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English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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EDITORIAL

GLOSSARY

proponent:

s.o. who is in favour of
sth.

awkward:

clumsy, inelegant

cluster:

group tied closely
together

Since Brexit talk of Scottish independence has been back in the news as proponents of leaving the United Kingdom point to the specificity of Scottish culture. In this issue of our newsletter we focus on language and what makes Scots and Scottish English so different than standard English. After reading this issue, you will hopefully also be able to avoid making common mistakes with English verbs as well as identify and re-word awkward, unnatural noun clusters, something which differentiates English from German.

John Nixon

Style Guidelines for Writing Official University Texts in English

The University Communications Department has in collaboration with the Language Center developed a number of style guidelines for publishing official university texts in English, e.g. websites and brochures. Please take a look at these useful tips when publishing university documents in English.

[Guidelines](#)

If you are interested in any of the following, please click on the links or [contact us](#).

- [Regular Courses](#)
- [English Graduate Upgrade Certificate](#)
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CURRENTLY
ON OFFER

Eight Mistakes with Verbs Not to Make

The verbal system in English is without a doubt a tricky affair. Not only do learners of English have to grapple with different tenses (past, present and future), but also aspect (simple, perfect, continuous and perfect continuous) and voice (active and passive). Learning the intricacies of these verb forms requires a certain level of exposure to the language and a sensibility for the various nuances. Fortunately, by examining common mistakes, one can improve one's English and develop a feeling for the subtle differences in meaning that combinations of tense and aspect give rise to. Here are some common mistakes that German native speakers make.

GLOSSARY

to grapple with sth.:
to deal with sth.
difficult

to give rise to:
to cause

phenomena:
plural of phenomenon
(an occurrence or fact)

to be better off:
to be in a better
situation

blunder:
careless mistake

attendee:
someone who attends
a meeting, an event,
etc.

to heed sth.:
to pay attention to or
follow some advice,
rules or warning

Overusing Present Simple

Mistake 1

Present simple is not used to indicate activities that are happening now. Here present continuous is used instead.

I drink coffee right now. (incorrect)
I am drinking coffee right now. (correct)

Mistake 2

When we indicate activities or states that have started in the past, we do not use present simple but rather present perfect. Typically, we have signal words like "since" and "for".

She is a committee member since 2005.
(incorrect)
She has been a committee member since
2005. (correct)

Mistake 3

When making a spontaneous decision at the moment of speaking (i.e. the action was not already planned), we use "will future" and not present simple.

I post the link in the chat on Webex.
(incorrect)
I'll post the link in the chat on Webex.
(correct)

Incorrect Use of Present Continuous

Present continuous is used to describe actions or events at the moment of speaking. When describing scientific phenomena, the operation of machines or graphs, we tend to use present simple instead because the facts we are describing are true all the time.

Mistake 4

The humidity is decreasing with falling temperatures. (incorrect)
The humidity decreases with falling temperatures. (correct)

Confusing Past Simple and Present Perfect

Past simple is used to describe actions or states that are finished, whereas present perfect links an action or state in the past with the present.

Mistake 5

Do not use the present perfect for actions that were completed at a specific point in the past.

We have presented our paper yesterday.
(incorrect)
We presented our paper yesterday.
(correct)

This is different from the German structure "haben präsentiert".

Inappropriate Use of Would/Will

Mistake 6

Generally speaking, we do not use "would" and "will" after "if".

If they will/would save more money, they would be better off. (incorrect)
If they save/saved more money, they will/would be better off. (correct)

Continuous Forms and State Verbs

Some verbs are not actions, but rather states, such as belong, like, hate, own, understand and appear. For this reason, they are not used with continuous aspect, i.e. using -ing forms.

Mistake 7

The new design is not looking like an airplane. (incorrect)
The new design does not look like an airplane. (correct)

Webex Blunder (Modal Verbs)

After we have shared our screen with the attendees at our meeting and we wish to check that the others can see it, we do not use present simple, but rather the modal verb "can".

Mistake 8

Do you see my screen? (incorrect)
Can you see my screen? (correct)

The difference here is very subtle, but no less important. The helping verb "do" would only be used if the speakers were referring to something they could see themselves and knew was there.

