

CONTEMPORARY GERMAN: A SOCIOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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In speaking about contemporary German as well as about present-day English, there is always the meaning of a special status involved. Knowingly or not, we use these terms as opposed to some other status of a given language, which we may not be able to define clearly, but which is an older status, of course. We may find it hard, too, to define what is meant by the term "Contemporary". Is what we said yesterday, or what was printed ten years ago, still contemporary, or not? Somewhere along this line we shall definitely reach a point where we have to admit that a specific piece of language is no longer the contemporary or present-day type of language.

Observations like these mean that change is involved. There have been changes in language habits between the time just discussed and our own days. And here we have our problem: Everybody feels that there have been changes, without being able to go into details, and at this point scholarly research has to start.

First of all we have to ask: What changes can we observe leading from an older stage of a given language to its present use? Second and very important: Is there any motive by which these changes may be explained? And by finding an answer to this, we may be able, thirdly, to see since when this or these motives have been effective, so that we may come to a position allowing us to state the starting-point of such developments.

Although these general remarks may apply to all research into the development of any given language, I shall confine myself to a discussion of some recent developments in the German language, and I am concerned only with the written or printed language (*Schriftsprache*). I shall not dig into the development of colloquial German (*Umgangssprache*), although at a certain point in our discussions we shall have to go back to general observations on colloquial speech. In considering changes in language, I therefore have in mind only those which can be observed in the written German of today.

Of the many changes one might observe in modern German, I am not concerned at all with certain developments of sounds and of morphological forms. They would not lead us very far, and certain orthographic changes are even less significant. The most popular argument in discussing modern language development is that of changes in the vocabulary. It is obvious that there have been such revolutionary changes in the material and the intellectual *Umwelt* of civilized men during the last hundred years that the vocabulary of all civilized languages has been exposed to enormous alterations. This, in fact, is a world-wide experience.

But still, I think, too much stress has been laid upon this side of language development, even by scholars, who — as far as I can see — have made this popular argument their own in a somewhat uncritical manner. Taking into account all sorts of expressions that come from different sections of modern public life, e. g. from the language of administration, of politics and economics, of strategy, of science and technology, of journalism, of sport, of craftsmen and soldiers and sailors, you might have to list hundreds and thousands of words which are in common use now. But even the vastest collection of new words could not really give a description of Modern German, nor could you describe in terms of a neologistic vocabulary the distinctive features of present-day English. It is only one slice of the apple, and spectacular as it may be, it is not the most important one. The change of vocabulary does not make such difference. Words are like coins. You may exchange them very easily, and one shilling is as good as another. It does not affect the monetary system if you take this or that coin, nor does it affect the linguistic system if you put in this or that word.

To stick to our metaphor: There is a difference in fact if you pay in copper or in silver, and you might compare certain layers of words to one or other of these metals. We shall have to come back to this observation later. But still, the use of one of them does not alter the monet-

ary nor the linguistic structure. On the other hand, if you switch over from your tripartite monetary system to a centesimal system, then you really will have a structural change in your monetary order. The whole framework of thinking in terms of money will have to be altered. And in language it really means change if the framework in which you used to express yourself is altered, that is to say, if the habits of framing sentences, clauses and phrases are changed.

To say it in one word: The most important changes you can observe in a given language are those of its syntactical structure. Changes in the sentence patterns really affect the core of language. And it is these syntactical changes I am reflecting upon, when speaking about contemporary German as opposed to the written German language used in earlier times, let us say in the time of the German classic authors.

You will probably agree that no author of our days would be able to write like Goethe or Schiller, or in the field of English literature like Dickens or Byron or Shelley, not necessarily because of lack of ability, nor because of the change of vocabulary, but because we do not have the habit of framing our sentences in the same way as our ancestors did. Of course, there are many other problems involved, such as the change of philosophy and thinking, of subjects and of interests, but still I think that the purely syntactical question is a very important one.)

