Die schreckliche deutsche Sprache
"Life is too short to learn German"

Dan McArdle

Language is at the core of written and spoken communication. If Freud is to be believed, it exists in a conjoined separation of words and meaning, and many have attempted to explain its emergence. It also appears that while some animal species, like dolphins, are able to recognize simple words and communicate, only humanity, and indeed, all of humanity, is able to acquire language.

But how is it acquired? This is a topic of long debates, and in this paper, rather than attempting a linguistic or scientific explanation of a general theory, I am choosing instead to rely upon my own personal experiences of the last decade as a native English speaker learning German.

The best way I can describe learning a new language: you need translation until you don't. The rate at which this milestone is hit varies: infants and children pick up new languages quickly and often speak without accent, whereas teenagers and adults have a much slower process, and many difficulties adjusting to it. The brain is a muscle, and learning a language could be compared to doing a workout: the more we practice, the better we get.

Fluency

The degree to which someone becomes "fluent" in a language depends on their level of immersion. The best way to improve is to make lots and lots of mistakes. When I have been in situations where I wanted to say something but lacked the words, I would try to say it in words I *did* know. For example, when I didn't know the word for "to compare" I would say (in German) "these two things, are they the same?" Incidentally, the German word for "compare" (vergleichen) is very similar to the word for "same" (gleich) so picking up the new word came naturally over time. But I would remember that there was a word I didn't know, and look it up, and having that experience helped with recall, because I didn't want to have the same issue again. Another interesting example: when I would learn a topic in Deutschkurs (German class), and then see it in an advertisement or overhear it in public (Umgangssprache). And often, when there was a word or concept I was unsure about, I would encounter it naturally in daily life and it would suddenly make more sense.

In this way, I found learning a new language to be a bit like being a log floating down a river. These little experiences add up, these bits and pieces combine over time and group together. When we are a beginner learner, we hear or read a word, and then have to do a mental translation into our native language (like English). This is slow and annoying, and makes conversation difficult. At this point it's important to take risks and make mistakes, and say words that "feel" right but we're not completely sure about. There is a saying that when we are drunk, our skill level in the language goes up because we do not care about making mistakes and no longer bother with the mental translation part. This translation process takes time, and as we get better at it, it takes less and less time, and after a while we don't need it anymore.

It's also worth mentioning that when most people learn a new language in school, there is a safety buffer, a sense that if we don't know a word, we can fall back to English (or some common tongue) and escape from the jungle of the new language. But when we are talking with someone who only knows the language we are trying to learn, there is no such safety buffer. Suddenly we must take risks and make mistakes, and force ourselves to learn in a way we otherwise would not. I learned this the hard way early on, because I made the extremely faulty and wrong assumption that everyone knew at least

some English. In school, we have the option to just “give up” and ask to get the answer so we can move on; but when that “give up” option is absent, a new reality sets in that many people have a fundamentally different language foundation than we do.

Translation

At a certain point, not only can we understand the language without needing to do the translation, but we can understand something and be *unable* to translate it into English. I was once at the doctor with my wife (who speaks only a little German), and I saw a funny quote written on the wall. I chuckled, she asked me what it said, and I found I was unable to explain it. It seems that this is because when we can speak two languages, we have two minds, one for each language, and ideas cannot always cross over. For those ideas that *can* cross over, they require a mental context-switching, which is bizarre. For example, if I am reading a book in English and someone addresses me in German, it might sound like a stream of gibberish. I'll reply "Nochmal bitte? (Again please?),” and when they repeat it, it suddenly makes perfect sense. I have had this happen numerous times, and it always takes me a few seconds to change to the correct language. From what I understand, this “bridge” effect is a known and studied phenomenon, which is why live translators can only function for around 15 minutes at a time.

