

“The Awful German Language”

Mark Twain’s most famous ethnocentric essay revisited and updated

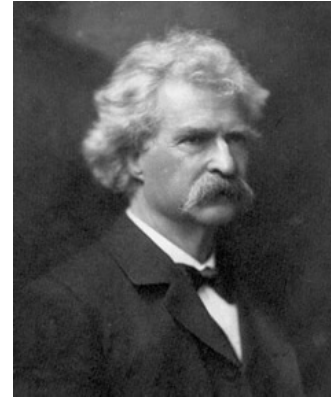
by Patrick Schmidt

One can learn much about the thinking and perception of a culture through the study of its language. That is exactly what Mark Twain did back in 1879 while learning German in Heidelberg. His hilarious essay “The Awful German Language” was an immediate hit worldwide and paradoxically, it was most popular in German-speaking countries. Remembering my own surprises while trying to become proficient in German, I felt that his brilliant study of German logic deserved to be updated.

Many people wanting to learn German as a foreign language have absolutely no idea what the proverb “*Deutsche Sprache, schwere Sprache*” really means. For the foreign student trying to master this language, it often seems like a mysterious logic of communication designed to go against every rule of good common sense.

For example, to be taken seriously in the German language, one needs to conceal the meaning of a sentence by placing the main verb at the very end. Read the following excerpt (literally translated) from a recent newspaper article:

“The government announced today, that the Finance Minister the new income tax system because of its new format with a self fill-in procedure, which many outside observers it fairer describe, and its simpler write off system, already in other European countries applied, from the first of January of the new year introduced be will”.



Although it is supposed to be eloquent, it sounds more like Teutonic verse gone amok, leaving the foreign reader both confused and stunned.

This may explain why Germans have a tic, “temporary paralysis”, frequently noticed by foreigners. It seems when Germans are listening to someone, they are intensely waiting for the speaker to tell them the last word. And when it is finally announced, you see an expression of climactic relief on their faces. However, should the iPhone ring or the baby start crying before the verb arrives, they often miss the meaning of the sentence. Then the poor German is left hanging with a large, incomplete sentence in his head, frustrated in not knowing what was said.

This obsession with the verb at the end leads to comical situations. Imagine the following. A young man, let us call him Hans, is declaring his love to a young woman. The phrase “*Ich habe mich in dich verliebt*” goes something like this: “Gretchen, my feelings are so strong that I for the reasons of the beauty of your eyes, your little rosebud mouth, your thoroughly-trained, sporty body and last but not least your sexy Marlene Dietrich voice, with you in love fallen have.” Unfortunately, Gretchen had to answer the ringing doorbell midway through this rambling discourse, and never heard the magic verb. Tragedy strikes again.

But if that isn’t bad enough, the German language com-

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Donaudampfschiffahrts- gesellschaftskapitän

The Awful German Language

— continued

pounds the problem with the large number of verbs. The general rule, as far as I can make out, is the more the merrier. Therefore, German sentences have lots of “*haben sind gewesen gehabt worden können geworden sein.*” It really sounds like a musical merry-go-around, allowing Germans to make themselves sound self-important, but it is not supposed to be taken at all seriously.

Even more awkward is the German habit of putting many words into one. The words “*Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän*” or “*Endbindungsstationsschwesternaufenthaltsraum*” are gigantic, mumbo-jumbo sayings, whose sole function is to terrify the unfortunate foreign language student into thinking that the learning of German is a hopeless cause from the very beginning!

The German language’s handling of the gender, or how nouns are classified according to sex, is total chaos. Take, for example, the noun *Sonne* (sun), which symbolizes power, destruction, force. For some inexplicable reason, it has the feminine gender *die*. The noun *Mond* (moon), on the other hand, which is the symbol of tranquility, intuition and passivity is given the masculine gender *der*.

But the biggest surprise is the classification of the nouns ‘young girl’ and ‘heart’, which are given the neutral gender *das*, presumably to indicate that they are not supposed to



The first page of Mark Twain’s German book. Little did he know how difficult it would become to master the language.

have any sex at all! How the poor foreign student is able to detect logic in this ridiculous classification system is beyond me.

However, the ultimate tragedy of a language system gone mad are the word endings. When someone wishes to express something in German, each part of the sentence must first be thoroughly analysed, so that the word endings have proper inflections. To understand the system requires a monumental intellectual effort that only a masochistic genius might want to attempt. Take the simple phrase “the big hamburger”, which in German is “*der grosse Hamburger*”. If this is in the accusative case, then it becomes “*den grossen Hamburger*”. Using the preposition “with”, it changes to the dative and the endings change - “*mit dem grossen Hamburger*”. “The catsup of the big hamburger” is the genitive case or the possessive, which in German is “*der Ketchup des grossen Hamburgers*”.

At this point, the person attempting to speak German begins to feel a sense of numb horror. But dealing with the plural is even worse, further traumatizing the already linguistically battered student. Rather than to continue tormenting your mind, it is better to enter a MacDonald’s restaurant in Germany and give your order for a big hamburger in plain simple English than to stumble around in this grammatical hodge podge.

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