

WHEN THE LECTURE AND THE PRIZE ARE IN ERROR

(Some common English mistakes by German-speaking academics)

by

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Almost everyone in Germany speaks fluent English, even if not everybody is comfortable doing so. This is particularly true in academic circles where most people speak nearly-perfect English, sometimes with a distinct British accent or throwing in Americanisms, depending where the speaker learned English.

Now, for an American beginning to learn the ways of this country, it appears that it is a trait of German character not to shy away from pointing out other people's mistakes (this is less so in many other cultures). In most cases, this is not at all intended to be hostile, but is driven by a general desire to see thing "done right." In this note, we adopt this friendly attitude and point out some common linguistic "crimes" in English often committed by German speaking academics.

Not surprisingly, most of these errors have to do with "false friends," i.e., words that sound similar in German and English but mean completely different things (like "gift") or slightly different things. As an example of the latter, consider the following statement by a German editor: "It might be enough, *when* the manuscript is carefully read by another researcher." What the editor really means here is *if*. A funny common error is the misuse of the word "prize" to mean "price" as in "You should buy this laser from us. We will offer you a good *prize*." "Safe the date" where "save" is meant is in the same category.

Sometimes one and the same word in German (e.g. ausleihen) needs to be translated into different words in English (lend or borrow, depending on the meaning). Not doing so results in "Can you *borrow* me your pen?"

A somewhat subtle example is the use of the word "lecture." A German speaker might say: "*There is a lecture starting this month*" when what they really mean is a lecture course.

Words that are written the same and have the same meaning in both languages can also cause "problems" if they are pronounced differently, for example, "Agenda," in which the g is pronounced as in "Gott" in German and as in "gene" in English.

Naturally, grammatical "fine points" like word conjugation, endings, etc. are often problematic (and not only for German speakers!). For example, one may encounter a "*high sensitive magnetometer*" where "high-sensitivity" or "highly sensitive" is really meant. Another one: "The government helps out to some *extend*" where "extent" is meant.

Here are very common errors that both sound funny (komisch) to an English speaker: "*Hello, together!*" which is a "carbon copy" of the German expression that is never used in English and "*We will see us tomorrow!*" which sounds particularly odd and should be "I will see you tomorrow!" "These are excellent observations, *or?*" is, unfortunately, also not quite correct: "aren't they" is a much better choice. Another error along these lines is that Germans often use gender describing objects: "The printer is broken. *He* will not print." In English, inanimate

objects are usually described as “it” (with rare exceptions like a ship for which “she” is acceptable).

Here, to finish, are two more common errors. “They have been divorced *since* 30 years” should really be “for 30 years” and “I learned this *with five years*” should really be “when I was five years old.”