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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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Glossary

to soar: to fly high, to go far above the usual level

innocuous: harmless

Editorial

“Learning by burning” took on a whole new meaning recently when temperatures soared around 40 degrees Celsius and exams began to take place. We are happy that our latest issue of the newsletter is accompanied by cooler temperatures and the promise of vacation just around the corner.

This issue examines the most common word in the English language: “the.” Seemingly innocuous, this little word can be particularly tricky for non-native speakers.

Our intercultural section considers differences between

how Germans and Anglo-Saxons ask for or offer help.

Lastly, our vocabulary section will provide a way to make your writing more academic in style.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

Upcoming Issue:

Relative clauses, current trends with gender and language, winter holiday vocabulary



Comments

Do you have any ideas for future issues or would like to give us feedback? Please contact us.



Subscription

Currently on Offer

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

- We are pleased to announce the launch of the **Academic Manual!** This resource provides students, faculty, and staff the opportunity to improve their English through self-study and a comprehensive collection of exercises. A broad range of topics are covered, including grammar, vocabulary, writing skills, intercultural communication, e-mailing, and presentations. Click [here](#) to be taken to the Academic Manual.
- SZ offers tailored **academic English workshops** for you and your team at your workplace. Please contact us for a reasonably priced offer: workshop-english@sz.uni-stuttgart.de
- **Free September 2019 seminar offerings for PhD students** and academic staff are now available online. Click [here](#) for more information.
- **Schreibwerkstatt: Now in English!** Check out our Academic English à la carte offerings. Take mini-courses individually or combine to build your own SQ. Our offerings can be accessed through C@mpus and ILIAS. For questions, feel free to email us: workshop-english@sz.uni-stuttgart.de

Grammar

Definitely Not Easy: the Definite Article

The definite article “the” has been known to dupe even advanced foreign speakers of English, which may surprise you. After all, it is the most common word in the English language, and in your native tongue you could very well have several more variants for “the” than in English. Case in point: *Das Mädchen hat dem Lehrer die Hausaufgaben gegeben*. However, before you are fooled by the deceptive ease of “the,” imagine explaining how it is used to someone whose mother tongue is one of the 198 languages with absolutely no definite or indefinite (a, an) articles.¹

If the explanation is not occurring to you so quickly, this is because “the” is not only prevalent but also quite complex. For example, on merriam-webster.com one finds 23 entries for its various uses.² It should then be no surprise that even advanced foreign speakers sometimes struggle with this word. The following article will examine some of the more common problems that arise, especially for native speakers of German. Note that this article focuses on American English.

There are some instances when the definite article is used in English but not in German, which can lead to mistakes. Two of the most common examples of this are “in *the* future” and “as *the* + noun.”³

The prices for real estate will continue to rise in *the* future. The introduction of stricter regulations has been cited as *the* solution to the problem.

A similar issue arises with the word “direction,” which often does not require the definite article in German (*in Strömungsrichtung, in Fahrtrichtung*).

Air is forced to flow in *the* streamwise direction. The heavier end was pointed in *the* direction of travel.

As one can see here, we are specifying what kind of direction it is. This is an important rule with “the”: When something is referred to in the abstract, it does not require the definite article. When it is specified, then it does.

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”⁴
The power of the president is checked by the judicial and legislative branches.
 Mass and weight are not the same in physics.
 Several factors determine *the* overall system mass.

Tying into this, there is occasionally some confusion

with the word “first”, which requires “the” when used as a qualifier.

The first prototypes were unveiled last year.

When introducing the term for something, sometimes non-native speakers omit the definite article. This is wrong.

The part that is illustrated in Fig. 3 is called *the* “collar.”

The difficulties with “the” also surface in spoken language. This word is actually difficult to pronounce correctly for non-native speakers when said alone, especially the vowel. The proper pronunciation is an unstressed schwa, or \tə\ when written in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This is the same vowel sound as the word “of.” There is also the misconception that “the” should always be pronounced like “me” when it precedes a word beginning with a vowel (“the only reason”, written as \tʰe\ in IPA). In fact, this is not always the case. It may be pronounced either as \tə\ or \tʰe\, and it is difficult to hear the difference when someone is speaking at a normal pace. Lastly, in order to emphasize or for dramatic effect, “the” is sometimes pronounced as \tʰe\ before a consonant: “Introducing the queen of soul... Aretha Franklin!”