Beyond translation, language becomes a sort of feeling. Possibly influenced by hearing the sounds or reading words of the language passively, I encountered several breakthroughs where I would say something to a friend in German, pause, noticing that it felt “wrong,” reword it slightly in a way that felt more “correct,” and look to them for confirmation. In each case, it was simply following intuition and gut instinct, not because I had learned about it in Deutschkurs. A good example of this: in Nebensätze (subordinate clauses) the verb comes at the end, and this is very, very hard for a native English speaker to master. I learned this naturally before encountering school lessons about it, simply because it *felt* right. The more we follow these feelings, the more the language patterns become natural. One of the reasons that listening and reading is far easier than speaking and writing is because in the former, we are presented with words we must interpret, whereas in the latter, we must mentally retrieve the words, and sometimes very quickly. At some point, this retrieval process becomes unconscious.

Tonality and Flow

Because German is structured fundamentally differently from English, straight translation doesn't work. That is, knowing how to say something in English, and then changing the words to be German, will usually technically make sense, but it will sound extremely awkward. I'm at the point now where I can tell when someone does not know German very well because of the grammar mistakes they make, and when I see a German person write something in English that doesn't sound quite right, I understand why they structured it the “incorrect” way they did.

In some sense, this language flow is melodic, like music. In fact, German has little "filler" words that don't actually mean anything, but enhance the sound and the meaning. For example, the word "nicht" means no, and we can make it stronger and more assertive with the phrase "gar nicht." But the word "gar" doesn't really mean anything, it just enhances the sense of the "nicht." And when someone uses words in the wrong order, or uses the wrong article, it sticks out like the wrong key pressed on a piano. It gives an odd feeling, and the deeper into the language I get, I can sense it's wrong but can't really explain why. I suspect this is true of all languages to an extent.

Structure

English is a rather loose hodgepodge of language, inheriting many attributes from other languages, and could rightfully be called a melting pot. German has inherited some words, but it contains an inherent structure far deeper and more rigid than English. In fact, one explanation for the massively differing cultures of European countries points to the differences between their languages, suggesting that language creates culture. Although this theory leaves out other obvious influences, such as weather, geography, and general cultural history, it seems reasonable to accept that language plays a non-trivial role.

Though not from the Romance languages, English shares many properties with them, such as its sentence structure. One of the hardest things for me to learn about German has been reordering words, because in many cases the flow of words is the exact opposite of what it would be in English. Not only do verbs come at the end, but when you are dealing with past or future tenses, as well as passive, they follow along in a way that is very difficult for a native English speaker to process. In fact, when I run a phrase like “because he would have needed to be driven”, Google Translate (Appendix C) changes the word for “because” from “weil” to “denn” after adding the verb, possibly because the word order for “denn” is easier for the code to render. Additionally, while English speakers will sometimes pause mid-sentence for effect or to search for a well-fitting word, Germans never do. There seems to be a forced completion in German that English lacks, which might help explain why Germans sound very assertive and aggressive.

Another facet of German I find interesting: when I hear something in English that could be expressed faster in German, I get impatient. I think it has something to do with the words themselves, perhaps the tonality. One great word is "genau" which means something like "correct" or "exactly." Genau rolls out of the mouth like a pellet gun, it sounds very quick and to the point, whereas "correct" has an annoying delay in the "r" sound, and "exactly" takes so long to finish saying that I've already moved on to the next word. I think this is a facet of the "personality" that the language gives. When I've been speaking in German, sometimes English words are annoying, but when I switch to English, after a while the annoyance goes away.

Words and Patterns

Before studying German, I would often refer to Freud and Jung when trying to explain how I viewed the nature of words and language, mapping the words to the "ego" and the meanings of the words to the "id." I believe that linguists like Saussure made similar links with concepts like the "langue" and the "parole." However, after much reflection, I think this framing is misguided. It is not that we have a bucket of words and symbols, and a similar bucket of meanings; I think it is more likely that we have buckets of languages and meanings, which exist in a sort of Venn Diagram together. How else could one explain the ability to understand a concept in one language while being entirely unable to express it in another language?

