too, is a pioneer (**Pioner**) and a savior (**Heiland**). Peace (**Friede**), war (**Krieg**), and holocaust (**Holocaust**) are male, and past (**Vergangenheit**), present (**Gegenwart**), and future (**Zukunft**) are female. A curve (**Kurve**) is female, but an angle (**Betrachtungswinkel**) is male. Liquid (**Flüssigkeit**) is female, and

solid (**Stoff**) is male. Gaze (**Blick**) is male, but evil (**Übel**), and crime (**Verbrechen**), and victim (**Opfer**) are all neutral, as is genius (**Genie**). The gender does not explicitly alter the word, but you can see just from these examples that age-old gender associations, whether mythical or material, undoubtedly persist in the division of nouns.

I comfort myself at the angst-inducing complexities of the language by thinking of them less as useless affectations designed to make the non-native weep, and more as poetic vehicles that change the color and contrast of the language in ways English cannot. I have come to think of declining adjectives as a form of poetic possession. A noun will lay claim to the words around it, color a sentence with its presence. Verbs that separate themselves, pushing the prefix to the end, turn the sentence into a mythical beast with the head of one animal and the tail of another. They also mean that you cannot effectively interrupt a German mid-sentence since you have to wait until the very end of the sentence to hear the second part of the verb in order to know exactly which hybrid creature you are contending with.

The reflexive verb — another item we don't have in English — is most extraordinary of all. Certain verbs are reflexive because you do them to yourself, like comb your hair (**sich kämmen**), or put on make-up (**sich schminken**). But then there are verbs that are reflexive in more abstract ways — ways that alter the very nature of subjectivity. These reflexive verbs turn the self into a medium through which actions must pass. In English we merely remember things, but in German it's **sich erinnern**. You "remember yourself" things, which makes remembering an act of consciously passing every episode through the lens of the speaking subject. Similarly, the verb "decide" in German is **sich entscheiden**. This gives a whole new level of agency to the verb; it removes the verb from abstract space and roots it firmly in the self. You cannot decide something without "deciding yourself" of it. German also gives self-directed agency to primal impulses like **sich fürchten**, meaning "to be afraid." Fear becomes something you do to yourself, not something real that is inflicted upon you, but rather a phantom of your own making. Similarly, in the case of love, Germans do not passively "fall" in love. Love is not some cliff they stumble over haplessly. In German, it is **sich verlieben**, which is difficult to render in English as we are so well-accustomed to spontaneously "falling off"

romantic precipices. In German, you "love yourself someone." Love is a deliberate state that you put yourself into over someone. It is a conscious ecstasy.

The last and rather simple point to be made about the beauty of the German language is one of sound, not sense. When someone tells me they find German ugly or harsh to listen to — a common prejudice amongst the British — I ask them if they have ever tried speaking it. For someone with a mouth habituated to English, German words feel very good. There's something about the sounds the words require, the movements they necessitate a tongue to make. The words have a sharpness to them, they fill your mouth in a way much more satisfying than trying to wrap English teeth around the rolling r's and pouting vowels of French. I have heard classical singers claim that German is phonetically the best language to sing because the shape of the words leaves space for breath, and therefore song. The words are easy to sing *through.* At the end of his essay, Twain, too, concedes, "There are German songs which can make a stranger to the language cry. That shows that the sound of the words is correct — it interprets the meanings with truth and with exactness; and so the ear is informed, and through the ear, the heart."

I recently attempted to read my favorite novel, *Gulliver's Travels*, in German. At the end, Gulliver encounters the Houyhnhnms (an onomatopoeic rendering of a horse's neigh), a tribe of talking horses who, in Swift's satire of humanity, represent a prelapsarian version of mankind. The word Houyhnhnm to them means both "horse" and "the perfection of nature." Gulliver greatly admires their language for its "grace and significance," and its ability to express the passions well. He struggles to do justice to it in "our barbarous English." He likens this ideal horse-speak to High-Dutch or German. He even refers to the same quote from Charles V, but the implication is not that the emperor speaks German to horses to command them better, but that horses themselves speak German because German is the best language for expressing their perfect and rational nature. This is perhaps the reason why, when we want to use a proverb to express a truth, we talk about having heard a thing "straight from the horse's mouth," one proverb that does not seem to exist in German.

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