

Who is Afraid of Foreign Texts?

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The most important question I take home from the workshop and into the classrooms is: “Do I teach madhouse language?” - of which Dr. Mickan gave us an interesting example with a not so interesting German *der/die/das* exercise. Therefore, I ask: do I create authentic situations and teach genuine language that is actually used?

A good answer was the text we were asked to work with: a recipe. A recipe is a beautiful example of an authentic text, which will arouse an appetite to learn and curiosity. It is firmly connected to everyday life, conveys a part of culture and everybody loves food. The genre of the text is visually and almost immediately clear with many familiar words.

Now how should I approach a text, which is foreign in two senses for Japanese students: (a) it is written – how terrifying! - in Roman letters, and (b) it is a text in a foreign language – in the present case - in German! Now, what I usually tell my students is the following: think of how you read a newspaper (or nowadays browse through a website). You do not read it word for word from the first to the last page. There are several levels of intensity with which you go through a text. You leaf through the paper and look at the headlines. Some will catch your attention and you look closer at the article. You glance through it, read it perfunctorily, or go into more detail when you are interested in the information. Even then you might just go half way and jump to the next article, which promises to be of more interest. If this interest is really intense, you might read the article thoroughly word for word. This would be analogous to the task of translation. However, to translate is a special skill and special task only called for in special situations. What you want is to grasp meaning and make sense.

Back to the recipe. Sure, you do not want to poison yourself. Thus, you will make certain, you understand the ingredients correctly. Regardless, cooking and preparing them will not necessarily require a word-for-word translation. The respective verbs describe actions, which can, as Dr. Mickan so entertainingly demonstrated, be enacted and demonstrated. Their meaning can be conveyed by gestures, which are perfect texts of their own, as we have also learned in the workshop.

Once again back to the verbal text. If we take a glimpse at a recipe, there will be words we know, words we can easily figure out, and words which are obscure. The latter we will leave as they are for the time being. Now, most importantly, we look at the shiny white spots (the known) and not at the little black holes (the unknown). If we get absorbed by the latter, we are lost. Unfortunately, in a traditional approach a text in a foreign language is thrown at you and the

first thing you do is to clasp a dictionary and frenetically start to look up all the vocabulary you happen not to know. Now, desperation, followed by exasperation and then frustration will follow on the heels of such activity, and you are tempted to jump out of the window (madhouse situation!). What should you do?

Now, the next thing I would tell my students is: you have a vast latent knowledge of German you can tap into. You have already made an effort to learn English for many years, a language with strong Germanic roots. It was brought to the British Isles by fearsome German tribes (Anglo-Saxon = *Angeln* & *Sachsen*!) and later got some Norman-Roman overlay (many Latin origin words, which by the way might also be found in German). Sure enough, we want to beware of bad friendships: the occasional false cognates (*faux amis*), but they will at this stage not deter us from looking for words we potentially know. With food and drink in particular, there are plenty of lexemes very similar in English and German. They can be immediately understood via – what I like to call – ‘linguistic imagination’. Just to give a few examples: salt = *Salz*, pepper = *Pfeffer*, bread = *Brot*, fish = *Fisch*, spinach = *Spinat*, apple = *Apfel*, kangaroo = *Känguru*, beer = *Bier* and wine = *Wein*. Letting the students mobilize their linguistic imagination and figure out the meaning of the words without a dictionary can be great fun. It is a joyful experience when they detect that they understand much more than they have thought. It is one *aha*-experience after the other. And only after they got the big picture, they will go into detail and if necessary look up unknown words and brighten up the dark spots. The dictionary is then allowed as a last resort. Of course, the students should work out the meaning of the recipe by consulting each other, talking, gesturing, or grimacing.

When working with texts, the shifting of attention away from the unknown to the known is motivating and elevating. In the case of a recipe, the teacher can also tell the students that cooking the meal described is their homework. The teacher can add that should the meal not taste real good, there must have been some misunderstandings. These however happen regularly in our daily conversation even in our mother tongue. They are there to be cleared and are by no means mortal sins (unless you poison yourself, but that’s rather unlikely). Let’s eat good food, be sane, and have fun in the classroom!