**The Awful German Language by Mark Twain**

*[This is Appendix D from Twain's 1880 book A Tramp Abroad. (abridged)]*

I went often to look at the collection of curiosities in Heidelberg Castle, and one day I surprised the keeper of it with my German. I spoke entirely in that language. He was greatly interested; and after I had talked a while he said my German was very rare, possibly a "unique"; and wanted to add it to his museum.

If he had known what it had cost me to acquire my art, he would also have known that it would break any collector to buy it. Harris and I had been hard at work on our German during several weeks at that time, and although we had made good progress, it had been accomplished under great difficulty and annoyance, for three of our teachers had died in the mean time. A person who has not studied German can form no idea of what a perplexing language it is.

Surely there is not another language that is so slipshod and system-less, and so slippery and elusive to the grasp. One is washed about in it, hither and thither, in the most helpless way; and when at last he thinks he has captured a rule which offers firm ground to take a rest on amid the general rage and turmoil of the ten parts of speech, he turns over the page and reads, "Let the pupil make careful note of the following **exceptions**." He runs his eye down and finds that there are more exceptions to the rule than instances of it. So overboard he goes again, to hunt for another Ararat and find another quicksand. Such has been, and continues to be, my experience.

Every time I think I have got one of these four confusing "cases" where I am master of it, a seemingly insignificant preposition intrudes itself into my sentence, clothed with an awful and unsuspected power, and crumbles the ground from under me. For instance, my book inquires after a certain bird -- (it is always inquiring after things which are of no sort of consequence to anybody): "Where is the bird?" Now the answer to this question -- according to the book -- is that the bird is waiting in the blacksmith shop on account of the rain. Of course no bird would do that, but then you must stick to the book. Very well, I begin to cipher out the German for that answer. I begin at the wrong end, necessarily, for that is the German idea. I say to myself, "**Regen** (rain) is masculine -- or maybe it is feminine -- or possibly neuter -- it is too much trouble to look now. Therefore, it is either **der** (the) Regen, or **die** (the) Regen, or **das** (the) Regen, according to which gender it may turn out to be when I look. In the interest of science, I will cipher it out on the hypothesis that it is masculine. Very well -- then **the** rain is **der** Regen, if it is simply in the quiescent state of being **mentioned**, without enlargement or discussion -- Nominative case; but if this rain is lying around, in a kind of a general way on the ground, it is then definitely located, it is **doing something** -- that is, **resting** (which is one of the German grammar's ideas of doing something), and this throws the rain into the Dative case, and makes it **dem** Regen. However, this rain is not resting, but is doing something **actively**, -- it is falling -- to interfere with the bird, likely -- and this indicates **movement**, which has the effect of sliding it into the Accusative case and changing **dem** Regen into **den** Regen." Having completed the grammatical horoscope of this matter, I answer up confidently and state in German that the bird is staying in the blacksmith shop "wegen (on account of) **den** Regen." Then the teacher lets me softly down with the remark that whenever the word "wegen" drops into a sentence, it **always** throws that subject into the **Genitive** case, regardless of consequences -- and that therefore this bird stayed in the blacksmith shop "wegen **des** Regens."

N. B. -- I was informed, later, by a higher authority, that there was an "exception" which permits one to say "wegen **den** Regen" in certain peculiar and complex circumstances, but that this exception is not extended to anything **but** rain.

There are ten parts of speech, and they are all troublesome. An average sentence, in a German newspaper, is a sublime and impressive curiosity; it occupies a quarter of a column; it contains all the ten parts of speech -- not in regular order, but mixed; it is built mainly of compound words constructed by the writer on the spot, and not to be found in any dictionary -- six or seven words compacted into one, without joint or seam -- that is, without hyphens; it treats of fourteen or fifteen different subjects, each inclosed in a parenthesis of its own, with here and there extra parentheses which reinclose three or four of the minor parentheses, making pens within pens: finally, all the parentheses and reparentheses are massed together between a couple of king-parentheses, one of which is placed in the first line of the majestic sentence and the other in the middle of the last line of it -- **after which comes the VERB**, and you find out for the first time what the man has been talking about; and after the verb -- merely by way of ornament, as far as I can make out -- the writer shovels in "**haben sind gewesen gehabt haben geworden sein**," or words to that effect, and the monument is finished. I suppose that this closing hurrah is in the nature of the flourish to a man's signature -- not necessary, but pretty. German books are easy enough to read when you hold them before the looking-glass or stand on your head -- so as to reverse the construction -- but I think that to learn to read and understand a German newspaper is a thing which must always remain an impossibility to a foreigner.

