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IS THE GERMAN LANGUAGE GOING TO THE DOGS?



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1.

Every age claims that its language is more endangered and threatened by decay than ever before. In our time, however, language is really endangered and threatened by decay as never before. [...] Journalism is at fault, both written journalism and the spoken journalism of radio and television. [...] The explosion in education has inflicted considerable damage on language. And the most terrible thing about the explosion in education is not the ever larger number of pupils and students, but the ever larger number of teachers and professors.¹

Language is today so quickly transformed that it has become decayed and rotten. Ineptitude and sluggishness, bombast, foppishness and grammatical errors are increasing. Ugly paper language has replaced good literary language. Added to this is the foreign foible that is the Germans' inherited weakness. The German may grow as old you as like; he will remain the fool of the other nations. There is widespread aping of the French and the English. [...] The real nest and breeding place of this barbarism are the newspapers, or to be more exact, the daily newspapers. Since the advent of the freedom of the press in 1848, there is an oversupply that results in degeneration. [...] Above all, it is the Jews who are at fault in this decay: a large part of today's language rubbish is derived from the Jew-German of Berlin's and Vienna's daily newspapers. The reason for this is that the ancestors of the Jews did not have German as their mother tongue. Therefore, the Jew of today has no command of the German language. As agile as he may be in the elements of German grammar, when it comes to having a feel for the language, he will remain ever the foreigner. [...] But the real culprits should be sought in the schools: where do they come from, these destroyers of German of the last forty years, if not from German schools? We have not even German lessons!²

Almost a hundred years lie between these two laments, but in essence – except for WUSTMANN's racial motives – they are nearly the same: the German language is in acute danger. It is rotting away, and the flood of »new« media and the schools are at fault. This is the topos of language decay. I dare say that all of us have experienced this linguistic variation of cultural pessimism at some time or another. And when WUSTMANN's complaint is rid of his »ethnolinguistic« rant about the »guilt of the Jews« in the process of language decay, some may think to themselves: »You know, he's not all wrong.« After all, by 1966 WUSTMANN's book had been reprinted fourteen times – with the omission of the preface to the first edition. The recurring theme of language decay – stretching over all civilized countries and all ages, from Plato to Quintilian and Rousseau, all the way to Kemal Pascha Atatürk, Helmut Kohl and Prince Charles, who recently articulated his concern about the increasing degree to which the British version of English is being sullied by the American one. Hardly a week goes by in

1 Hans Weigel: *Die Leiden der jungen Wörter [The Sorrows of Young Words]*, Munich 1974.

2 Gustav Wustmann: *Allerhand Sprachdummheiten. Kleine deutsche Grammatik des Zweifelhafte, des Falschen und des Hässlichen [All Kinds of Language Blunders. A Little German Grammar of the Dubious, the False and the Ugly]*, Leipzig 1891.



which some reader of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* doesn't write a letter to the editor expressing fear for the future of the German language.

Are these fears justified? And where do they originate? In this talk, I will discuss these questions and related ones.

2.

Three things spring to mind immediately:

1. For more than two thousand years, complaints about the decay of respective languages have been documented in literature, but no one has yet been able to name an example of a »decayed language.«
2. It is always the contemporary version of the respective language that is in danger of decaying. For example, no British prince would today lament that the wonderful Anglo-Saxon language has degenerated into completely Gallicized modern English.
3. Language criticism is always criticism of the foreign, criticism of others' use of language. This should give pause. You would never hear anyone say, »My goodness, what terrible English I write in comparison to that of my grandparents!«

The prevalent image is the following: the current state of my language is correct, good and authentic, and from there on, it goes downhill fast. In the nineteenth century, this notion of language decay is often also theoretically underpinned by organismic metaphor: »Languages are organisms of nature [...]; they rose, and developed themselves according to definite laws; they grew old, and died out.«³ Organismic thinking is probably also responsible for our perception of Latin as a »dead« language. Of course, Latin is not dead at all, but living happily ever after in versions that are usually called »French«, »Italian«, »Catalan«, and so on. In other words, French is nothing but degenerate Latin. The elegant classic form *cantabo* »I will sing« was replaced in Vulgar Latin with the analytical paraphrase *cantare habeo*, which was itself successively demoted – thanks to the Gauls' sloppy pronunciation – with *cantare aio* and the French form *chanterai*. But it didn't stop there: *chanterai* was increasingly crowded out by a new vernacular paraphrase, *je vais chanter*. This is how a description of linguistic history has to look if language development is seen through the eyes of a theorist of decay.

