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At least Germans can speak German

Mark Twain once wrote an essay titled "The Awful German Language." If you are not familiar with the essay, the basic premise is this: the German language is awful. He has a slew of examples at his disposal, which he uses as evidence of the language which, according to him, is "slipshod and systemless … slippery and elusive to the grasp." What he failed to recognize, is the structured rigidity that Germans are so famously stereotyped for, helps to provide much structure to the language. Structure that is missing in other languages such as Slavic languages. Slavic languages include Czech, Slovak and Polish among others, and speaking as an American university student who studied Czech for four months… they all sound the same. Now perhaps that's true of many similarly-grouped foreign languages, and perhaps 4 months really is not that long of a time, but compared to German, Slavic languages are slippery, slick, and smooth. There are 4 reasons why.

1.

The smallest unit in any written language is the letter, and having to learn more or less letters than a native language can be one of the greatest challenges, because letters dictate pronunciation. In the English language, there are 26 letters. In German, 30 letters, and Czech has 42 letters. To start with, the additional letters in German are mainly the three dipthongs of the alphabet. A dipthong is a single letter that has two sounds. This may sound weird to English speakers (but then again, letters with no sounds are equally weird). The combinations are ae, oe and ue, and they are marked as a or o or u respectively with a pair of dots over the single letter. The fourth letter, often American students' favorite, the ettsett. The symbol looks like a capital

B, but without severing the two holes completely, and it symbolizes two s's. Why they needed a single letter for two s's is and not to m's is beyond me.

In Czech, there are significantly more letters and sounds. These different letters are still within the Roman alphabet. Some consonants have a dash angled to the right, and some of them have a little hat, called a hatchek. The dashes simply elongate the sound, while the hatchek softens it. A hard "d" sound becomes a softened "dee-yuh" (said very rapidly). There is also a double letter, ch, which is treated as a single letter, and produces a much more guttural sound. It stands out in contrast to words such as *musíte jít*, or *hledáme*, making it all that more noticeable in words like *poslouchat,* or *chceš*. The soft curvatures of the 's' or the 'i' are made distinctive when matched by the guttural roar of the ch, which makes it sound like the speaker is trying to cough up a hairball.

The letter that every American hates however is the R with the hatchek. Written out phonetically, it sounds like a rapid fire td td td. However, it appears to also have a 'j' sound, and is said so rapidly, even when slowed down for linguistic thickheads like me, is too fast to comprehend. Dvořak is the most famous example of how the letter r works. I wish I were exaggerating how difficult this letter is, but my host father in the Czech Republic shared that it took him (a native born Czech I might add) nearly two decades to learn out to pronounce the letter. Not even Czechs can speak their own language. At least Germans can.

2.

To start off his essay, Twain complains about the verb, first and foremost. Why? It's quite simple after all; the active verb is the second position in the sentence. All other verbs stay in their infinitive form and are placed at the end of the sentence. Once you learn what positions are (basically think who, what, when, where, how as different positions of a sentence) the

placement is easy. One complaint he brings up, which is valid, are the separable verbs. On the one hand, who wants to put “de” in the second position and “parted” at the end of the sentence. No one. On the other hand, 2nd position is a friend, creating a clear and logical placement for *all verbs in the language*. You probably wish English were that simple, don’t you? It becomes a matter of learning and memorizing which tenses use which verbs. All secondary verbs are placed at the end of the sentence, no matter which tense.

In the Czech language, to discuss verbs, there must also be a discussion of pronouns, because they are one and the same. Ok, not technically, but Czech does not use pronouns! Conjugation, which is one of many concepts that does not really exist in the English language (to the degree it does in others) determines the pronoun being referred to, and therefore the context of the entire conversation. If talking about yourself, you introduce your name with the pronoun, and then after that just the verb. An introduction looks like this: “I am Joe. Am student. Am Creative Writing major. Am not employed. Yet.” Now, one could look at this and say how convenient that is, you let the conjugation do all the work, so you don’t have to remember all the various pronouns. That is until you see how varied verb conjugation is, even within the same verb ending groups. At least German is consistent with the groups, and any exceptions lie outside of the verb ending groupings.

3.

Nouns. Another thing that German does right, which Twain acknowledges, is that every noun is capitalized. Every single noun. This is a blessing, especially someone who is partially knowledgeable in the language. You get a basic categorization of the words of nouns and non-nouns. Basic grammer and position placement can then help you figure out verbs, reducing the puzzle even more.

To be fair however, the Czechs have a different system that tends to work. They do not capitalize their nouns, which can make looking at billboards or signs a positively nightmarish experience. Rather, they have an interesting trick using letters. First however, I must tell you about gendered languages, if you don't already know. Like conjugation, almost any other language in the world except English has gendered nouns, and these genders tend to be masculine, feminine and neutral. The reason this matters is it comes up with the use of adjectives, and this is true in both German and Czech, which shall be the fourth point of this essay. In the Czech language, the last letter of nouns almost always determines the gender of the noun. If a word ends in a consonant, you know for sure that it is a masculine noun. No other part of speech or gendered noun will ever end in a consonant. If the word ends in 'a' then it is always a feminine noun, and if the noun ends in 'o' then it is always a neutral noun. Now, of course, like all languages there are exceptions. Nouns can also end in 'e' or 'i' and these nouns can be either feminine or neutral. If you don't know, well, you're just plain old out of luck.

4.

The second complaint Twain marks down in his essay is adjective endings – a phenomenon, like gendered language and conjugation, that exists in almost every language in the world except English. Based on the gender of the noun: masculine, feminine, and neutral, the adjective endings respectively change. After these endings are memorized, the only complicated part is learning different cases. These include Nominative, Accusative, Dative and Genitive. The English language has these same four cases, though students rarely learn them by name any more. And compared to Latin's 7 cases, German students should dance with joy. And yet, Twain writes that he once met a Californian student in Heidelberg who would "rather decline two drinks than one German adjective." Of Twain's complaints, this is perhaps the least exaggerated

and most legitimate, adjective endings are hard and do require pure memorization, but once the pattern is figured out, much like the rest of the language, logic and order follow.

In the Czech language, adjective endings follow the same kinds of rules, the one major exception is that feminine nouns change in the accusative case rather than masculine nouns, though I admit this is a German to Czech language student complaint, and a pretty small one at that. The application is different though the rules are the same, which was actually helped by my understanding of German.

And that is perhaps the bottom line here. These complaints raised by Twain and I: they are a privilege. It is a privilege to know and speak two languages, let alone be familiar with a third. It is a privilege to dissect languages and see what makes sense, and what is illogical. In his essay Twain deconstructed the language, and then proposed six changes he would make to improve the language himself. I will not go so far with the Czech language, but rather compliment it on its beauty. German to me is rigid and logical (with exceptions to the side of course) and the sound of the language reflects that in its harsh sounds and strict letters. Czech is far more fluid and soft, utilizing a greater alphabet to take advantage of greater subtleties of phonetic capabilities. By reducing words that are needed (compressing them into simply verbs), the language is able to ‘cut corners’ in music and poetry to reduce the artistic quality to the essential core.