But just to claim that there have been syntactical changes will not be enough. A scholarly approach requires the development of methods by which one can prove that there have been changes and what has been changed. It is difficult, though, to find an adequate method. In describing what any contemporary language is like, a very big obstacle is the bewildering mass production of language, day after day. Therefore, I decided to make use of a "representative cross-section". And further, I thought that a medium stratum of present-day German might be best for the kind of research I had in mind, a sort of language without any special stylistic ambitions, intellectually sober, not grasping at popular effects. So I took for a starting-point a well-known pocket-book series, *Rowohlt's deutsche Enzyklopädie*, in which scholars from the most varied fields discuss their subjects, intending to be understood by a rather broad public.

From each of the first fifty volumes of this series, that is to say from fifty different authors, I took one thousand consecutive sentences, leaving out only quotations, statistics and similar things. In these 50,000 sentences the number of words was counted, taking as a "word" what stands in print by itself and is separated from the neighbouring words by a space, thus cutting out all those tricky questions about what a word is.

This initial stage already produced quite important results. It showed that, in this type of present-day German, sentences containing 16 words are preferred to others. They form a maximum or the top point of a rather regular curve, which, ascending from a small number of very short sentences reaches this maximum rather soon, and thereafter declines more slowly towards the longer sentences.

Altogether, about one-half of all the sentences were in the range between 8 and 23 words, and two-thirds of all in the range of 8 to 30 words. I may remark that in the meantime we have been busy comparing 50,000 sentences written by 50 leading journalists of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Their sentences are even shorter, the maximum being 12 or 13 words; more than 50% of all sentences here range between 6 and 20 words. In comparison, Lessing, who wrote the shortest sentences among German classics, seems to have a maximum of about 24 words, and Schiller's phrases are even longer (these figures are arrived at by a preliminary count of only 1,000 phrases each, not enough to allow firm statements). Extending the research to include trivial authors of the time of Goethe, I found that their sentences tend to be much longer than those of their famous contemporaries. Here, then, we have the first reliable fact to prove our statement. Sentences have become remarkably shorter compared with the length usual 150 years ago, and it really means change when the structural frames you are accustomed to utter your thoughts in, get narrower to the extent shown by these figures.

Of course, there are many more instances of change to be discussed. But 50,000 sentences were far too bulky to arrive at the results I was out for. So I decided to take the sentences of 16 words as a standard, and for comparative research to select all the sentences containing 4,

8, 24 and 32 words each. This ended up in a catalogue of more than 5,500 sentences (now to be checked against about 6,500 sentences of the same length, written by journalists), and there is a team of junior scholars and students at my home University helping me to evaluate both these catalogues. All our sentences are put onto punch cards, and we do a big proportion of our research work by using computer machines. We aim at a thorough description of all grammatical, especially syntactical, features of Modern German by means of researching on the complete material which is contained in both catalogues.

To come back then to our question of syntactic changes. As far as language structure is concerned, the way in which sentences are built seems very important. In German, as in other Indo-European languages, you may have just plain phrases or sentences containing subordinate clauses and so on. It was therefore easy enough to divide our material into four main structural groups.

1. The first one is what I call *Setzungen*, that is incomplete sentences, where mostly at least the predicate is missing. There were 143 instances, or 2.5% of my catalogue.

2. *Einjachsätze*, just simple sentences, not containing any subordinate clause. With 2271 instances, they make 41% of my material.

3. There is a trend in modern German to string simple sentences together, not separating them by a full stop. As I understand it, an author puts a stop when he thinks the thought he wants to express is complete; as long as he does not put in the stop, his thought still goes on. Therefore I took into account what I call *Reihungen*, which means a series of at least two single sentences, not separated by a stop. There were no less than 755 such series, or 13.5%, in my catalogue.

4. Finally, there are those sentences which besides at least one main clause contain one or more subordinate clauses. We call these in German *Gefüge*, which might be translated by "periodic sentences". We found 2,402 instances, or 43%, of them in the catalogue.

These figures need some interpretation. Especially the numbers of simple sentences and of series, consisting of simple sentences, are of interest. Ninetenths of the 8-word sentences fall into these categories, about 55% of the 16's, 40% of the 24-word phrases, and even of the very long sentences containing 32 words, there is exactly one-third not containing any subordinate clause.

Here I cannot give any comparative figures from 150 years ago. But experience shows that in written language periodic sentences (*Gefüge*, our fourth group) outnumbered simple sentences by far at that time.