With this, I have reached my central claim: what we perceive as language decay is the continuous, ubiquitous process of language change, seen from the subjective, historical worm's-eye view. We view language selectively, in a small window of time, and in this meager slice, we necessarily see a slew of mistakes and »barbarisms«. But the systematic mistakes of today are very probably the new rules of tomorrow. I will now try, using a series of examples, to prove and demonstrate this point.

³ August Schleicher: *Darwinism Tested by Science of Language*, trans. by Alexander V.W. Bickers, London 1863/1869.



It is important to clarify from the outset in what sense the word *language* is meant when speaking of its decay, for its use in colloquial speech is extremely ambiguous. In the expressions »the language of young Goethe«, »the language of today's youth« and »the German language«, the word »language« is used with a different meaning in each case. In the first expression, a certain idiolect is meant, specifically, the typical and unique features of young Goethe's use of language; in the second, a certain variety of German is meant, specific to a particular group; that is, a certain sociolect. *Language*, in the sense of German, English oder Swahili, means a certain system of conventional rules – phonological, syntactical semantic conventions – that currently apply. Since social conventions are subject to constant change, and beyond this vary by the specific society, region, age and possibly gender (to name just a few examples), the term »the German language« is necessarily extremely unclear. Nevertheless, language still has a solid core – let's say an intersection of all these varieties. This is the sense in which »language« is probably meant in talk about its decay. But this also makes it clear that language cannot be equated with certain expressions or the texts of individual people. Erroneous expressions do not allow conclusions to be drawn as to the state of »the language« – unless the error in question occurs very systematically and frequently.

With this, we have reached a point that could be decisive for the widespread belief that the German language is going to the dogs: Every change in a convention necessarily begins with that convention's violation, and when it comes to language, the violation of conventions is called »error.« When such an error ultimately becomes common practice, it ceases to be an error, and a new convention is born. As long as the simple past of the verb *schrauben* was *schrob*, anyone who said *schraubte* made a mistake. Today, we all make this »mistake«, which is exactly the reason why it no longer is one. (All we have left is the strong form of the participle *verschrauben*, in its metaphorical sense, in *verschroben*.) This example shows why attentive observers of language must always and everywhere gain the impression that their language is going to the dogs. We notice the beginning of the process of change, which must necessarily be the violation of a rule. But our attention wanes at the same rate as the original violation becomes generally used, because with use, it loses all shock value. This can be seen very clearly in the example of orthographic rules: Anyone who today suggests writing *spaghetti* without the »h« risks being accused of disgracing Western culture (though using the plural *spaghettis* goes unpunished). Anyone who writes the English word *cakes* as *Keks*, and then, furthermore, considers it (like *Straps*) to be a singular form, is guilty of nothing. The reason that *Kekse* is generally tolerated is due exclusively to the fact that this spelling was introduced 90 years ago, and in the meantime we have all simply gotten used to it.



3.

What are the phenomena suspected of causing language decay? Grammatical mistakes are usually at the center of criticism, as is the use of foreign words and recently, of course, orthography, thanks to the latest German spelling reform («The spelling reform is irrelevant in the face of the ruin of our language caused by the spread of the unspeakable German-English linguistic brew», read a letter to the editor in *Der Spiegel* of 17 April 2000.) Let's take a look at a few examples of these three areas. I would like to begin with a common argument against the new German spelling reform (which indeed can be taken to task on a number of details).

3.1

The new spellings will lead, it is often heard, to Germans finding themselves unable to read their classic literature. But a glance at a few pages of the first edition of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* of 1774 is enough to prove the absurdity of this theory: »am 10. **May** ... Wenn das liebe **Thal** um mich dampft ... und näher an der Erde tausend mannigfaltige **Gräsgen** mir merkwürdig werden. Wenn ich ... die Gestalten all der **Würmgen**, der **Mückgen** ... das Wehen der **Allliebenden** ... Die Kühle des Orts, das hat so **was** anzügliches, **was** schauerliches. ... Ich bin ... in **Verzückung** ... Ich saß ganz in **mahlerische** Empfindungen vertieft. ... um **weis Brod** zu holen, und **Zukker**. ... **theils** wegen **dem Gegensatze**.« Any number of further examples could be named. They only show that the proponents of the theory above have never seen »their« German classics in the original spelling. Any child today who were to spell as Goethe did then would have a straight »F« in German.

