

## Licht Regen

### Or the Torment of being a Teacher of English in Germany

There is an animated screen in the entry lounge of one of my customer firms which presents the information that some IT-boss regards as interesting for incoming people, like the company's turnover figures (in English) and the weather forecast for three days (in German). For a number of days in a row, the forecast said "Licht Regen". Very instructive. What? Is there not always light during the day? Yes, of course, but the IT-apprentice did not realize in his or her English version of the weather that "light" was an adjective to "rain" and that the whole should say "leichter Regen". Difficult, isn't it? We have arrived at the nonsensical "Gewinnwarnung" the same way, because some idiot did not look up that "warning" can also mean "Mitteilung".

No, certainly not difficult, but it is just typical. The Germans regard themselves as competent in English and behave in such a way – but their real English is a scrap. I went into a normal supermarket yesterday, and above the butchers' area it said (in English) "Dry aged beef". Are they sure that everybody is able to realize "trockengereiftes Rindfleisch" behind it and would not arrive at "trockenes altes Rindfleisch"? That is what they believe, they are international and they can deal with everything in its original language. Whatever Pudelmütze or fragrance it may be, it is presented in English (in the good case) or in self-made English (in the worst case). But I have come to refuse buying something which is unnecessarily presented in English. Just as if every German these days was going to America every month! Not because I am against English, no, because I am against its misuse. Do you know what that is supposed to be "Urban Bohemian Trends"? Well, that is what it said in a fashion catalogue. "Urban" and "Bohemian" – that is contradictory. Or what "Bohemian" style are such people thinking of? Böhmisch? Bohemien? Zigeuner? It is this silly mind which makes them unable to learn a language properly.

### **Wrong auto stereotype of a competent learner of English**

Yes, I know, some of my Daimler-Chrysler people in Sindelfingen did go to Detroit that often or more often. But the majority? Those who buy sausages from the REWE butcher? No, don't you believe the Germans' auto stereotype as the best English speakers in Europe. Believe what I saw in the neighbouring DIY-shop immediately afterwards: They sell toilet lids there with the imprint of howling wolves or the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Eiffel Tower and a third tower in a 3-D picture on it. Does that make a difference to people's digestion? No, but that is the true state of the present day German mind. It needs entertainment with everything. So much so that if your English classes are not at least as entertaining as a brutal computer game then they regard it as bad, however good your methods may be.

### **I know what is necessary to learn**

Germans keep over pronouncing the mute Rs. Like “Alight heRe foR faiR and ...”. Germans, it seems, in a secret agreement, are refusing to pronounce “executive” correctly. Else I just cannot understand why the correct stress of a word should be such a problem. You can repeat “deita” until you die, they will always say “data”. Germans refuse to practice the ash-vowel. However skilful you may present the difference between “flash” and “flesh” or “man” and “men” – they don’t even move their mouth to try. Such comments by the teacher are regarded as superfluous. Not important to me, so, why learn it? (They would claim they are far from this attitude, but it is what they show.) Germans are ignorant against the use of the tenses. Don’t like it, so, don’t do it. Little souls that you are!

### **Your bad accent is more detrimental than you think**

One could regard them as pidgin Germans. But what makes the whole thing so unbearable is the fact that when it comes to talks about the better abilities of the Scandinavians to use Eng-lish, unanimously they explain: “They have got English channels on tv and watch them with-out the help of subtitles.” No, you silly lot, it is not that. Thanks to my Swedish and my fre-quent stays in Scandinavia I know better. I now that the Scandinavians, young and old, re-spect the language and the language learning. They take English serious, Germans don’t. They would not even know how to take it serious.

From the Stockholm gate at Düsseldorf airport to the sauna baths of the ski hotel in Rauland or Suesjoen I have met an incredible number of people making me compliments on my English (that is one thing) and then go on explaining in detail what makes their German partners’ English sound so bad (that is a second thing). In fact, they dive so deeply into describing ze Tschörman English (not Ingglish! Too difficult.) that they do not hear my desperate attempts to explain why I can do better, and tone down their admiration, yeah, even gratefulness. (I think in fact it does not agree with etiquette to comment a stranger’s language competence, so these reactions are all the more telling!)

So, their wrong explanation makes the whole thing sound even worse. The second is that in the 60ies, Germans were better learners of foreign languages. They were so fond of being admitted to the world again after the war they had caused that they made an effort to speak well. Now, I am not complaining here about this problem in order to just give vent to my feel-ings but to ask you: What can one do? What makes them such bad students? What makes their mind so resistant against better learning? Can you give me some advice? What do you do when you encounter such untalented and inattentive students? Help me, for I might explode when I hear the next “äksekjuuutiv”.

