

## On Mark Twain 'The awful German language'

A little learning makes the whole world kin. – *Proverbs xxxii, 7.*<sup>1</sup>

'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.' (Mark Twain: A tramp abroad. Appendix D)

What Mark Twain observed during his trip through Germany, Switzerland and Italy, is still worth reading. His bluejay yarn is far from being out of place or outdated even today – it is apt to rise the curiosity for the truth behind the sagacious yarn – , nor is the critique he states on the song of German jays. However, it is the sound of my mothertongue.

Why should he explain the weak endings of the anglosaxon feminines<sup>2</sup> as long as he is comparing the numbers of German adjectives to Swiss black cats<sup>3</sup>? Of course he is right about the German adjectives<sup>4</sup> but there is more than one inventor to blame. Inventors are all the Germans who have lived on German soil for ages. Tongue in cheek I would say that all the bluejays are enlightened when they open their birdbrains to other cultures and the origin of their own culture<sup>5</sup>.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the flection of adjectives was lost in the North and Northeast of England, even the –n as suffix ending, safe the weak ending -e. However, the oldfashioned German bluejays are so much used to the end-e they retained from so many fairytales their Gran had told them, that they just cannot get rid of its sound. They do not know about the labour their forefathers had undertaken in order to simplify the unrestrained flectional system of the indoeuropean herency. However, in their narrative they use the present perfect which brings the past experience to a lively presence. Like this, they also avoid the many vocalic changes in the ancient irregular verbs which go back to a complex flectional system of temporal aspects we know from Old Greek.

The adjective suffixes can be learned as a system of phonetic sequence of gender signals (strong endings) and open syllables (weak endings), i. e. the sounding end-e. The latter are used after a gender signal has been set by the definite article (not the indefinite article, which is a generalizer like 'a' in English, although it is the German numeral 'one'!), the demonstrative pronoun or an adjective:

♂ der Mann  
BE man

♀ die Frau  
woman

☀ das Licht  
light

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain's epigraph of the essay with the same title.

<sup>2</sup> 'The inventor of the language seems to have taken pleasure in complicating it in every way he could think of. For instance, if one is casually referring to a house, **Haus**, or a horse, **Pferd**, or a dog, **Hund**, he spells these words as I have indicated; but if he is referring to them in the Dative case, he sticks on a foolish and unnecessary e and spells them **Hause**, **Pferde**, **Hunde**.'

<sup>3</sup> '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.'

<sup>4</sup> '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.'

<sup>5</sup> '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.'

1a	<u>der</u> , <u>dieser</u> [3] <u>guter</u> <u>er</u>	<u>die</u> , <u>diese</u> [e] <u>gute</u> <u>sie</u>	<u>das</u> , <u>dieses</u> [es] <u>gutes</u> <u>es</u> (personal pronoun as substitute)
1b	<u>guter</u> <u>frischer</u> ein <u>guter</u> <u>frischer</u>	<u>gute</u> <u>frische</u> eine <u>gute</u> <u>frische</u>	<u>gutes</u> <u>frisches</u> ein <u>gutes</u> <u>frisches</u>
1c	Ich möchte ... ( <i>I would like</i> ... - but be prepared for ♂ object) <u>guten</u> <u>frischen</u> einen <u>guten</u> <u>frischen</u>	<u>gute</u> <u>frische</u> eine <u>gute</u> <u>frische</u>	<u>gutes</u> <u>frisches</u> ein <u>gutes</u> <u>frisches</u>

The poem “Der Werwolf” by Christian Morgenstern narrates how an old and blind ‘Whowolf’ (the translation werewolf would be a great misunderstanding of Morgenstern’s intentions) leaves his wife and children one night to go on a peculiar pilgrimage. The nearby graveyard is his aim, there to visit the village teacher’s grave. Crossing his forelegs in respectful attitude, he asks the teacher to decline him:

"Der Werwolf", - sprach der gute Mann,  
 "des Weswolfs"- Genitiv sodann,  
 "dem Wemwolf" - Dativ, wie man's nennt,  
 "den Wenwolf" - damit hat's ein End.'

The wolf rolls his eyeballs, amazed by so much grammar but in the end leaves with only half the lesson: he wanted to learn the plural as well. However, we learned our lesson if we can deduce the importance of interrogatives. Who asks in German, gives the sound of the declined gender signal. But what about ‘shewolf’? In German she is declined in a distinguished manner, of course. It would be like this:

Die Werwölfin,  
 der **Wes**wölfin,  
 der Werwölfin und  
 die Werwölfin.

Once again you can see how much easier it is to treat female wolves. If you are still keen on declining, you should try nouns of romance origin, and you will see how easy it is:

Der Student,  
 des Studenten,  
 dem Studenten und  
 den Studenten.

There is almost no difference in the plural:

Die Studenten,  
 der Studenten,  
 den Studenten und  
 die Studenten.

How can you distinguish if they are almost all the same? Just use their pronouns instead: Dem Studenten. – Wem? – ihm. Der Studentin. – Wem? – ihr. Den Studenten. – Wem? – ihnen.

## Christian Morgenstern

### Der Werwolf

Ein Werwolf eines Nachts entwich  
von Weib und Kind, und sich begab  
an eines Dorfschullehrers Grab  
und bat ihn: Bitte, beuge mich!

Der Dorfschulmeister stieg hinauf  
auf seines Blechschilds Messingknauf  
und sprach zum Wolf, der seine Pfoten  
geduldig kreuzte vor dem Toten:

"Der Werwolf", - sprach der gute Mann,  
"des Weswolfs"- Genitiv sodann,  
"dem Wemwolf" - Dativ, wie man's nennt,  
"den Wenwolf" - damit hat's ein End.'

Dem Werwolf schmeichelten die Fälle,  
er rollte seine Augenbälle.  
Indessen, bat er, füge doch  
zur Einzahl auch die Mehrzahl noch!

Der Dorfschulmeister aber mußte  
gestehn, daß er von ihr nichts wußte.  
Zwar Wölfe gäb's in großer Schar,  
doch "Wer" gäb's nur im Singular.

Der Wolf erhob sich tränenblind -  
er hatte ja doch Weib und Kind!!  
Doch da er kein Gelehrter eben,  
so schied er dankend und ergeben.