3.2

Now let's consider three examples of systematic grammatical mistakes that can be observed in the German of today: *Im Herbst diesen Jahres werden wir umziehen* («In fall this year we will move»). Sentences like this can be heard often, even from the mouths of educated speakers. Naturally, it should instead be *im Herbst dieses Jahres*. Why do people make exactly this mistake? After all, no one would make the same mistake in other similar expressions: *die Hosen dieses Kindes* or *der Fahrer diesen Autos*. The explanation is as follows: what we have here is an analogous formation, a phenomenon that occurs frequently in language development. You say *im Herbst letzten, vorigen, nächsten Jahres*, and therefore also *im Herbst diesen Jahres*. The semantic series *letzten, vorigen* and *nächsten* obviously leads the speaker to inflect the demonstrative pronoun *dieses* like the adjective *letztes*. As I mentioned above, the systematic mistakes of today are the new rules of tomorrow. The



following analogous formation apparently happened just yesterday: the genitive of the feminine noun *die Nacht* is, as everyone knows, *der Nacht*, and never *des Nachts*. Nevertheless, *des Nachts* has established itself as analogous to the semantic expressions *des Morgens*, *des Mittags* and *des Abends*, all of which are masculine. Here, the analogous form has in the meantime become fully accepted, while in the case of *diesen Jahres*, the current linguistic convention is just starting to lose ground.

3.3

Our second example of systematic deviation from a rule even led to a citizens' initiative with the battle cry »Save the causal clause«: *Ich muss gehen, weil die Geschäfte machen gleich zu* (»I have to go, since the stores are closing soon«). This »mistake« is by now widespread; and here too, it is to be expected that it will become the accepted norm. What kind of process is under way here? The conjunction *weil* (»since« in the sense of »because«) is a subordinating conjunction and therefore should in German be used with dependent clause word order. Not *weil die Geschäfte machen gleich zu*, but *weil die Geschäfte gleich zumachen*. A look at the larger historical context shows that the little word *weil* has a long and tumultuous story: in Middle High German, the word *wile* was still a noun that meant something like »duration of time« (like »while« in English). From it, a conjunction *weil* developed, first with temporal meaning: Schiller was still able to write *Heirate, weil du jung bist*, meaning »Marry while you are young«, not »Marry because you are young«. The temporal meaning finally evolved to become a causal meaning, a process that can be observed again and again in many languages, for the causal interpretation of a temporal statement often follows logically (consider the English *since*). The causal conjunction *weil* is currently in the process of becoming a so-called epistemic conjunction. This can be briefly explained as follows: the »new« *weil* clause no longer answers the causal question »Why is this so?«; rather, it answers the question »How do you know that this is so?« This is why the following dialogue makes perfect sense:

Ist Peter noch hier? (»Is Peter still here?«) – Nein, der ist schon weg, weil sein Auto steht nicht mehr im Hof. (»No, he's gone, because his car isn't in the parking lot anymore – that is, because I no longer see Peter's car in the parking lot, he must be gone.«)

The analogous clause, with »correct« word order, would not necessarily make sense, and therefore is hardly likely to occur:

Ist Peter noch hier? – Nein, der ist schon weg, weil sein Auto nicht mehr im Hof steht. (»No, he's gone because his car isn't in the parking lot anymore« – that is, the reason he left is because his car is no longer in the parking lot.)



The upshot is that here, too, we are dealing not with a process of language decay, but with the long-term transformation of a temporal noun into a temporal conjunction, which in the course of time first took on temporary causal meaning and now is in the course of becoming an epistemic conjunction.

3.4

As a final case of morphological innovation, I would like to consider an example that probably seems pretty barbaric to most people, since the process is just getting started. There is a new German word: *son*, in its feminine form *sonne*. We German speakers use it in sentences like *Son Ding hab ich noch nie gesehen* (»I've never seen such a thing«). The dative case of this word is incidentally *som* or *soner*: *Mit som Ding/soner Maschine geht das wunderbar* (With such a thing/such a machine, it works great«). Now you will probably say that *son* is not a new word, but the contraction of the words *so ein*, like *er hat's* is a contraction of *er hat es*. And my response goes like this: Once upon a time it **was** a contraction of *so ein*. But in the meantime, it has grown up and become independent, and is now perceived as one word. Historically seen, this sort of thing happens frequently. The word *Adler* (»eagle«) began as a contraction of *adel are* (»noble eagle«); in the meantime, we no longer perceive this origin, which is proved by the fact that *der edle Adler* (»the noble eagle«) does not appear to us to be a redundancy. That such a contraction has become a matter of course is demonstrated by the fact that it is no longer easily pulled apart. We can use either *hat's* or *hat es* in any conceivable situation. But we cannot always replace *son* with *so ein*: *Ich habe ein son Ding gehabt, und jetzt ist es weg* (»I had one of those things once, and now it's gone«). The expressions *ein son* and *kein son* cannot be interpreted as *ein so ein* or *kein so ein*. They are only possible because *son* is already perceived as an independent word. And what kind of word is it? It is an indefinite demonstrative article. It may take a couple of decades for *son/sonne* to find its way into written language. But when this happens, it will not be a case of decay, but just the opposite: our language will have become more complete. With definite articles, we have the choice between *der* and *dieser*. For the indefinite article *ein* there is currently no analogous counterpart.

der → dieser
ein → ...