Do you think you have it now? Click on the exercise below to practice.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

¹ *WALS Online - Feature 37A: Definite Articles*, wals.info/feature/37A#2/25.5/148.4. Retrieved April 29, 2019. Korean, Japanese, and Russian are a few examples of these languages.

² “The.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the. Retrieved April 29, 2019.

³ It is acceptable to say “in future” in British English. However, one should say “in the past” and “in the present” for both British and American English.

⁴ Quote by John Dalberg-Acton, 1887. John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton#cite_note-Imcone-4. Retrieved April 29, 2019.

Glossary

to dupe:
informal, to trick

case in point:
a good example of something being discussed

deceptive ease:
misleading effortlessness

prevalent:
to be commonly found

to cite:
to refer to as evidence

to unveil:
to bring out for the first time

to omit:
to leave out

schwa:
ə

to precede:
to come before

pace:
a rate of speed



Exercises

Intercultural Communication

Unsolicited and Solicited Help

Unsolicited Help

A friend who returned from a short trip to London recently expressed his amazement at the reactions from his fellow bus passengers when he asked for directions to Trafalgar Square. Apparently, everyone in his bus within earshot had been keen to offer help. He returned to Germany completely baffled by the abundance of unsolicited help in the UK. So how much help is generally offered here in Germany?

At first glance, the Germans would appear very reluctant to offer unsolicited help. One can spend hours gazing at maps, looking lost and confused in the average German town. There is an innate reluctance to enter into a stranger's personal space here. Perhaps this, in turn, is rooted in the deep pride in the ability of being able to solve one's own problems rather than bothering an outsider.

However, the picture is a completely different one if one actually fails to carry out a particular action correctly. As Nic Houghton blogs:

'One of the lesser known facts about Germany is that it comes with its own autocorrect function. If someone sees another person doing something incorrectly, there is a 50/50 chance that they will happily interject, point out the mistake and then offer an alternative solution.'¹

Over the years, I have been autocorrected by strangers in Germany for various anti-social activities, from failure to dress my young children in woolly tights in the winter, allowing dandelions to grow in my garden, to reversing my car inefficiently. Without exception, everyone who offered their unsolicited advice intended to be helpful.

In the UK, such well-meaning advice would be viewed as an interference, or being a 'busy body' and would probably only serve to annoy the recipient without actually bringing about any improvement in behaviour.

Solicited Help

Asking directly for help in the UK can be a complex dance. We tend initially to hint at situations where help might be appreciated. Such conversations rarely come directly to the point. For instance, if I wanted someone to water my plants when I'm on holiday, I might just start with 'I'm going on holiday next week.' If this failed to generate a suitable offer of help, I could then continue with 'I'm not sure what I'm going to do with my plants.' Of course, such a discussion could and would lead to all

sorts of tangents, but eventually my neighbour would 'pick up the hint'. If such comments were ignored, I would assume the neighbour had better things to do and drop the subject.

In Germany, it is far likelier that this exchange would consist of two direct questions: Will you be home next week? Will you water my plants?

One of the greatest reasons for the discrepancy in the two approaches may lie in the cultural acceptance of saying 'no' to requests. In Germany, it's socially acceptable to say that one cannot help. In the UK, refusing to help is rare and almost always appears churlish if not delivered with a suitable excuse. As Gill Woodmann writes:

'Giving negative information or feedback is an uncomfortable thing for many British people to do. The language and culture tries to avoid direct negative feedback as much as possible. This might result in the English native speaker agreeing to do something which in fact is extremely difficult for them to complete within the given time. They would, however, feel very rude and unhelpful to just refuse to do it.'²

In conclusion, as with so many other facts of daily life, whether we are actually helpful or not remains a matter of cultural and personal perception.

