How learning German changed the way I think and view the world

My efforts to read German philosophers like Kant and Hegel in English translation came to naught. I was totally unable to relate the terminology used in these translations to the terminology of the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy in which I had been trained, but worse still, this English terminology seemed terribly abstract and unrelated to the ordinary language we use in talking about the world as we experience it perceptually. The fact is, English is a schizophrenic language, using Anglo-Saxon terms for the immediately perceived world of day-to-day living but terms borrowed from Greek and Latin, often through French for the abstract world of philosophical and theological reflection as well as for science and technology generally. As loan words, these technical terms have absolutely no roots at all in daily experience which is articulated for the most part in Anglo-Saxon terms and thus are unable to call up sensual-perceptual experience. Although they were once rooted in the day-to-day perceptual experience of the Greeks, the Romans, and even the French, who are nearer to us in time, this experience is inaccessible to us today, and, although dictionary entries usually explain their etymology in terms of the language of their origin, such explanations are no substitute for the term's immediately recalling and suggesting perceptual experience.

When I came to Germany, however, and after some years became so immersed in the language that I learned to live and think as a German, I discovered that the German philosophical terminology was entirely different from the abstract English terminology I had previously known. Of course, German, like English, has an abstract technical vocabulary representing the common heritage of medieval and early modern scholasticism. But parallel to this abstract vocabulary, a series of brilliant thinkers and linguistic geniuses, in particular Martin Luther, Christian Wolff, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Karl Barth, and the German Dominican translators of Aquinas, created a vividly concrete, perceptually based vocabulary using root terms taken from the language of daily life and thus immediately calling up concrete sensual images (phantasms in the Aristotelian-Thomistic sense) in a way that no English philosophical or theological language can ever hope to do. It is as if we had an Anglo-Saxon based philosophical and theological language created by Ernest Hemmingway. The German thinker, therefore, has in fact two distinct but related vocabularies at his disposal: when he wants to emphasize the abstractness of his concept, he can use the Greek-Latin loan word; when he wants to emphasize the concrete perceptual roots of the concept in experience, he can switch to the German-based word. Switching this way between the abstract and the concrete synonyms also breaks up the monotony of having to use only the abstract loan words in talking about a concept, as we are constrained to do in English.

Thus English philosophy and theology, even when written by empiricists and linguistic analysts is abstract in a way that German, even when written by idealists, never is. Learning to think in German, therefore, enabled me, for the first time, effectively to think concretely in vivid and vibrant images directly related to my sensory experience of the real world around me; it was a way of thinking unlike anything I had experienced while thinking in English. But having once learned to think this way, I am now able to do it in English as well. Thus, it is hardly surprising, that when Germans attempt to explain the meaning of a term based on German root terms, they spontaneously look to its etymology.

Three additional features of the German language further support the ability of German to express philosophical and theological notions in a very concrete and well structured manner:

1) In English, the ability to create new words to express complex ideas is severely limited. As a rule, English relies, initially at least, on merely writing the two components of a compound one behind the other with a blank between them, in this case, however, the very fact that the terms must be taken together as expressing a single concept is often not immediately clear. Although the use of hyphenation or writing as one word, once frowned upon by style pundits, is gradually finding greater acceptance among grammarians and dictionary-makers, the precise relationship between the component of English compounds still cannot easily be expressed in English.

In general, German uses agglutination, i.e. combining the two nouns into a single word, sometimes with a hyphen for clarity, to indicate the fact that the terms belong together and that together they name a single complex concept. Most frequently, one noun is used attributively to modify another, and to indicate the relationship between the two terms, the attributively used noun is often supplemented by a genitive case ending, the so-called "Fugen-s", but even then the precise nature of the relationship remains unexpressed.

A classical theological example is the German term "Heilsgeschichte" which has given rise not only to a variety of by and large unsuccessful English translation attempts but also to vehement protests by English speaking theologians against the very term itself as representing a "woolly". way of thinking. As an alternative to the attributive agglutination, the purists usually suggest complex descriptive circumlocutions or ugly strings of prepositional phrases often repeating "of". The principal translations originally proposed in the case of "Heilsgeschichte" were "history of salvation" (emphasizing the story character of the process of salvation) and "saving history" (emphasizing the salvific character of both the story itself and of its narration). The German term however deliberately included all three of these aspects under a single term in order to emphasize that the historical process as such works salvifically precisely through its narration. So understood, "Heilsgeschichte" is not at all a "woolly" notion, but very solid theology. Thus, despite the protests of the language purists and the conceptual simplifiers, the term "salvation history" has now come into general use in English as a technical term at least among theologians and not just as a "poor" translation of the German term, though its precise meaning remains lost to the ordinary Christian. Nevertheless, because neither "Heil" nor "Geschichte" have any direct perceptual reference in English, the loan word remains abstract even for the expert, and it evokes no immediate, vivid concrete images except in those who have come to learn its meaning by study and reflection.

