

Wieder ist ein Schiff untergegangen!

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Introduction

This paper compares some features of English and German, and it says some things about my experiences with these two languages and how my abilities in the two languages relate to those experiences. I was born and raised in the state of Oregon. From the time I was about seven years old until I reached adulthood, my family lived in Klamath Falls, in southeastern Oregon. Klamath Falls is essentially a monolingual English-speaking town, and all the people I had any contact with there--family, friends, teachers, employers--used only English. As an undergraduate, I majored in French, and I spent two years in the Peace Corps in Niger, a francophone African country, where I also began learning the Hausa language. Thanks to this experience and periodic returns to French and Hausa speaking areas, I speak both these languages relatively well, though certainly not at a native speaker level. The focus of this paper is not these languages, however, but rather on German.

My paternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. German was the language used in my father's family during his entire childhood. My father was the youngest of seven siblings, and until I was seven years old, we lived in the Portland, Oregon area, near most of my paternal aunts and uncles. They would often speak German when they got together, and though I never learned to speak or understand it, they enjoyed teaching me how to say things, such as the numbers, the alphabet, the names of common things, and even phrases. After all these years, I still remember one of my aunts telling of an illiterate friend or relative who, during the First World War, was looking at a newspaper, but holding it upside down. On the front page was a picture of a ship (upside down, of course), and he said, "Wieder ist ein Schiff untergegangen!" [Another ship has gone down!] I learned this phrase and repeated it over and over.

When I was seven, my family moved to Klamath Falls, at the opposite end of the state, so I saw my aunts and uncles less, and they, too, spoke less and less German, so I had little contact with the language until I entered graduate school in linguistics and saw the need for German as a research language. I sat in on a German class for a year, where I learned about grammar and memorized such useful sentences as, “Ich moechte ein Wienerschnitzel mit Salat.” [I'd like a veal cutlet with salad.] Since then, I have acquired a reasonable linguist's knowledge of the grammar, and I have learned to read German rather painfully, using a dictionary. I have also visited monolingual German-speaking relatives in Germany, where I tortured them and myself with my “pidgin” German, but I have never acquired a fluent speaking or writing ability.

Comparison of Sounds

Among the sounds of German that do not exist in English are a **voiceless velar fricative** and a **voiceless palatal fricative**. In the German writing system, both sounds are spelled “ch”, but they are quite distinct in pronunciation. I will represent the **velar** fricative with the symbol [x] and the **palatal** fricative with the symbol [C].

Bach	[bax]	‘brook’ (also the name of the famous composer)
ich	[iC]	‘I’

The **voiceless velar fricative**, [x], is pronounced by putting the tongue near the velum, as for [k], but instead of completely stopping the air as for [k], the air passes between the tongue and the velum causing a “grating” fricative sound. The **voiceless palatal fricative**, [C], is made by raising the entire middle part of the tongue high in the mouth toward the hard palate (the “roof of the mouth”), almost like the vowel [i]. The air passes between the tongue and the palate, again making a fricative sound. Both [x] and [C] are voiceless, that is, the vocal cords are not vibrating.

For German speakers, these two sounds may, in some sense, be “the same”. As noted above, the German writing system spells both as “ch”. More important, the sounds occur in different contexts. The **palatal** [C] pronunciation comes up when a front vowel ([i] or

[e]) comes before or after “ch” and the **velar** pronunciation [x] comes up elsewhere. In the phonetic transcription below, [@] represents a mid central unrounded vowel (“schwa”).

Velar			Palatal		
kochen	[kox@n]	‘to cook’	Mädchen	[medCen]	‘girl’
acht	[axt]	‘eight’	recht	[reCt]	‘right’
Bach	[bax]	‘brook’	ich	[iC]	‘I’

English speakers trying to speak German hear these as completely different sounds. For the **velar** [x], English speakers will tend to substitute a velar stop [k] because this is the only voiceless velar sound in English. They will thus pronounce “Bach” as [bak]. For the **palatal** [C], English speakers will tend to substitute the “sh” sound of “shoe”, which, like [C] is a voiceless fricative. English has no true “palatal” sounds, but the ALVEOpalatal “sh”, which I will symbolize phonetically as [S], is fairly close to the palatal place of articulation. English speakers with thus tend to pronoun “ich” as [iS].

Comparison of Grammar

Though English and German are both Germanic languages, they differ in many respects in both morphology and sentence structure. I will comment only on some word order differences involving placement of verbs. The verbs in examples also differ in morphology, but I will not discuss that here.

In a simple sentence involving just a Subject, Verb, and Object, both languages have SVO order.

Uwe spricht Deutsch. ‘Uwe speaks German.’
 Sie kauft ein Buch. ‘She is buying a book.’

If there is an auxiliary verb (a “helping” verb) along with the main verb, English still has SVO order, treating the auxiliary + main verb as a “verb complex” that still is in the “V” position. German, on the other hand, places the auxiliary verb after the subject but places the main verb at the end of the sentence.

Uwe kann Deutsch sprechen. ‘Uwe can speak German.’
 Uwe can German speak.