Cheryl Stenzel

¹Houghton, N. (2018, March 14). The German Society of Auto-Correction. Retrieved July 16, 2019, from <http://40percentgerman.com/home/2018/3/14/the-german-society-of-auto-correction>

²The Meaning and Theories of Intercultural Communication. (n.d.). Retrieved July 16, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309155695_The_Meaning_and_Theories_of_Intercultural_Communication

Glossary

unsolicited:
unprompted,
not requested

within earshot:
range of distance within which you can hear or be heard

baffled:
confused

abundance:
more than enough

innate reluctance:
inborn dislike, aversion

busy body:
someone who involves themselves in other's affairs

churlish:
rude, unpleasant

Vocabulary

The Ins and Outs and Ups and Downs of Phrasal Verbs in Academic Writing

One of the key differences between academic writing and other kinds of language use is the register, or degree of formality. There are key elements to keep in mind when transitioning from casual language use, such as speaking and emailing, to more formal use, such as academic writing for publication. One of the hallmarks of academic writing is precision. When speaking, texting or emailing, we have the opportunity to clarify or modify what we mean. Academic publishing, on the other hand, is static. The text should be as accurate as possible because there is little to no room for adjustment once it is published.

In a [previous newsletter](#), Sylvia Grade addressed how to improve your academic writing by avoiding the ubiquitous phrasal verbs that use “get.” The present article extends the ideas expressed there by focusing on common phrases including prepositions.

Although phrasal verbs are not forbidden in academic writing, they are not ideal. This is because phrasal verbs are often casual or imprecise. Take, for example, the phrase “go up,” which could mean increase, ascend, climb, rise, grow or intensify. In our daily lives, the subtle differences between these words are not crucial to our understanding. In a scientific publication, however, they very well may be. Consider the following text in which the phrasal verbs have been identified.

Putting Together an Image of an Absence

Primordial black holes are thought to have been brought about by the Big Bang. They are thought to be created when a star implodes rather than blows up. Black holes are difficult to pick up on because they do not produce light. They do, however, create a silhouette that can show up in images created by powerful telescopes.

The larger the telescope, the more the chance of seeing distant objects goes up. There is no telescope large enough to get a look at a black hole from Earth, so the challenge was for scientists to work out how to create the image without one.

This is the motivation behind the Event Horizon Telescope, which takes images from various telescopes around the world to make up one picture. Each telescope takes an image and passes it on to be processed. The project then puts images together to form one whole.

The project had many participants, including Dr. Katie Bouman. As a graduate student, Dr. Bouman had a hand in creating software to manage the data and produce the images. The algorithm she helped to design picks out the

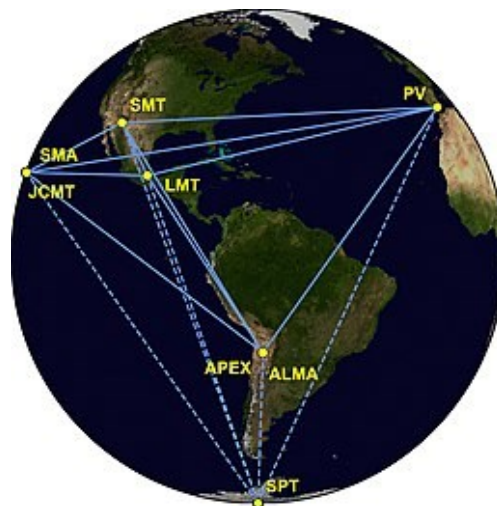
most likely images and cuts down on unlikely ones. The EHT put out an image on April 10, 2019.

This recent success means scientists will likely carry on with the goal of creating accurate images of black holes and many young scientists will look up to Dr. Bouman and the other participants.

If you replace the informal phrasal verbs with the formal vocabulary listed in the right column, the text above becomes more authoritative. It is important to remember that one nevertheless will find phrasal verbs in academic publications. Getting a feel for how many to use and what effect they have on the level of formality is one of the most difficult aspects of writing in your non-native language.

For more practice with phrasal verbs in academic writing, click below to be taken to a short exercise on ILIAS. For further information, you may also consider consulting the following resource: Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2001). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills: A course for nonnative speakers of English*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Dr. Lucy Blaney-Laible



Eight stations of the Event Horizon Telescope. Source: (2019). "First M87 Event Horizon Telescope Results. I. The Shadow of the Supermassive Black Hole". *The Astrophysical Journal* 875 (1). DOI:10.3847/2041-8213/ab0ec7. ISSN 20418213. Figure 1

Glossary

to put together:
to assemble

to bring about:
to create

to blow up:
to explode

to pick up on:
to detect

to show up:
to appear

to go up:
to increase

to get a look at:
to see

to work out:
to determine

to pass on:
to transmit

to make up:
to create

to pick out:
to select

to cut down on:
to reduce

to put out:
to produce



Exercises