



War of Words

Many Europeans are known for being fluent in English. They're good for two reasons: (1) they insist on practicing and (2) we let them. That's why most of us native English speakers will never speak anything but English. Unless we put up a fight.

By Chantal Panozzo | Learning a language is a bit like waging a war – especially when you want to practice with native speakers who also know English. For a long time, I'd try a few German sentences with these linguists and then just switch to English because it was easier to make friends when I could discuss more than where I lived (across from a clock tower that dings every 15 minutes, 24/7) and what I ate for dinner last night (spaghetti). The problem is, once you make friends with someone in one language, it's strange to switch languages later.

“But I need to practice my English,” my Swiss friend Peter would whine, when I told him it was finally time for us to speak together in German.

“Your English is perfect,” I'd tell him in German.

“No, it's not,” he'd say, and continue speaking English like a native while I'd be left to ponder my non-existent Deutsch.

“You can speak German to me and I'll answer back in English,” he'd usually offer upon seeing my frustration.

This would work for about five minutes until I couldn't continue because my German wasn't good enough to keep up with his English. And it's hard to learn a language when speaking isn't also combined with listening because you can't play off things or hear new words.

I have a love-hate relationship with German. Right now I'm in the love stage again (a slightly forced love, due to necessity) and am ready to give the language another chance. (Never mind that I read Mark Twain's essay, *The Awful German Language*, with great joy since I'm not really a fan of 25-letter words, backwards word order and verbs that feel like afterthoughts.) But anyway. I want to talk and be able to understand people. And mainly, I'm tired of feeling foreign – in other words, I'm tired of feeling like an idiot. Make that *eine Idiotin*.

Standing outside my friend Karin's apartment, I brace myself for the language battle that occurs whenever I am with someone who wants to practice English as much as I want to practice German. Because of my history at losing this game, I will myself not to let English come out of my mouth – even though it can't wait to display its world domination.

Karin opens the door. “Hi,” she says.

I immediately change languages, preparing for battle. “Wie Geht's?”

“Gut!” She switches to German and doesn't even blink an eye. I'm so happy

that war has been averted that I want to kiss her (in a platonic two or three-cheek European kind of way of course).

Then Karin serves me home-cooked brownies, cookies and cherry juice and allows me to speak non-stop German for the longest time in my life: three and a half hours. And while her cookies are fantastic, my German is less so.

After I call her baking “Super”, she hands me her cookbook and tells me to go to a certain section. I don’t understand her so have no idea if I am turning to the right spot in the book. But she doesn’t act like I’m dumb and doesn’t correct me either – she just keeps talking to me like I’m not an idiot. In return, I use a lot of *genaus*.

But while my *genaus* are as good as they get, the rest of my sentences sound a bit less fluent despite my habit of changing every *der, die, das, den, dem, denen, or des* into a “duh”. For example, I start a past-tense sentence with “ich habe” only to realize the verb at the end required an “ich bin” (*zu spaet!*), and also partake in my very favorite habit of simply leaving off the verb entirely since having to place it at the end of a sentence makes me forget I even need to use a verb in the first place.

Throughout my butchering of the German language, Karin speaks to me like I hadn’t just said things like “My husband, her have today lunch with girlfriend”. Instead, she keeps the German conversation going like it’s just normal to listen to a two-year-old’s German coming out of a 31-year-old woman’s mouth. In her head, she must be translating my bad German to good. I don’t know how she is doing it but figure it’s either: (1) utter kindness or (2) a little *Schadenfreude* (that is a German thing, after all).

Anyhow, filled with hope for the German

language, I head for the tram, bidding Karin “tschüss” and “bis später” as I go. But then, as I stand there, I hear “grüezi” and “merci” and hundreds of other Swiss-German words and my confidence starts to sink. So I turn on my iPod to drown them all out and live in my happy little language bubble, thinking, I can talk, no really, I can talk!