Do you see the arrow at the top of the screen? It's red and flashing.

If you heed these basic rules, you will be well on your way to communicating more accurately in English.

John Nixon

Scots and Scottish English

GLOSSARY

lingo:

jargon or particular language of a group of people

kin:

related group of people

to be of paramount importance:

to be extremely important

variety (of language):

different form of language, e.g. British English, American English

to be rooted in:

to be based in/on

in its own right:

on its own, independent of sth. else

salt of the earth (said of people):

good, honest, reliable and hard-working

tongue-tied:

to nervous or embarrassed to speak

tertiary education:

university or college

to do justice to a topic:

to deal with a topic appropriately

endearing:

easily likeable

a host of:

plenty

Language is identity and identity is language. The lingo we grew up with makes us feel amongst kin – though newcomers might not understand a word (Bookes, 2018)! In a place like Scotland, where people have always broadly defined their cultural identity as not being English, the native language Scots and Scottish English are of paramount importance when it comes to cultural identity (Flower and Darrah, 2020-2023; Kay 2006). This is documented in countless brilliant and enjoyable YouTube clips like the “Scots Elevator Skit” (click [here](#)) or “Air Traffic Control” (click [here](#)) and movies (click [here](#) for a list). So, what are the differences between Scots, Scottish English and English?

Scots and Scottish English are varieties of English and as such are Germanic languages that are mostly spoken in Scotland as opposed to Scots Gaelic, a Goidelic or Celtic language still spoken in parts of Scotland. Scots is rooted in the Northumbrian dialect of Middle English and – over centuries – developed (also by adopting some Gaelic) parallel to *Inglis* (English), which emerged from the East-Midlands dialect and morphed into the Standard English we know today (Bookes, 2018; Flower and Darrah, 2020-2023; Kay 2006). As a language in its own right, Scots has a distinct pronunciation, grammar and lexis (Bookes, 2018). It should not be confused with Scottish English, which developed from the 17th century onwards because the English spoken in the south of the British Isles largely became the standard in official settings in Scotland, such as church matters, education and public administration. It is safe to say that over the centuries Scottish English with its distinct pronunciation but more standard English vocabulary and grammar has been used in formal situations in which speakers radiate their educational background, whereas Scots has remained the language of the working class, the salt of the earth. For many who grew up as Scots speakers and went through secondary and tertiary education, learning Standard English went along with feeling discriminated against, being ridiculed and tongue-tied (Bookes, 2018; Flower and Darrah, 2020-2023; Kay 2006). Today Scots comes in a variety of dialects (the most prominent of them being Central Scots, Northern Scots, Island Scots and Southern Scots with their sub-dialects) and is different things to different people. It is “a living language which is as complex as its speakers are. It is often mixed with other languages in conversation – with English, but also with Urdu, Polish, Arabic, Romani, Gaelic and more” (Flower and Darrah, 2020-2023). And as Scots, Scottish

English and Standard English are all spoken in Scotland, it comes as no surprise that people may mix all three depending on the situation (Kay, 2006).

So, writing about Scots in a 600-word newsletter piece does not suffice to do the topic justice but maybe kindles the reader’s appetite to learn more about this unique and endearing language, where a “yes” becomes “aye” and a “no” becomes “-na/-nea”, where a “woman” is a “lass(ie)” and a “bloke” a “ladd(ie)”, where if you know something you “ken” it and most things become “wee”, i.e. little.

There is also a host of good advice such as: “Dinna fash yersel!” (Don’t worry!)

“There’s always time for a wee blether.”

(There’s always time for that little friendly chat.)

“A nod’s as guid as a wink tae a blind horse.” (However hard you try, some people will not get it.)

“Mony a mickle maks a muckle.” (Many little bits add up to a full bowl/large sum, referring to the proverbial Scottish thriftiness.)

A reminder not to tell the experts how to do their jobs is expressed as you “dinnae teach yer granny tae suck eggs!”

Finally, a innocent word like “fine” as an answer to “How ye daein?” (How are you?) can mean anything from “really good” to just indifference (Bookes, 2018; Murphy 2022).

Click on the links above to listen to Scottish English.