In a German newspaper they put their verb away over on the next page; and I have heard that sometimes after stringing along the exciting preliminaries and parentheses for a column or two, they get in a hurry and have to go to press without getting to the verb at all. Of course, then, the reader is left in a very exhausted and ignorant state.

The Germans have another kind of parenthesis, which they make by splitting a verb in two and putting half of it at the beginning of an exciting chapter and the **other half** at the end of it. Can any one conceive of anything more confusing than that? These things are called "separable verbs." The German grammar is blistered all over with separable verbs; and the wider the two portions of one of them are spread apart, the better the author of the crime is pleased with his performance. A favorite one is **reiste ab** -- which means departed. Here is an example which I culled from a novel and reduced to English:

"The trunks being now ready, he **DE-** after kissing his mother and sisters, and once more pressing to his bosom his adored Gretchen, who, dressed in simple white muslin, with a single tuberose in the ample folds of her rich brown hair, had tottered feebly down the stairs, still pale from the terror and excitement of the past evening, but longing to lay her poor aching head yet once again upon the breast of him whom she loved more dearly than life itself, **PARTED**."

However, it is not well to dwell too much on the separable verbs. One is sure to lose his temper early; and if he sticks to the subject, and will not be warned, it will at last either soften his brain or petrify it. Personal pronouns and adjectives are a fruitful nuisance in this language, and should have been left out. For instance, the same sound, **sie**, means **you**, and it means **she**, and it means **her**, and it means **it**, and it means **they**, and it means **them**. Think of the ragged poverty of a language which has to make one word do the work of six -- and a poor little weak thing of only three letters at that. But mainly, think of the exasperation of never knowing which of these meanings the speaker is trying to convey. This explains why, whenever a person says **sie** to me, I generally try to kill him, if a stranger.

Now observe the Adjective. Here was a case where simplicity would have been an advantage; therefore, for no other reason, the inventor of this language complicated it all he could. When we wish to speak of our "good friend or friends," in our enlightened tongue, we stick to the one form and have no trouble or hard feeling about it; but with the German tongue it is different. When a German gets his hands on an adjective, he declines it, and keeps on declining it until the common sense is all declined out of it. It is as bad as Latin. He says, for instance:

* SINGULAR
  + Nominative -- Mein gut**er** Freund, my good friend.
  + Genitives -- Mein**es** gut**en** Freund**es**, of my good friend.
  + Dative -- Mein**em** gut**en** Freund, to my good friend.
  + Accusative -- Mein**en** gut**en** Freund, my good friend.
* PLURAL
  + N. -- Mein**e** gut**en** Freund**e**, my good friends.
  + G. -- Mein**er** gut**en** Freund**e**, of my good friends.
  + D. -- Mein**en** gut**en** Freund**en**, to my good friends.
  + A. -- Mein**e** gut**en** Freund**e**, my good friends.

Now let the candidate for the asylum try to memorize those variations, and see how soon he will be elected. One might better go without friends in Germany than take all this trouble about them. I have shown what a bother it is to decline a good (male) friend; well this is only a third of the work, for there is a variety of new distortions of the adjective to be learned when the object is feminine, and still another when the object is neuter. Now there are more adjectives in this language than there are black cats in Switzerland, and they must all be as elaborately declined as the examples above suggested. Difficult? -- troublesome? -- these words cannot describe it. I heard a Californian student in Heidelberg say, in one of his calmest moods, that he would rather decline two drinks than one German adjective.

In German, all the Nouns begin with a capital letter. Now that is a good idea; and a good idea, in this language, is necessarily conspicuous from its lonesomeness. I consider this capitalizing of nouns a good idea, because by reason of it you are almost always able to tell a noun the minute you see it. You fall into error occasionally, because you mistake the name of a person for the name of a thing, and waste a good deal of time trying to dig a meaning out of it. German names almost always do mean something, and this helps to deceive the student. I translated a passage one day, which said that "the infuriated tigress broke loose and utterly ate up the unfortunate fir forest" (**Tannenwald**). When I was girding up my loins to doubt this, I found out that Tannenwald in this instance was a man's name.

Every noun has a gender, and there is no sense or system in the distribution; so the gender of each must be learned separately and by heart. There is no other way. To do this one has to have a memory like a memorandum-book. In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl. See how it looks in print -- I translate this from a conversation in one of the best of the German Sunday-school books:

"**Gretchen**.