The same is true in respect of the unfinished sentences (*Setzungen*). A percentage of 2.5 may seem unimportant. But it must be pointed out that among the 4-word sentences no less than 56 out of 314, that is more than one-sixth, belong to this category, and that among the sentences of 16, 24 and 32 words, there are 32, 21 and 11 instances respectively to be found. On the other hand, you may run through pages and pages of classic prose without finding one single sample. I estimate there might be 0.1 to 0.2% to be found in classic prose writing. Against such low numbers even a percentage of 2.5 in modern prose writing carries weight.

Finally, looking at the 43% of periodic sentences, one might consider it to be an imposing figure. But, as said before, there have been far more instances in earlier writing. And still another point should be taken into account. Out of altogether 2,402 instances, only 644, not much more than a quarter, contain more than one subordinate clause, and this again is in sharp contrast with such elaborate sentence structures as, for example, Schiller was a master in.

Even more remarkable seems to be the kind of subordinate clauses which are used. A very high percentage, about 70 to 75% by my estimate, of all subordinate sentences are just relative clauses, a rather trivial sort of clause, not contributing to the logical order of thought in any way, but just adding something in an attributive manner to what has already been said, mostly by a preceding noun.

Another big group, comprising about 20% (estimated) are dependent clauses introduced by *dass*. These, too, are very trivial ones like the English clauses introduced by *that*. There is

left only a very small group, definitely less than 10%. of higher standing. Clauses introduced by *wenn, weil, da, obgleich, während*, really may add something to the logical order of thought. But, as the figures show, there are relatively few occurrences, sentences with *wenn*, meaning "if" as well as "when", being the largest sub-group. Causal or adversative connections are made rather by co-ordinating simple sentences, either introduced by an adverb, like *denn, trotzdem*, etc., or — more often — without any introduction at all. Especially this vanishing of dependent clauses, which contribute to the logical gradation of thought, is in contrast to the written expression of thoughts found in earlier times.

To sum up then, we may state that as far as sentence structure is concerned contemporary German prefers:

1. Relatively short sentences.
2. Simple sentences, not weighted by dependent clauses.
3. The simplest kinds of dependent clauses, if these are used at all.
4. The present-day German language is not sensitive to unfinished, broken sentences.

All these tendencies, to which some minor items might be added, are in strict contrast with the use of written language in classical times, and, as we may be allowed to state, without proving it, with the standards observed during the 19th century.

Looking at these distinctive features of modern written German, one will agree that they are in accordance with what we know about colloquial speech. Everywhere, colloquial language tends towards short utterances. In colloquial circumstances you do not use a sentence when a word will do. You will not say *Father is just entering the house*, when the door-bell rings, but you say simply *Father*, and everybody understands the meaning. All the unspoken remainder is understood from the circumstances. In written language the context plays the same role. In answering a rhetorical question one has asked in a paper, the statement *Das ganz gewiss nicht* (Certainly not) will be enough, corresponding to the same answer to a question in colloquial speech. In fact, this is a sentence (a *Setzung*) of my catalogue, and it should be kept in mind that our forefathers did not approve of this type of careless writing. For them, a written sentence had to be a full, grammatically correct sentence.

Colloquial language also prefers co-ordinating sentence structure to subordinating structure. This has been observed on many occasions and in many Indo-European languages. In the majority of plain sentences we have therefore another significant mark of similarity to colloquial language. On the other hand, there are dependent clauses in written German, naturally. But most of them are relative or *dass*-clauses, and exactly both these types even occur in colloquial speech of somewhat higher level, whereas dependent clauses of the purely logically subordinating type are almost unknown to colloquial speech. And, as we have seen, they do not occur in written language very often. So then it seems to me a fair and provable statement to say that modern written German is very close to colloquial German, as far as the framing of sentences is concerned.

