

The rise and fall of the German language

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Kyle James reports for a variety of public radio programs and networks, including Deutsche Welle via Worldview (see March 26), NPR, and PRI's Marketplace. His English grammar is perfect, the pronunciation impeccably American, but if you listen, you'll still notice something odd about his voice. It may even take you a few listens before you figure out what it is. It's the cadence. Even though Mr. James is speaking in English, the shape of the sentences—the rise and fall of the pitch, the changing velocity of the words—is characteristically German. The German language has a particular shape to it. It's hard to describe in words; you have to listen to a lot of spoken German to start to get a feel for it. For example, in an “if, then” type of sentence, American English takes the important word of the “if” part (typically the last word) and starts it at a higher pitch, dropping it rapidly to a very low pitch, and holding it there for the remainder of the clause, perhaps with a very small uptick at the end.

da –

If it rains to – .

– ay,

German, on the other hand, tends to take the important word and raise its pitch, holding the pitch high until the end of the clause.

heute regnet,

Wenn es

(On the other hand, if the emphasis were not on the day but on the weather, then the pitch would rise on the word “rain” or “regnet”.) I remember listening to an English-language Deutsche Welle broadcast where the native German newsreaders were speaking with a BBC

cadence. (The BBC end-of-sentence cadence, in particular.) It worked for a while, but after a minute I simply couldn't bear to listen any more and had to shut it off. The problem was that they were using that one sentence shape over and over again instead of varying as the flow of the article demanded. Getting the right sentence flow is one of the things you almost never learn formally when studying a language. Rather, it's something you simply have to pick up as you go. And it's often so subtle that you never perfect it. For example, when I'm speaking German—which happens almost never nowadays—I often get so worried about declining my adjectives correctly (how hard can it be? there are only 48 scenarios to worry about) that I pay almost no attention to getting the right sentence shape.

Here's a chart of the 48 adjective endings, as applied to the regular adjective *weich*, which means "soft". Don't worry about the last six charts; they are just repeats of the first three with a different root. It wouldn't be so bad if adjectives didn't come in three "strengths"... Then again, I'm sure other languages like Finnish or Icelandic can put German to shame. (And I have to admit, after working with German adjectives for a few years, I eventually developed a quasi-instinctive feel for how they should work, although the plural adjective endings always fool my intuition. When I learned that Swedish adjectives come in only two strengths, I felt kind of cheated.)

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