

## LANGUAGE CULTURE AND STYLE – SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

The increasing influence of English on other languages

When looking at the way we speak and write today, I personally think that we should take care more of our cultural language heritage. Although this assertion is directed more at other European languages that nowadays have to deal with the reality of an ever more present and intrusive English, the very same influence that English exerts on many other tongues has a somewhat negative return on English itself. The many “localized” versions of an English language, having now become the international “lingua franca” of the whole world, do have the power to gradually alter and erode the once solid language base of native English speakers, although it is obvious that a far more visible effect is observed in the influence that English has on languages with which it coexists today, a fact that is perhaps not so well known to native English speakers.

This is best seen in the realm of the digital, where a special subset of English has undoubtedly conquered the whole world. There are some slightly desperate moves in France by the French Academy to reign in the near total dominance of English vocabulary in that field, by replacing common computer terms like “download”, “software” or “byte” with artificially construed and state-enforced terms like “**télécharger**”, “**logiciel**” and “**octet**”, respectively. In my opinion that is a misguided policy, because those terms have already become universally accepted, and no intervention by any state will change that. The same goes for a large swathe of business, economic and science terms, and in a globalized world this process should be accepted by everyone.

Things are different though when English expressions are incorporated into other languages in an unwarranted manner, just because it has become fashionable or chic in many countries to replace native words and expressions with English synonyms or alternatives.

This may and does indeed happen via dubbed versions of American TV serials, poorly corrected machine translations, or internet videos, leading to the curious but real phenomenon that some English usage has already spilled over into other languages and is continuing to do so at an ever-faster pace.

If the current rate of replacing words and expressions continues unabated, **some countries may at some point end up with a kind of localized “Pidgin English”**, mixed with the native tongue and adapted to the linguistic needs of the environment and the place concerned.

Such an outcome to me personally does not seem desirable, because it would mean that schoolchildren in the affected countries would neither learn their own language or English properly. On the other hand, it may be convincingly argued that languages are like living organisms, and will go their own way anyhow. And to expect politicians to interfere with those processes, raises the spectre of non-democratic forms of government. So in the end it's up to people themselves if they think it's OK how their languages evolve.

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## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GERMAN AND ENGLISH:

The main difference between German and English is that the former appears and probably is better structured and more logical in its composition. Nevertheless, and contrary to what grammar books teach us, even German sometimes exhibits certain ways of saying that deviate from grammatical rules.

(For example the phrase: "My gift comes from the heart (in the sense of: is sincere)" in German becomes: "Mein Geschenk kommt von Herzen", instead of "vom (von + dem) Herzen", breaking the rule of the dative after the preposition "von". Instead, if I were to make a sentence, like: "starting from the heart, the disease spread to other parts of the body", the rule applies: "Vom Herzen ausgehend, weitete sich die Krankheit auf andere Teile des Körpers aus". Putting "von" in this case, would be a plain grammatical error, whereas the above "von" is part of a fixed saying. The explanation is that the saying has been shortened, leaving out an adjective that carried the dative ending: von ganzem Herzen = from the whole heart, as in the common expression: "Ich danke Dir von ganzem Herzen" / I thank you with all my heart)

Like English, German has undergone many changes, and paradoxically, the most difficult German for the student is not found in the times of Goethe and Schiller, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was fashionable to construct long and winding sentences that are neither good style, nor really necessary to express even more complex content. It is precisely those snake-like monsters that are most feared by those who learn higher-level German as a foreign language. The authors obviously copied the style of neoclassical Latin, in which this way of sentence-building was considered normal. Those constructions, where a group of words is imbedded in another phrasal construction, and so on, like in a Russian Matryoshka doll, often extend over the length of half a page or more, before an eagerly awaited full stop puts a temporary end to the suffering of the unexperienced reader.

It was only in the post-war years that German took on its modern form. Therefore, those who learn German as a foreign language should be aware of the fact that the German of famous "modern" writers such as Thomas Mann actually at least in part still reflects the language of the authors' parents and teachers. This was the German of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which featured many Latin, French and even Italian words. In fact, Italian was a highly valued language in Goethe's Germany, and it was almost an obligation for educated people to know some Italian. Today, however, Italian has acquired the reputation of being a somewhat capricious language that is difficult to learn.

So for instance in German-speaking countries, Spanish has now taken the place of Italian, due also to the popularity of modern "Latino" music, especially among younger people.

### **GRAMMAR**

In English, on the other hand, it is my personal opinion that the main purpose of modern grammar teaching seems to be to make life hard for those learning English.

Before English grammars adopted the rigid systems of German grammarians, things were simpler, but also less structured. Since the early 20th century, German linguists and grammarians increasingly played a decisive role in the development of English grammars. But in practice, native English speakers don't care much about grammar, and it is somewhat difficult to understand for non-English speakers that the so-called "usage", constituting the real and everyday use of language, is far more important than in other tongues.