At this point we should come back to the question of vocabulary, and to our image of silver and copper coin. In present-day written German, there is a tendency towards the use of popular or even vulgar words. I am not referring to earthy or even obscene language, although modern authors seem to have a certain preference for it. But there are quite a few slangy words, taken from workmen's or soldiers' daily lingo, creeping into the written standard language, and nobody seems to care. In a serious German newspaper I found the following sentence recently: *Wieder einmal hat die Partei gegen ihren Boss aufgemuckt* (Once again the party were quarrelling with their chairman). I do not think the word *Boss* very tasteful, but I did not feel any objection to *aufgemuckt, aufmucken*. I was all the more surprised to find that it had been listed in a German dictionary for the very first time only in 1939, and that there was a remark *seinem Gefühlsklang nach in gehobener Rede unmöglich*, which means more or less *on account of its connotations impossible in standard German*.

But this is only one point. The other one, less spectacular, but more important, as I see it, is the careless use of everyday expressions in writing. In my catalogue, I find a sentence

taken from an important report on physics: *Doch hat die ganze Sache leider einen Haken* (*But unfortunately, in the whole matter, there is a fly in the ointment*). Expressions such as *unfortunately, to my regret*, etc., are not standard usage in scholarly writing, but it is definitely unacceptable to term a scientific matter *the whole thing*, and *hat einen Haken*, instead of *there are some difficulties to overcome*, is plain slang. Nevertheless, there are dozens of samples of this type of careless writing, and all these authors are highly-educated men.

Here again, I think, the close connections between today's written German and common colloquial speech are obvious. These authors write as though they were speaking completely at their ease, and I should not except myself. Although aware of the fact that the written expression requires special attention, you just cannot avoid the common trend of language that you read and hear around you, day after day. Therefore, this careless use of daily words without any special meaning has become rather typical of the average German style of writing.

It is well known to philologists that there are periods in the history of languages when the written language goes entirely its own way and is quite remote from the spoken idiom, whereas there are also periods when both are in more or less close contact with each other. During the classical age of German literature, that is to say about 150 years ago, both language strata were very far distant from each other, although one may assume that at that time the written language influenced the spoken, and even the colloquial language of educated people to a certain extent. And it also seems to be a correct statement that during the 19th century upper-class society and even some middle-class people used the standards set by the classical authors as a yardstick for their written as well as their spoken language. Playwrights and novelists sometimes take advantage of this in gaining comic effects by making a character speak this special type of educated German, which is far out of the way of the usual colloquial speech.

If the classical standards were kept in written language during at least the first half of the nineteenth century, and if they even affected the colloquial language of the same period, there has been a complete change since then, almost a complete reversal: In the past a written language with high standards influenced the spoken language; whereas today a spoken language with comparatively low standards points the way for the written language.

A phenomenon like this demands explanation, especially in view of its astonishingly rapid development, and there must have been very strong influences to bring about such conspicuous changes. And this is the point where a sociological aspect may help to explain the facts.

Let us start with some observations on the classical type of language again. The language used by Schiller may give a good example. Certainly the idealism and the enthusiasm of this man have given high colour to his language, and they are completely his own. But still, his phrasing and his elaborate rhetorical style, his persuasiveness and impressiveness: these are elements of the language nobody could achieve by his own accomplishments alone. Behind a style like this there is a long tradition of centuries of teaching at schools of very high standards, handed down from master to pupil through a long series of generations. In fact, there is an unbroken line of high-quality education from early mediaeval times down to Schiller and down to some outstanding schools of the 19th century.

To be sure, this sort of education was suitable for, and extended to, only a very small group of privileged people. Only they were eligible for this sort of high-quality education. But in the social structure of that time, only these privileged men had any share in public life. And so far as language is concerned, they set the standards of writing, and anybody who took to the pen knew that there were binding standards he ought to meet.

As I understand the situation, these old traditions which were very much alive in our classical age have been lost since. The earlier scholarly system of school education was shaped for a small privileged group only, and it could not be maintained from the very moment when society was broadened and education was to be extended to many people. There could not even have been enough highly-trained teachers to extend this old traditional wisdom to the

growing numbers of pupils, quite apart from all the other reasons why in a broadening society education could not strike such deep roots as before.

