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Slavic 425

Linguistic Commentary 1: *Praktisch* and German Culture

Anna Wierzbicka's book *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words* discusses several German words, *Heimat* and *Vaterland*, as well as their meanings and connections to German culture. This paper seeks to clarify the meaning of the adjective form of a word pertaining to a different aspect of German culture: *praktisch*.

The translations of *praktisch* are varied, and most have to do with what would be an admittedly American concept of German culture – namely, that Germans are efficient almost to a fault. The word is obviously a cognate for practical, and also has similarities to English words for functional, handy, and convenient.

However, the connotative meanings of the English equivalents for *praktisch* are rather negative, and do not fully express the word or its connection to German culture. If something is functional or convenient, it is not considered to bear many other descriptive qualities, and therefore is not terribly desirable since it has no other traits.

This is evidenced rather amusingly by the shift in translation of the motto for a German brand of chocolate bar. Ritter Sport's slogan in German is "Quadratisch. Praktisch. Gut." which translates to "Square. Practical. Good." This was changed to "Quality. Chocolate. Squared." in the US, and "Quality in a Square." in the UK. The

English language considers something that is practical as fulfilling only its minimum requirement, while German clearly considers it to be something more enlightening.

*Praktisch* expresses a simple brilliance; if something is *praktisch*, it is fulfilling its intended, almost divine, purpose, and perpetuating harmony. German efficiency stems from order, and order is a result of this harmony. Although a typical German caricature is that of an obsessive-compulsive rule follower (thus the origin of phrases like “grammar Nazi”), it is not an exaggeration to state that much of German culture hinges on the ideas expressed by the word *praktisch*.

A clear example of the harmony expressed by *praktisch* can be found in Jan Faktor’s poem “wie praktisch ist unsere Haut”:

„Wie praktisch ist unsere Haut  
wie genial unsere Wirbelsäule,  
wie zur Schönheit entwickelt unsere Lungen,  
wie anpassungsfähig und arbeitsam unser Magen,  
wie gerade richtig dünnflüssig unser überall gegenwärtiges Blut“

“How *praktisch* our skin is  
How brilliant our vertebrae  
How our lungs grow with beauty,  
How adaptive and hardworking our stomach,  
How rightly flowing the current of our blood”

Here one can see that *praktisch* is expressing more than functionality – there is an overarching idea of purpose expressed in this stanza, and clearly every piece of the body has a piece to contribute to the smoothly working whole. It is also

noteworthy that *praktisch* is used alongside words like “brilliant” and “rightly”. The next stanza is even more telling:

„Stellen wir uns das Grauen vor,  
dass unsere Haut durchsichtig wäre,  
dass unsere Wirbelsäule steif wie unser Schienbein wäre,  
dass unsere Lunge Durchzug nicht ertragen würde,  
dass unser Blut in uns wie die Milch in der Tüte plätschern würde“

“Let’s imagine the horror,  
That our skin was transparent,  
That our vertebrae were as stiff as our spine,  
That our lungs could no longer bear to pull the air,  
That our blood would splash in us like milk in a paper bag”

When skin loses what makes it *praktisch*, it induces horror and becomes disgusting. Our skin, along with our other body parts, clearly has an intended purpose. When they begin to fall apart, the whole crumbles as well. This poem was written during the division of Germany, and the loss of harmony here expresses the discord felt throughout the nation at the time. Without everything *praktisch*, the German values of efficiency and order were lost.

Thus, this paper asserts that *praktisch* has a meaning deeper and more emotional than “practical”. Rather, those who do not speak the language should understand how *praktisch* expresses a fulfillment of purpose and contribution to order that is held in high regard by Germans.

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