Sie hat ein Buch gekauft. ‘She has bought a book.’
 she has a book bought

In a subordinate clause (a clause that is embedded inside a larger sentence), English still has SVO order, but German, in effect, becomes an SOV language, with even a simple verb going to the end of the clause. If there is an auxiliary verb, it goes after the main verb.

Er weiss dass Uwe Deutsch spricht. 'He knows that Uwe speaks German.'
 he knows that Uwe German speaks

Er weiss dass Uwe Deutsch sprechen kann. 'He knows that Uwe can speak German.'
 he knows that Uwe German speak can

For native English speakers trying to speak German, these word order differences cause considerable difficulty. Not only must one remember that verbs fall into different spots, but one must also remember that different contexts require different orders. Thus, a predictable error, and one that I have made many times, is to use English ordering, such as, “*Er weiss dass Uwe **kann sprechen** Deutsch,” resulting in a completely ungrammatical sentence in both “prescriptive” and “descriptive” senses.

Language and Thought

German has three grammatical genders: **masculine**, **feminine**, and **neuter**. Nouns themselves do not usually have any mark of gender, but the gender shows up in agreement patterns, such as with the definite article. Most nouns referring to male humans and animals are **masculine** gender. Most nouns referring to female humans and animals are **feminine** gender. The gender of inanimate objects is unpredictable.

Masculine		Feminine		Neuter	
der Mann	‘the man’	die Frau	‘the woman’	das Haus	‘the house’
der Hengst	‘the stallion’	die Stute	‘the mare’	das Wasser	‘the water’
der Kuli	‘the pen’	die Kopie	‘the copy’	das Buch	‘the book’

There is a derivational morpheme **-chen** that makes diminutive nouns. For example, adding **-chen** to **Haus** 'house' gives **Häuschen** 'little house'. Addition of **-chen** makes a noun neuter in gender, even when added to a word that refers to a male or female human or animal. Thus, adding **-chen** to **Greta**, a woman's name, gives **Gretchen** “little Greta”.

Taking the Whorfian view that the structure of one's native language influences the way that a speaker of the language views the world, one might argue that the shift to neuter gender when **-chen** is attached to a noun CAUSES speakers of German to view diminutive nouns as depersonalized objects. For example, if I am a native speaker of German and name my daughter Gretchen, perhaps I will view her as an “object” under my control.

In German, there is, in fact, evidence against this Whorfian interpretation. Though direct modifiers of a human noun with the **-chen** suffix show neuter agreement, agreeing words separated from the noun, such as pronouns, show the “natural” gender, that is, male or female depending on the referent. In the following example, **das** is the neuter definite article (in German, a definite article with a proper name indicates familiarity), but the pronoun **sie** 'she' in the second clause is feminine (neuter would be **es** 'it').

Das Gretchen singt gut. **Sie** studiert Musik. ‘Gretchen sings well. She
the Gretchen sings well she studies music is studying music.’
(neuter)

Even without this evidence, however, the Whorfian view would have no verifiable support. This view arises from classical circular reasoning: The fact that Germans put human nouns with the **-chen** suffix into neuter gender shows that they view those humans as “objects”. The evidence that Germans view humans referred by nouns with the **-chen** suffix as “objects” is the fact that such nouns are in the neuter gender. There is almost surely no independent evidence for the claim that language is influencing world view in this way. For example, it is quite surely not the case that parents with daughters named “Greta” (a name of feminine gender), as a group, treat their daughters differently from parents with daughters named “Gretchen”.

Acquisition

Having acquired English as a child, using the built-in tools supplied by the language instinct, I create grammatical English utterances without consciously going over rules and thinking about words. By virtue of exposure to Hausa and French and using these languages over long years, I am also able to speak them relatively fluently. The language

instinct seems to have been at work even in my adult years, but having acquired these languages after the “critical age”, I speak both of them with an American accent and make errors that native speakers would never make.

In the case of German, my pronunciation is actually closer to that of a native than is the case for either French or Hausa. I attribute this to the fact that I heard and practiced saying things on the model of native speakers while I was still a child and could apply my pre-critical age acquisition abilities. However, during my childhood exposure to German, I did not acquire the ability to construct full utterances. As an adult, because of limited active use, my speaking ability in German has never gone past a “pidgin” stage of putting words together in a sort of loose, agrammatical way. I am probably applying the German rules and vocabulary that I can bring up “on the fly”, but falling back on English where my knowledge fails. A case in point is use of prepositions. Here are a couple of errors I have made:

I said ...	should be ...	meaning
meine Reise in Deutschland	meine Reise durch Deutschland	‘my trip in Germany’
dann sind wir in sein Auto gefahren	... mit seinem Auto ...	‘then we traveled in his car’

These are classic cases of interference from English. In both cases I used the English preposition ‘in’, the appropriate preposition in the English translation, but in these expressions German uses other prepositions, namely **durch** ‘through’ and **mit** ‘with’.

Conclusion

Even though English and German are both Germanic languages, there are many differences in sounds, morphology, and syntax. All these “learned” areas of the languages present challenges to adult speakers of one of the languages trying to learn the other. Comparison of the structures of the two languages, comparing the different contexts for learning the two languages, and contrasting these contexts with two other languages of which I have some knowledge, takes us toward an understanding of my different abilities in these various languages.