An example: Something like "before my website is up and running ...", being a common expression in the IT sphere, is not exactly an example for precise grammar in action. So, the flipside of all those beautiful grammar books is that they don't teach students what expressions are really used in everyday English, but instead overstate the importance of certain grammar rules. If someone is really interested in improving his or her knowledge of written English, this is best done by reading well-known modern authors, in my personal opinion.

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## [A note on the evolution of modern English and German](#)

It should also be remembered that modern English goes back to a large extent to William Tyndale's translation of the bible. Tyndale succeeded in laying the base of modern English, starting out from a maze of diverse dialects, just as the reformer Martin Luther did for the German language.

Today, the influence of Tyndale and Luther on the modern vernacular is regularly understated, probably because their linguistic achievements are seen to be linked to religion. But in the final analysis, it is a purely linguistic phenomenon that can be explained by the incredibly rapid (and mostly illegal) dissemination of printed bibles among the population.

And those bibles weren't just stuffed away somewhere to gather dust, but were intensively read, and thus had a decisive influence on the language of the everyday speaker. Before the invention of printing, books had to be written by hand on parchment or the even more precious vellum, and were therefore prohibitively expensive, and totally beyond the reach of the common citizen. In addition they were commissioned either by the Church or by representatives of the state, and thus had little or no influence on the vernacular, especially since they were almost all written in Latin and could therefore only be read by a select few.

### Changes in modern English, translating into English from Italian or German

Nowadays, it is a fact that the Standard English of yesteryear is slowly changing and is being replaced by a large number of localised subsets of English spread all over the world. To illustrate this change, take the famous British Broadcasting Corporation: Until the 1980s, the BBC's international service had virtually no "Ethnic Speakers", as I may call them here. In practice, that meant that a newsreader with a strong Gaelic or Indian accent, just to give an example, could and would not work in the BBC's external service.

In the last 20 years this has completely changed, and now it's the speakers with the pure "King's English" that are in the minority, while "Ethnic Speakers" make up the majority (except in the news), thus reflecting the multi-ethnic reality of modern Britain. This situation has created a certain disadvantage for the student of English, as it has become more difficult to learn the standard pronunciation or "British accent", which can be heard only in certain areas of society today. That may be the price that English has to pay for becoming the universal language of the globe, a place Latin once held for the "old world".

Probably due to television, the differences between American and British English are also getting smaller, thinking of the many American TV serials being broadcast in their original soundtrack for at least half a century.

Some basic differences will certainly remain, like the different spelling of words with "s" for "c", as in: US: defense, UK: defence; or "o" for "ou"; " as in US: color, UK: colour; or US: gray, UK: grey, to name but a few. Of course there are real linguistic differences, but in published or scientific texts these are marginal. The biggest differences are to be found in the language people use every day.

Finally, one should mention certain pitfalls in the translation process that often generate embarrassing mistakes. For example, the native Italian speaker has the tendency to translate an Italian word with Latin roots (as most are) directly into English, if a similar word with the same Latin root exists in English! This can cause serious errors, and Italian speakers should remember how their own students of Latin are constantly confronted with words that have changed their meaning during their transformation into modern Italian. Naturally the same effect can be observed in English, so it is quite normal that words originating from the Latin have often taken on a completely different meaning with respect to their Italian counterparts.

The German native speaker, on the other hand, is often tempted to translate German phrasal elements or idiomatic phrases directly into English, and this method also produces very "impressive" usage errors. Here is a typical example: Translating the German "Das / es geht nicht" into "that does not go" simply produces an ill-defined and uncommon expression in English, although being grammatically correct. In the sense of something not working it should be "that / it does not work", in the sense of "something is not permitted" it should read: "that's not OK, you mustn't do that", etc.

So it is precisely simple everyday phrases which are most likely to be translated erroneously by the German speaker unaware of those risks.

Sometimes European or continental speakers feel free to invent new „English“ words that either do not exist or already have another meaning. Take the popular German equivalent for mobile or cell phone, the ubiquitous “Handy”, a word that baffled many a business partner, interlocutor or acquaintance not familiar with that particular term. Or think of the “body bag” as a fashion accessory, undoubtedly thought up by some continental designer who simply ignored the less glamorous down-to-earth meaning of that composite word.

On the other hand, English speakers seem to have a talent for coining words for more awkward objects like “bag for dog’s excrements” – you’ll agree that “poop bag” sounds a lot nicer than „Hundekotbeutel“ in German (where „Hunde“ are dogs, „Kot“ is excrement, and „Beutel“ is bag) At least German has succeeded in creating another 3-element compound word. In Italian there is something similar to the English expression: “busta della pupù” for the more official „sacco per escrementi dei cani“.

So today the Internet allows a translator to check the usage of words that are hardly found in any dictionary, but nevertheless, a translator should also perfectly know the language, he or she is translating into. The World Wide Web is undoubtedly helpful in many respects, but it’s not a magic wand that does everything automatically and for free.

In this context read the long version of my article: [“Google and Co” Machine vs. human translation today – its benefits, limitations and risks](#)

<https://traduzioni-ticino.ch/downloads/MACHINE-TRANSLATION-vs-HUMAN-TRANSLATION-long.pdf>