### **The school system is worse than politicians believe**

Apart from that I can imagine that it is due to our rotten school system. The German state has the problem that the powers of the counties and of the Federation are nearly fifty-fifty against one another. None of them can do anything really without the consent of the other. It is always stopped or diluted by the other institution. I read an author who explained that this is intended, for none of the institutions can be blamed when something that the civil servants are responsible for, like flood protection, e.g., does not work. But schools are the only field where the parties and the counties can win the battle. In spite of all pseudo-democracy like parents' and pupils' participation in councils, the county governments do what they please and they imagine it was good for the young people and they bask in the satisfaction that they have accomplished a "change". But in reality the young students come out with just one achievement: How to survive being in an institution which is really against them and not for them. Their Abitur is just good enough to make a car sticker, but they have not really learned useful facts or techniques. Thus they arrive at our adult institutions, believing they were good, but they are far from it. They have never learned the enjoyment of learning.

### **No respect for the learning conditions**

I can imagine also that there is a difference between a single person in the fifties or sixties, interested in a language, and the many people who are pushed to learning English just because their company came under the roof of another, together with many other companies which are then just subsidiaries, and they need a common language. There are those among them who would never have thought of learning any other language, once they had enough of Russian. And they have remained uninterested in anything like languages. What bosses never realize is that the events of a normal working day and the emotions accompanying have such an impact on the brain that it just cannot easily integrate new learning, which also requires accompanying emotions. That is clearly different from a day at school, where the normal working day is learning.

Ok, I can understand that emotion and lack of initiative. And what they are given by their employers is just those ridiculous two periods a week, rather than a week-long course or some other kind of intensive course, so how could they possibly find enjoyment in learning the expected language? But do you think these silly people would think of passing a holiday in an English speaking country in order to find some help in such a way? Far from it. I used to ask people this question, but when I realized that they have never been to Britain or Ireland or the USA or whatever, I stopped asking this question in the interviews for I felt it too embarrassing for me to ask it and bring them into embarrassment. But that is the people who are believed to buy Dry Aged Beef and Urban Bohemian fashion.

### **You should not be sure they will understand you**

I am against this ridiculous contradiction between the minuscule pseudo-English that they imagine to know and the marketing and advertising floods pretending that we had Germans with English as a second language around us. "Na, ja, die wissen ja, was wir meinen." So? You do not realize what „light rain“ means but you dare say that you understand one another? You are too silly to write "closed" at your shop door in Tübingen (only "close") and you trust that you understand one another? How many misunderstandings or wrong interpretations did you not realize? You keep sending e-mails to your partner in Singapore saying "please find attached the actual data" and you believe that the people on the other side know that, as a German, you mean "current data"?

### **"Alles klar" aber "keine Ahnung"**

Another factor ruining the Germans' capacity of learning English is that marketing presents anything that they might buy for them as the big customer kings. "All inclusive" is a key to understanding the present day Germans state of mind. They have come to thinking - automati-cally, that is, not intentionally – that wherever they might be, they command, and everyone else is pleased to roll out the red carpet for them. So, by merely coming to a language course, they expect: Please inject your dose of what I need into me and leave me alone for anything else. Foreigners, if you want to learn German, it is just two phrases that you need: "Alles klar" and "keine Ahnung". This what you actually hear most frequently in any conversation, though from young people most of the time. And again, it is enough to describe the current state of the German mind: Huge auto stereotype, poor performance really.

### **They watch "Fuck you, Göthe" but believe they have inherited Goethe's intelligence**

Correct your auto stereotype, Germans, and become realistic about your pidgin! Learn with a lot more discipline! Do travel to English speaking countries! Watch CNN or BBC regularly. Regularly! Don't believe you learn English from pop songs. Become modest. Become open and truly interested. Dive into the characteristics of the other language with curiosity and in-terest, not with laziness or tiredness. Let your English learning children help you. Stop using wrong arguments as to why other nations learned better. You are just hiding the true responsi-bility from yourselves. Stop believing that buying some course on the new media would make learning a language easier. And become exemplary learners of languages again. Anything else is just bothersome. And if you do not show true efforts yourselves you may not realize how you are just being lifted through by a tired teacher, while he or she would really love to help you – if it worked. And if your efforts do not show the reward that you expect – look for what other nations' speakers have overtaken you.

A. Martin Steffe

## Kontakt

A. Martin Steffe

Lehárstr. 89

D - 22145 Hamburg

Fon und Fax: 040 / 57 68 30 03

Mobil: 0170 / 48 34 961

e-mail: [a.martinsteffe@t-online.de](mailto:a.martinsteffe@t-online.de)

[www.fremdsprachen-unterricht-steffe.de](http://www.fremdsprachen-unterricht-steffe.de)

[www.limani-news.com](http://www.limani-news.com)