In addition to agglutination, German makes use of a broad spectrum of prefixes and suffixes, most of them with Germanic roots, which, in combination with Germanic root terms, can be used to create additional concrete terms expressing particular modifications of the original concept and these modified forms of the concept likewise evoke concrete perceptual images.

There are virtually no limits to German's ability to form new words either by agglutinating already existing terms or by adding standard prefixes or suffixes in order to create words whose meaning is modified in such a way that the relationship to the original root term always remains visible and conscious. Thus German writers often make free and

generous use of this possibility to create new words that cannot be found in any dictionary and may have no currency outside their own publications. Doing so, makes it possible to assign precise names to highly complex concepts such as that of "Heilsgeschichte", in which the notions of both "healing/saving" and "history/story" remain perceptually rooted and thus call up a corresponding dynamic image of being healed/saved in the course of the story of God's dealings with humankind, a salvation becomes real for each individual hearer precisely in the act of listening to it being told, so that one can say that its works precisely through its telling.

2) From any given term, whatever word class (part of speech) it may belongs to, it is generally possible to create corresponding nouns, adjectival/adverbial forms, and even verbs in many cases, simply by adding the appropriate standard suffixes. Thus, from the noun "Heilsgeschichte" the adjective/adverb "heilsgeschichtlich" has been created. In English, although it may be possible to produce multi-word definitions or descriptions of such complex concepts, there is no way to name them so that the name can subsequently stand for the defined notion in serving either as the subject, verb or object of subsequent sentences or as an adjective or adverb to modify another term.

3) The inflection of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and especially the articles, with their different genders and cases, make it possible to express clearly the relationships between individual words or compounds in more subtle ways than English allows, where only the possessive genitive or the preposition "of" can be used for this purpose. Thus German can construct perfectly lucid long periodic sentences, which when translated literally into English become unintelligible. Particular the inflection of articles, adjectives, and pronouns corresponding to the gender of the terms they refer to, makes it possible to identify clearly these referent terms. Thus a long German periodic sentence can, without confusion, contain several relative clauses with distinct referent terms, something virtually impossible in English.

Special pitfalls for translating from German into English

In addition to the features described above, German usage includes several features that often lead translators to produce false or misleading literal translations.

1) **Academic German**, often denounced as "Papierdeutsch" [see *Duden 9: Richtiges und gutes Deutsch* (2005), p.644–45]
   a) makes excessive use of substantivised verbal expressions instead of simple verbs, e.g. "Wegfall" for "wegfallen" i.e. "loss" instead of "losing". This so-called "Nominalstil" makes the text ponderous and verbose;
      Duden, *op. cit*. p. 625 , observes: "Basically, one can say that the verbal expression is generally clearer and more vivid, more lively and spirited, and easier to understand, whereas the nominal expression implies a clearer, more structured conceptual articulation. Thus, there is no objection to the use of verbal substantives in principle, wherever such conceptual clarity is needed. It

is only the needless multiplication of such verbal nouns within a single sentence or paragraph that makes the text abstract and difficult to understand."

b) makes excessive use of ponderous compound terms, especially agglutinations;

Here again, it is not the use of agglutinated compounds as such, when they are needed for conceptual clarity, but only the unnecessary repetition that makes the text so difficult to read. Thus, once the agglutinated compound has been introduced and defined in a sentence, it can often be replaced wither by a pronoun or a shortened form or in many cases by a descriptive circumlocution using perceptually intelligible expressions.

c) makes excessive use of prepositions derived from nouns, e.g. "mittels" (= by means of) where a simple preposition would suffice, e.g. "durch" (= by, through);

This kind of verbosity is equally reprehensible in English and will often be caught by a primitive spelling and grammar checking programme.

d) prefers verbal constructions in the impersonal passive voice over those in the active voice, which requires naming the acting subject.