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Flower, Thomas, Elly Darrah (2020 – 2023). What Is “Speaking Scottish”? *Speaking Scottish: Language, Culture Community*. Source <https://speakingscottish.co.uk/scots-and-scottish-english/>

Kay, Billy (2006). *Scots: The Mither Tongue*. Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh.

Murphy, Sean (2022). 13 of the Best Scottish Proverbs to Use in Everyday Life. *Daily Record*, 17.09.2022. Source <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/scotland-now/13-best-scottish-proverbs-use-27941268>

The Generated Noun Train Will Derail

GLOSSARY

to derail:
to go off the tracks

to be smitten with:
to be attracted to or to like sth. or someone a lot

to take sth. with a grain of salt:
to treat sth. with skepticism

to poke fun at:
to make fun of

confounding:
confusing

to retain:
to keep

to be reminiscent of sth.:
to remind s.o. of sth.

stilted:
not smooth or natural

albeit:
although

mentioned:
what was stated before (and not “the before mentioned”, which is a type of noun train)

The famous American author and humorist Mark Twain was a great admirer of Germany. He was especially smitten with Heidelberg, where his family spent a summer in 1878 and which he called “the last possibility of the beautiful.”¹ Given Twain’s affection for Germany, the title of his essay “The Awful German Language” should be taken with a grain of salt. First appearing in 1880, the essay playfully pokes fun at what he found to be the confounding aspects of German. To highlight some of these aspects, Twain translated an excerpt from a Mannheim newspaper into English but retained the original syntax:

When the fire to the onthedownburning-houseresting Stork’s Nest reached, flew the parent Storks away.²

As this sentence illustrates, several modifiers can precede a noun in German, which sounds very unusual in English. This is reminiscent of a rather common phenomenon I have termed the “noun train,” where my students, particularly native German speakers, take a verb, change it to the past participle form, and then use that word as an adjective. In many cases, this leads to awkward and unnatural phrasing. For instance, I have found the following stilted wording in my students’ writing: “generated energy,” “conducted measurements,” and “designed model.” Very often the adjectives are redundant as it is clear from the context what is meant. Therefore, the simple solution to this problem is to simply remove the adjective.

The conducted measurements provide an insight into transient flow values. ✗
The measurements provide an insight into transient flow values. ✓

A similar issue to the noun train is the noun cluster, which is formed solely by nouns. For example, a student of mine recently wrote “particle concentration distribution.” Although technical terms can sometimes be composed of several nouns, it is generally preferable in English to have prepositions and articles in between nouns. A more natural wording of this phrase would be “the distribution of the particle concentration.”

If you feel you might have written a noun train or noun cluster, you can verify the naturalness of the phrase in question with the Internet. One method for doing so is to put the phrase in quotation marks, which means that a search engine will look for that exact formulation, including any punctuation. For technical and scientific writing, you can use Google Scholar, which searches academic databases. You can also try www.ludwig.guru, which searches reputable and trustworthy sources. This website allows a limited number of searches per day before it forces you to sign up, albeit for free.

If using the mentioned websites results in a high number of entries, it is likely that the phrasing is natural and therefore usable. Nevertheless, this method is not foolproof. For example, consider the phrases *in italics* in the following two sentences. Which one do you think is correct?

A. The manufacturing process is a major factor when aiming for an *optimal quality of the material*.
B. The manufacturing process is a major factor when aiming for an *optimal material quality*.

If you answered both, you are right... perhaps! Sentence A sounds more natural, but a search on Google Scholar yields 11 entries for the phrasing in A compared to 97 entries for the phrasing in B. On the other hand, a regular Google search results in 32,900 entries for A compared to 6,790 entries for B. So what are we to make of these results? When a search in Google Scholar results in a relatively low number (for example, below 100), it is advisable to double check in regular Google. Unless you are absolutely sure that a given phrase is acceptable in your field, it is advisable to choose the phrase that has the higher number in a regular Google search since this is most likely the more natural phrasing and would be understandable in any context.

Footnotes:

¹Crair, Ben. 2016. “Mark Twain Found Inspiration in Germany (Though Not German).” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2016, sec. Travel. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/travel/mark-twain-heidelberg-germany.html>.

²Twain, Mark. 2018. *Tramp Abroad*. S.L.: Hansebooks.