In an attempt to explain consciousness and intelligence, John Searle famously introduced, in his 1980 paper “Minds, brains, and programs,” the Chinese Room Experiment (Appendix B). After years of reflection on this concept, and more importantly, after learning German to a sufficient degree, I’ve concluded that the arguments Searle makes could only come from someone who is monolingual. In mathematics, there exists the idea that complex systems can be broken down into smaller and simpler parts, thus easier to analyze and study. However, language does not work like this. The idea that a concept represented by symbols can be broken down, rearranged, and then reassembled in different

symbols and convey the same meanings betrays a lack of experience with translating concepts between sufficiently disparate languages[1].

Humans are pattern seeking by nature, and we can find patterns in all sets of symbols. Learning a Romantic language is much easier for a native English speaker, because most of the preconcieved notions of English still work. But in German, they don't. When a native English speaker asks "why does it work that way?" the response will be "why does English work the other way?"

[1] This comment refers to the FSI list of language difficulty levels for native English speakers. Note that German exists alone in Category 2: https://effectivelanguagelearning.com/language-guide/language-difficulty/

Appendix A: Deutsche Beispiele (Examples)

Sentence structure inflexiveness:

Ich weiß das.

Das weiß ich!

"Mit Dr. ___ habe ich eine Termin."

"Wir mussen zum Artz (gehen)."

Learning from words:

der Handschuh → glove

die Halskette → necklace

das Laufband → treadmill

die Leidenschaft → passion

Simplicity and bluntness:

handyparken

der Tatort

der Stau

"Schon?"

Precision:

ausschlafen und aufwachen

Transformation of concepts:

der Schrank → beschranken → die Beschränkung

spielen → das Spiel

Very hard to translate:

der Schweinhund

der Geist

schadenfreude

"Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem *ungeheueren Ungeziefer* verwandelt"

Desconstruction of Dasein*:*

dasein → Dasein

da: da-für, da-nach, da-mit….. da-sein?

Jokes:

Wo alle schläft und einer spricht,
wir nennen das ein Unterricht

das Gegenteil von umfahren ist umfahren.

Appendix B: Searle's Chinese Room Experiment

“One way to test any theory of the mind is to ask oneself what it would be like if my mind actually worked on the principles that the theory says all minds work on. Let us apply this test to the Schank program with the following Gedankenexperiment. Suppose that I'm locked in a room and given a large batch of Chinese writing. Suppose furthermore (as is indeed the case) that I know no Chinese, either written or spoken, and that I'm not even confident that I could recognize Chinese writing as Chinese writing distinct from, say, Japanese writing or meaningless squiggles. To me, Chinese writing is just so many meaningless squiggles.

Now suppose further that after this first batch of Chinese writing I am given a second batch of Chinese script together with a set of rules for correlating the second batch with the first batch. The rules are in English, and I understand these rules as well as any other native speaker of English. They enable me to correlate one set of formal symbols with another set of formal symbols, and all that 'formal' means here is that I can identify the symbols entirely by their shapes. Now suppose also that I am given a third batch of Chinese symbols together with some instructions, again in English, that enable me to correlate elements of this third batch with the first two batches, and these rules instruct me how to give back certain Chinese symbols with certain sorts of shapes in response to certain sorts of shapes given me in the third batch. Unknown to me, the people who are giving me all of these symbols call the first batch "a script," they call the second batch a "story. ' and they call the third batch "questions." Furthermore, they call the symbols I give them back in response to the third batch "answers to the questions." and the set of rules in English that they gave me, they call "the program."

Now just to complicate the story a little, imagine that these people also give me stories in English, which I understand, and they then ask me questions in English about these stories, and I give them back answers in English. Suppose also that after a while I get so good at following the instructions for manipulating the Chinese symbols and the programmers get so good at writing the programs that from the external point of view that is, from the point of view of somebody outside the room in which I am locked -- my answers to the questions are absolutely indistinguishable from those of native Chinese speakers. Nobody just looking at my answers can tell that I don't speak a word of Chinese.”

Searle, John. R. (1980) Minds, brains, and programs. Behavioral and Brain Sciences 3 (3): 417-457

Appendix C: Technical issues with translation