In colloquial speech, we make a fine distinction between *ein* or *'n* and *son*. This can be seen in sentences like the following, in which the two forms are not interchangeable *Da vorne an der Ecke ist son Metzger, der hat 'n unheimlich guten Mittagstisch* (»There's a butcher up there on the corner; he



serves a really good noon meal«). Old High German, like Latin, was a language without articles. The articles in Germanic and Romance languages developed over time from former demonstrative pronouns, and new demonstrative pronouns emerged. There is plenty of support for the theory that we are currently in the process of forming an indefinite demonstrative and thus closing the gap in the system:

der → dieser
'n → son

3.5

Let us proceed to the last topic, that of foreign words. Our language is threatening to lose its identity due to the »spread of the unspeakable German-English linguistic brew«, as the *Spiegel* reader quoted above put it. Is this fear justified?

It's true! We are absolutely flooded with English and pseudo-English expressions (*Handy*, *Talkmaster*, etc.), and lately the impression is growing that there are more every day. This might remind us: language serves us not only as a means of communication; it is also a means to impress. It is this fact that we probably have to thank for the inflationary speed of innovation in young people's slang and in advertising, and also, at least to some extent, for the flood of use of English expressions. Behavior meant to impress is an integral part of the human behavioral repertoire, and the use of foreign expressions as a documentation of one's own superiority is an long-lived tradition. Only the source shifts from time to time. In the eighteenth century, French was an excellent tool for simulating social standing, and was finally parodied in so-called »Dienstmädchenfranzösisch« (»maid French«). »Kitchen Latin,« as it was called, was a caricature of the documentation of academic prowess; now, it's English's turn, from *asset management* and *abgespaced* to *cash flow* and *cool* all the way to *zero bonds* and *zappen*. Some of it is snappy, a lot is unnecessary, and most of it is just plain embarrassing. But here, too, we may ask: does the German language system suffer because of it? And here, too, I am of the opinion that the answer is »no.« I will name just three reasons for this view:

1. Not every ad-hoc borrowing makes its way into the language. Most of them are fly-by-night characters or seasonal changes in fashion. For our grandchildren, the expressions *cool* and *grooving* in German will be as appealing as *knorke* or *dufte* are to us. The word *Handy* (a mobile telephone) might last, and may even – who knows – live out an unremarkable, mousy existence in the modernized spelling *Händi*, like the current Anglicisms *Streik*, *Keks*, *Gully* or *Tank*. That *Handy* is not really English will bother us as little as does the fact that a *Plantage* in French is actually plantation.



2. A quick look through the *Orthographische Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* («Orthographic Dictionary of the German Language») that Konrad Duden presented in 1880 confirms that under the letter »A« alone, hundreds of foreign words are listed that are no longer found in the current Duden, either because they have fallen completely out of use or are not even known: *abalinieren, Abandonnement, abducieren, abhorrescieren, abhorrieren, abjurieren, ablaktieren, affrontieren, ambieren, Aneurie, attrapieren, azotisch*, etc. People who are linguistically xenophobic should balance the immigrants with the emigrants. As far as I know, no one has ever done this.
3. What would happen if, someday, a significant percentage of German vocabulary were really derived from English? We can answer this question by looking at those languages in which an analogous process has actually taken place. A perfect example for an »excessively foreign« language is English: About 30 to 40 percent of English vocabulary comes from French, thanks to the Norman Conquest and the fact that English nobility tended to converse in French right up into the eighteenth century. It is obvious that neither the appeal of English nor its usefulness have suffered – just as little as Spanish has suffered from overwhelming Arabic influence or Korean from the influence of Chinese.

Thus, as we can see, the supposed threat to German by foreign elements is also less dramatic than assumed; even if the threat were considerable, this would do no damage in the long run, either functionally or aesthetically. The various states of language are not final, but fleeting episodes in a potentially unending process of cultural evolution. There is no reason to worry – or, as Professor Rainer Wimmer, the former director of the Institut für Deutsche Sprache, once put it, »German is holding up just fine.«



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✉ DOCUMENT:

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✉ AUTHOR:

RUDI KELLER

✉ DATE:

2004-07-12

✉ PAGE:

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