Wilhelm, where is the turnip?

**Wilhelm**.

She has gone to the kitchen.

**Gretchen**.

Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden?

**Wilhelm**.

It has gone to the opera."

To continue with the German genders: a tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female -- tomcats included, of course; a person's mouth, neck, bosom, elbows, fingers, nails, feet, and body are of the male sex, and his head is male or neuter according to the word selected to signify it, and **not** according to the sex of the individual who wears it -- for in Germany all the women either male heads or sexless ones; a person's nose, lips, shoulders, breast, hands, and toes are of the female sex; and his hair, ears, eyes, chin, legs, knees, heart, and conscience haven't any sex at all. The inventor of the language probably got what he knew about a conscience from hearsay.

Now, by the above dissection, the reader will see that in Germany a man may **think** he is a man, but when he comes to look into the matter closely, he is bound to have his doubts; he finds that in sober truth he is a most ridiculous mixture; and if he ends by trying to comfort himself with the thought that he can at least depend on a third of this mess as being manly and masculine, the humiliating second thought will quickly remind him that in this respect he is no better off than any woman or cow in the land.

In the German it is true that by some oversight of the inventor of the language, a Woman is a female; but a Wife (**Weib**) is not -- which is unfortunate. A Wife, here, has no sex; she is neuter; so, according to the grammar, a fish is **he**, his scales are **she**, but a fishwife is neither. To describe a wife as sexless may be called under-description; that is bad enough, but over-description is surely worse. A German speaks of an Englishman as the **Engländer**; to change the sex, he adds **inn**, and that stands for Englishwoman -- **Engländerinn**. That seems descriptive enough, but still it is not exact enough for a German; so he precedes the word with that article which indicates that the creature to follow is feminine, and writes it down thus: "**die** Engländer**inn**," -- which means "the **she-Englishwoman**." I consider that that person is over-described.

The reader can see for himself that this pronoun business is a very awkward thing for the unaccustomed tongue. I suppose that in all languages the similarities of look and sound between words which have no similarity in meaning are a fruitful source of perplexity to the foreigner. It is so in our tongue, and it is notably the case in the German. Now there is that troublesome word **vermählt**: to me it has so close a resemblance -- either real or fancied -- to three or four other words, that I never know whether it means despised, painted, suspected, or married; until I look in the dictionary, and then I find it means the latter. There are lots of such words and they are a great torment. To increase the difficulty there are words which **seem** to resemble each other, and yet do not; but they make just as much trouble as if they did. For instance, there is the word **vermiethen** (to let, to lease, to hire); and the word **verheirathen** (another way of saying to marry). I heard of an Englishman who knocked at a man's door in Heidelberg and proposed, in the best German he could command, to "verheirathen" that house. Then there are some words which mean one thing when you emphasize the first syllable, but mean something very different if you throw the emphasis on the last syllable. For instance, there is a word which means a runaway, or the act of glancing through a book, according to the placing of the emphasis; and another word which signifies to **associate** with a man, or to **avoid** him, according to where you put the emphasis -- and you can generally depend on putting it in the wrong place and getting into trouble.

In my note-book I find this entry:

**July 1**. -- In the hospital yesterday, a word of thirteen syllables was successfully removed from a patient -- a North German from near Hamburg; but as most unfortunately the surgeons had opened him in the wrong place, under the impression that he contained a panorama, he died. The sad event has cast a gloom over the whole community.

That paragraph furnishes a text for a few remarks about one of the most curious and notable features of my subject -- the length of German words. Some German words are so long that they have a perspective. Observe these examples:

* Freundschaftsbezeigungen.
* Dilettantenaufdringlichkeiten.
* Stadtverordnetenversammlungen.

These things are not words, they are alphabetical processions. And they are not rare; one can open a German newspaper at any time and see them marching majestically across the page -- and if he has any imagination he can see the banners and hear the music, too. They impart a martial thrill to the meekest subject. I take a great interest in these curiosities. Whenever I come across a good one, I stuff it and put it in my museum. In this way I have made quite a valuable collection. When I get duplicates, I exchange with other collectors, and thus increase the variety of my stock. Here rare some specimens which I lately bought at an auction sale of the effects of a bankrupt bric-a-brac hunter:

* Generalstaatsverordnetenversammlungen.
* Alterthumswissenschaften.
* Kinderbewahrungsanstalten.
* Unabhängigkeitserklärungen.
* Wiedererstellungbestrebungen.
* Waffenstillstandsunterhandlungen.