The change in the German educational system was definitely a consequence of the social changes which occurred during the 19th century, or -- to put it more exactly -- during the second half of this century. In the early 19th century, the German civilization was at its height, but I think it is fair to say that it was a civilization of the great, noble landowners, and especially of the bourgeois society in the cities. And up to about 1850 and even longer, there were no conspicuous social changes in city life. As far as statistics are available, it is shown that during the first half of the 19th century cities were still relatively small, Berlin -- by far the biggest -- numbering about 50,000 to 60,000 inhabitants, and that their population did not grow in numbers during that time. In the rural districts, on the contrary, there was an enormous increase of population, and it is estimated that during the years between 1820 and 1850 the rural population figures were at least doubled everywhere, and in some districts even multiplied three or four times. There had been little development yet in the cities, and overcrowding, lack of employment and the utmost poverty were purely rural problems at that time. The rural masses received only a very elementary education, if any. And economically, there must have been the utmost poverty and an enormous pressure on the ever-growing population in the rural districts, especially in the eastern parts of Germany.

There was already a working-class population in the cities, but it was a rather small group, and did not grow during the first half of the century. It is important to know that there were no big industries in Germany at that time. It was only in the forties that the big industries of today started on a very small scale. The great-grandfathers of today's industrial leaders were skilled craftsmen, and at the beginning they ran workshops rather than small factories, employing only a few craftsmen, whom they would be able to find in their town. There was no place for unskilled labour at that time.

Even then, the population of the cities increased very slowly. If my memory is right, the city of Essen, the home of Krupp's, had a population of 6,000 in the forties, and in 1870 there were only 1,000 to 2,000 more. But during the thirty years from 1870 to 1900 its population was multiplied by nearly thirteen, numbering 96,000 or 98,000 inhabitants in 1900. In fact, it was the last three decades of the 19th century only, which brought the enormous rise of German industries and the over-accelerated increase of population in the cities. Certain historical facts seemingly had an overwhelming influence on this development: The Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 and the foundation of the Deutsches Reich, on 18th January 1871. The reparations France had to pay after the war brought an enormous amount of money for developing industries and at the same time the constitution of the Reich granted *Freizügigkeit* to everybody, that is, for the first time everybody was allowed to travel wherever he wanted within the Reich's boundaries, and to make his home wherever he pleased.

It must have been like an explosion at that time. Here, the huge masses of rural population, suddenly free to move wherever they liked, and there, the industrial works, developing incredibly fast and attracting hundreds of thousands of labourers from all over the Reich.

This development was to have an enormous impact upon city life. The gap between the established citizens and the newly-arrived have-nots could not be bridged. The differences were too big, and there was suspicion and distrust on both sides. Of course, it is impossible to give here a full picture of the development of social and political struggles, and all that has happened since. But here was a new class, at the outset striving just for survival, but very soon imbued by Marxist doctrines, and struggling for the human and civic rights of their class.

Coming back to education, it may be said that the new class did not have the privileges that the settled citizens enjoyed, and that many of them did not even want them. There was much criticism of the bourgeois type of education. But, of course, the new-comers wanted their fair share in education, and so a movement was started, which may be described as a democratization of the educational system, which in the long run turned out to be very healthy. I dare say that there are no educational restrictions or privileges for anybody in Germany nowadays.

Everybody who is intellectually able to benefit by it really gets his full share of education. But to achieve such an aim there had to be an educational evolution on a very broad scale, and part of it was the giving up of old traditions no longer applicable to the modern type of mass education.

This had its consequences in the field of language development, too. The newcomers brought with them the rather poor type of colloquial German of the rural districts, and their leaders were full of distrust not only of the bourgeois class but also of their cultured language. There is strong evidence to show that some influential leaders, fearing that the proletarian ways of thought might be weakened, even persuaded their followers not to read the bourgeois type of literature.

What are the consequences of this development on the language? In learning to use a language, and even in growing into your native tongue, you need examples. Up to the seventies of the 19th century the literature of preceding centuries had provided enough models for those learning how to handle the style of the written language, and the teachers themselves were imbued with tradition.

The large number of new teachers and even more the new students did not have these old traditions, but they still needed examples for use in teaching and in learning how to write, and many more people were expected to speak or write for the public than ever before. Now, as I understand it, not having any printed precedents which seemed to suit their purposes, they just made their own commonly-spoken language the model of their written German. So, I think, the loss of traditions and the need for new models, derived from the man-in-the-street's common language, are the main reasons for the great and sudden change of language structure in German.