In German [see Duden, op.cit., p. 649], using the passive is justified when the statement focuses on the action and its result without giving particular attention to the agent performing or causing it, a perspective often preferred in academic and legal writing or in formulating instructions for using or handling something, e.g. in place of a long string of imperatives or "you should ..." constructions. Thus it can also serve to break up a tedious series of simple sentences in the active voice

Imitating "Papierdeutsch" in English tends to produce unreadable texts, even when the use of nominalised verbs, complex compounds, nominal prepositions, and passive voice may be justified for the individual concepts taken in themselves. In this regard, German is considerably more tolerant than English, where the limits of readability are quickly reached.

2) **Long periodic sentences** with strings of subordinate clauses, esp. relative clauses, are another feature of academic 'German that must be broken down, when translating from German to English.

- German is able to tolerate **a string of relative clauses** because the declension of the relative pronoun makes clear what noun is being referred to. This is not the case in English: often it is necessary to extract the information contained in the relative clauses and express it in independent clauses.

- Often, complex German sentences involving two or more **independent clauses united by a coordinate conjunction** should best be split into separate independent clauses connected by adverbs indicating a complementary or adversative relationship.

- **Strings of subordinate clauses** can be broken up by
  o **moving one or the other subordinate clause**, especially those of time and place, to the head of the sentence;
  o replacing subordinate clauses by **participial phrases**.

Although German has both present active and past participles, Germans make little use of them as substitutes for subordinate causes. In translating into English, however, participial phrases can often be used as substitutes for simple and straightforward subordinate clauses, e.g. those expressing simultaneous or previously completed actions and events.

3) As a verb form, **the German infinitive differs from the active gerund** only by being written with an initial small letter; both end in "-en". In the dictionaries, **the "-en"- verb forms** are always translated as *infinitives with the English infinitive marker "to"*. When the infinitive is used nominally in a given text, however, the "-en" verb form is then written with a capital letter, making it indistinguishable from *the active gerund*. Thus the sentence "Er lies das Schreiben" can be translated either "He ceased writing" or "he ceased to write". German **nominalised verbs ending in "-ung"** can serve as passive gerunds, e.g. "Die Schreibung mit einer Kleinbuchstabe am Anfang ..." is equivalent to the English "Being written with an initial small letter ...".

4) German abounds in **phrasal verbs with a Germanic root term in combination with a Germanic prepositional affix**. When these verbs are used in a dependent clause, the preposition is separated from the root verb and placed at the end of the clause. In dependent clauses, in participles, in infinitives, and in gerunds, the preposition is prefixed to the root, e.g.:

- "Er deckte den Skandal auf."   = "He uncovered/discovered the scandal."
- "Als er den Skandal aufdeckte, ..."   = "When he uncovered/discovered the scandal,

 ..."
- "Sein Aufdecken des Skandals"   = "His uncovering/discovering the scandal"

but also "His discovery of the scandal"
- "Die Aufdeckung des Skandals"   = "The uncovering/discovering of the scandal"

In German, the root "decken" = "cover" and the verbal character of the term is perceived much more strongly in all of these variations than in English. Failure to take this into account can lead to giving unnecessary preference to nominalised forms of the verb over the gerund, e.g. "discovery" instead of "uncovering/discovering", thus making the translation appear abstract and verbose.

5) Although German has fundamentally the same **verbal tense structure** as English, in practice, most Germans make little use of this variety and some are practically unaware of it. Thus,

- **progressive tenses** are almost never used;
- the **simple past** is almost never used, being replaced by the **simple perfect**;
- the **past perfect** is often confused with the **simple perfect**;
- both past and future tenses are very often replaced by a **historical or future in present** and the **sequence of tenses** is often violated;
- **present participles** have by and large lost their verbal character for most Germans, who see them simply as adjectives and often make no use of them at all except in relatively few fixed phrases where they are regarded as simple adjectives
- **past participles** of *transitive verbs* are used attributively before nouns or predicatively after forms of the verb "werden" (= becoming) and related verbs involving a change of state to form <u>passive constructions expressing actions or events</u> and after forms of the verb "sein" (being) and related verbs expressing states of being to form <u>passive constructions for ontological states or conditions</u>; past participles of intransitive verbs are generally not used attributively, but are used predicatively to form passive constructions for events or states of being.

When translating German into English, it is necessary to be more careful with these tenses and o observe sequence of tense. In particular, the excessive reliance on the present tense to express not only contemporary conditions and events but also conditions and events in the past and in the future tends to produce confusion.