Of course when one of these grand mountain ranges goes stretching across the printed page, it adorns and ennobles that literary landscape -- but at the same time it is a great distress to the new student, for it blocks up his way; he cannot crawl under it, or climb over it, or tunnel through it. So he resorts to the dictionary for help, but there is no help there. The dictionary must draw the line somewhere -- so it leaves this sort of words out. And it is right, because these long things are hardly legitimate words, but are rather combinations of words, and the inventor of them ought to have been killed. They are compound words with the hyphens left out. The various words used in building them are in the dictionary, but in a very scattered condition; so you can hunt the materials out, one by one, and get at the meaning at last, but it is a tedious and harassing business. I have tried this process upon some of the above examples. "**Freundschaftsbezeigungen**" seems to be "Friendship demonstrations," which is only a foolish and clumsy way of saying "demonstrations of friendship." "**Unabhängigkeitserklärungen**" seems to be "Independence declarations," which is no improvement upon "Declarations of Independence," so far as I can see. "**Generalstaatsverordnetenversammlungen**" seems to be "General-states-representatives‑meetings," as nearly as I can get at it -- a mere rhythmical, gushy euphuism for "meetings of the legislature," I judge. We used to have a good deal of this sort of crime in our literature, but it has gone out now. We used to speak of a things as a "never-to-be-forgotten" circumstance, instead of cramping it into the simple and sufficient word "memorable" and then going calmly about our business as if nothing had happened. In those days we were not content to embalm the thing and bury it decently, we wanted to build a monument over it.

"In the daybeforeyesterdayshortlyaftereleveno'clock Night, the inthistownstandingtavern called `The Wagoner' was downburnt. When the fire to the onthedownburninghouseresting Stork's Nest reached, flew the parent Storks away. But when the bytheraging, firesurrounded Nest **itself** caught Fire, straightway plunged the quickreturning Mother-stork into the Flames and died, her Wings over her young ones outspread."

Even the cumbersome German construction is not able to take the pathos out of that picture -- indeed, it somehow seems to strengthen it. This item is dated away back yonder months ago. I could have used it sooner, but I was waiting to hear from the Father-stork. I am still waiting.

If I had not shown that the German is a difficult language, I have at least intended to do so. I have heard of an American student who was asked how he was getting along with his German, and who answered promptly: "I am not getting along at all. I have worked at it hard for three level months, and all I have got to show for it is one solitary German phrase -- `**Zwei Glas**'" (two glasses of beer). He paused for a moment, reflectively; then added with feeling: "But I've got that **solid**!"

There are people in the world who will take a great deal of trouble to point out the faults in a religion or a language, and then go blandly about their business without suggesting any remedy. I am not that kind of person. I have shown that the German language needs reforming. Very well, I am ready to reform it. At least I am ready to make the proper suggestions. Such a course as this might be immodest in another; but I have devoted upward of nine full weeks, first and last, to a careful and critical study of this tongue, and thus have acquired a confidence in my ability to reform it which no mere superficial culture could have conferred upon me.

I would leave out the Dative case. It confuses the plurals; and, besides, nobody ever knows when he is in the Dative case, except he discover it by accident -- and then he does not know when or where it was that he got into it, or how long he has been in it, or how he is going to get out of it again. The Dative case is but an ornamental folly -- it is better to discard it.

I would move the Verb further up to the front. You may load up with ever so good a Verb, but I notice that you never really bring down a subject with it at the present German range -- you only cripple it. So I insist that this important part of speech should be brought forward to a position where it may be easily seen with the naked eye.

I would do away with those great long compounded words; or require the speaker to deliver them in sections, with intermissions for refreshments. To wholly do away with them would be best, for ideas are more easily received and digested when they come one at a time than when they come in bulk. Intellectual food is like any other; it is pleasanter and more beneficial to take it with a spoon than with a shovel.

Infractions of this law should be punishable with death.

I have now named what I regard as the most necessary and important changes. These are perhaps all I could be expected to name for nothing; but there are other suggestions which I can and will make in case my proposed application shall result in my being formally employed by the government in the work of reforming the language.

My philological studies have satisfied me that a gifted person ought to learn English (barring spelling and pronouncing) in thirty hours, French in thirty days, and German in thirty years. It seems manifest, then, that the latter tongue ought to be trimmed down and repaired. If it is to remain as it is, it ought to be gently and reverently set aside among the dead languages, for only the dead have time to learn it.