Other reasons as well might be mentioned. Another very important one is the trend among public speakers and writers to wish to please their audience, and therefore to make use of the latter's language. This again sets precedents which other people will follow. One should mention also the changes of thought and philosophy, the stress and the haste of modern life, which gives you no time to think about what you say or write, and many other reasons. But these would not come under the sociological aspect, and therefore they may be left out here.

As I see it, this change of the German language has gone to such an extent that we can no longer speak of New High German in terms of a historical period of the language still in being. Contemporary German, a term as preliminary and inept as New High German was, is no longer New High German. To me at least, it seems to be a new period in the development of the German language. And as a periodic system asks for distinction by time, I would propose that the years 1870-71 be made the dividing line. The development began there, which came into full effect only during the thirties of our century, or even only after the last war, when the remnants of bourgeois order had been wiped out and the complete levelling-out of class differences became an acknowledged fact.

A few words still about Contemporary German. I do not want to be misunderstood. Today's written German is mainly based upon colloquial German, but both are not identical. Written language always has its own ways, and so has modern written German. An amazing amount of new syntactical features, especially in the field of nominal phrases, has been developed. There is no space left to discuss this matter thoroughly. Only a few samples may be allowed. In a newspaper copy, chosen at random, I found the following sentences, taken from an article on the German "Bundestag":

Die monatliche Tagegeldpauschale für Bundestagsabgeordnete soll künftig auf 1000 Mark erhöht werden.

What interests us here is the nominal phrase *Die monatliche Tagegeldpauschale für Bundestagsabgeordnete*. First you have here the prepositional attribute *für B.*, a very common construction in modern German, with dozens of samples on each printed page, but only sparingly used in written German at earlier times, when rather a relative clause would have occurred instead (*Die... Pauschale, welche den B. gewährt wird*).

But a special type of hidden attributes is of even more interest. There is a possibility of

forming compound nouns, which will never be entered in a dictionary, and of which the first part syntactically is an attribute to the second or basic part. In our sample the words *Tagegeld-pauschale* and *Bundestags-abgeordnete* are of this type. These *Augenblickskomposita* (compounds formed in and for the very moment of speaking or writing) are very typical features of modern German style, occurring in nearly every printed sentence, especially in newspapers and in scholarly writing. They are packed with an enormous amount of information, and they replace syntactical groups, which would require many words, e.g. *die Pauschale, die den Abgeordneten des Bundestages anstatt eines Tagegeldes gewährt wird.*

Another sample reads as follows:

Der Gesamtbetrag für die persönlichen Aufwendungen der Bundestagsabgeordneten im Jahre 1963 (einschliesslich Versicherung ...) macht ungefähr 13 Millionen Mark aus.

Again, we have a far extended nominal phrase, reaching from *Der* to *Versicherung*. Dependent on the *Augenblickskompositum* *Der Gesamtbetrag* (instead of *der gesamte Betrag*), we find the prepositional attribute *für die ... Aufwendungen* on which depend the genitive attribute *der Bundestagsabgeordneten* and the prepositional attribute *im Jahre 1963*. But the nominal phrase does not come to an end yet. There is still the parenthesis *einschliesslich Versicherung*, again dependent on *Aufwendungen*. Parentheses are another very typical feature of modern German prose. They allow the insertion of special information which the speaker or writer wants to give in addition to his main thought, at nearly every point of a sentence. A great variability in combining different thoughts by means of parenthesis has been developed, and, in fact, it is a very efficient way of accumulating information in a single phrase.

The samples discussed here may not be good style, but seem to be rather typical of the modern German way of writing. At least, they show the enormous development in the use of nominal phrases. These new forms of sentence-building are definitely not colloquial speech. They are quite distinct features of the written language only, very complicated sometimes. But they have developed within the framework which was set by colloquial speech with its short, plain sentences and its lack of dependent clauses.

It sometimes may seem a rather clumsy style you read in contemporary German print. But there has been good and bad style at any time. It is not the deficiency of the language if it is misused, but it is the fault of the individual author, who does not make proper use of his language. Modern German, by itself, is not better or worse than classical German, it is just different. It is much more condensed than it was at earlier stages, and also more versatile: a modern language, effective, fit for modern man.