

Sam Courts
SLAV 425
April 26, 2013
Language Commentary 1

Gemütlichkeit - Comfort for the Soul

One of the main themes of this course so far has been that not all words are translatable; that some words express concepts unique to a culture and lack direct equivalents in other languages. I am a native English speaker and would not call myself fluent in any other languages, but I have studied German for several years. At some point during this time, I heard that the word *Gemütlichkeit*, although often translated as 'comfort', is a uniquely German word. I wasn't sure that this claim was true, and indeed when I first brought the word up with my native bilingual German/English roommate, Joelle, she seemed surprised that I thought there wasn't an English equivalent for *Gemütlichkeit*. After further research and a more in depth interview with Joelle, however, I am quite convinced that *Gemütlichkeit* is a much more complicated term than 'comfort'. As a nonnative speaker, I may not be qualified to claim that this word is one of Anna Wierzbicka's "key words" for German, but I do know that *Gemütlichkeit* expresses a concept without a direct translation in English and that it has a close relation to *Heimat*, a word that Wierzbicka does identify as a key German phrase (1997).

The Collins German-English Dictionary translates *Gemütlichkeit* as 'comfort',

‘comfortable ambience’, ‘friendliness’, ‘informality’, or ‘coziness’ (Terrell, 1993).

Interestingly, when translating from English to German, none of these English words are translated as the noun *Gemütlichkeit*. Although last in the list of possible translations, ‘coziness’ may be the closest equivalent, as the adjective *gemütlich* appears to be valid substitute for ‘cozy’. The most common translations given for these English words, and the translations I more familiar with, are *bequem*(adj) and *Bequemlichkeit*(N). I believe it is safe to claim that *bequem* is equivalent to the English word ‘comfortable’. To get a better understanding of why *Gemütlichkeit* means more than this, it is useful to look at the meaning of the root word *Gemüt*. The metaphysical concepts of ‘mind’, ‘nature’, ‘disposition’, ‘soul’, and ‘feeling’ are all possible translations given for *Gemüt* (Terrell, 1993). Using one of these translations, *Gemütlichkeit* might literally be translated as ‘souliness’, clearly something different than the English word ‘comfort’.

When discussing *Gemütlichkeit* with Joelle, she initially described the the word as just meaning ‘wholesome comfort’, but as she continued to talk about its uses and connotations, it became obvious to both of us that she associates many things with *Gemütlichkeit* that are not captured by this English phrase. For her, the word is closely related to comforts, but not just physical comforts. Snuggling with a loved one, for example, could be physically uncomfortable if either person is a restless sleeper, but the experience might still be an emotional comfort. In this case, one could describe the

situation as *unbequem* (not-*bequem*) but *gemütlich*. *Gemütlichkeit* has more to do with the comfort of home, the comfort of family, and the comfort of friends than with physical comforts. It is a social description of how one feels within a close-knit community. Joelle indicated the word is often closely related to family, saying, “When I’m with my family and we’re together and I’m at peace and at rest, then I have *Gemütlichkeit*.” She explained that the word can describe a feeling with friends as well, but only in the same situations that an English speaker might metaphorically describe those friends as family. Although the most common usages of *Gemütlichkeit* do refer to dinners, hikes, vacations, etc. with family and close friends, Joelle mentioned that, on rare occasions, a day spent alone could also be described as *gemütlich*. An afternoon reading in a sunny park, for example, could be a *gemütlich* activity.

One aspect of the noun, *Gemütlichkeit*, that Joelle says is not as strongly associated with the adjective, *gemütlich*, is a sense of time. By this she means that it is not possible to have *Gemütlichkeit* after a few minutes of talking to someone. A long period of time is generally required before producing a feeling of *Gemütlichkeit*. A first date, for example, could be *gemütlich*, but it would be very strange to say that such a brief encounter had *Gemütlichkeit*. Even using the adjective form, however, does imply some level of extended familiarity. An English speaker might say on a first date or to a new friend, “I feel like I’ve known you forever.” In the same way, when a German speaker describes a young

relationship as *gemütlich*, there is an implied sense of surprise that such a feeling of comfort was possible after so little time.

While discussing the temporal aspect of *Gemütlichkeit*, Joelle noted that the word not only deals with long-term relationships, but also with feelings, people, and experiences from childhood. She went further and said that *Gemütlichkeit* is related to *Heimat*. Given that our interview was conducted in English, it is particularly interesting that she said this word in German. The choice of saying *Heimat*, rather than a similar English word, supports Wierzbicka's claim that there isn't an English equivalent for *Heimat* (1997). In her own explanation of the concept, Joelle said that *Heimat* evokes longing for childhood and for one's hometown. The feelings of *Gemütlichkeit* are exactly what one associates with *Heimat*. When Wierzbicka says that *Heimat* "suggests something like nostalgia for childhood and for the special, unrecoverable, happiness which can be associated with it" (1997), she is describing the happiness of *Gemütlichkeit*. Joelle further confirmed this idea by saying, "*Gemütlichkeit* is linked with *Heimat*, because when people think about *Heimat*, they think about the soul and about family." Recall that the root *Gemüt*, can be translated as 'soul' (Terrell, 1993). The reason it is so natural to have *Gemütlichkeit* with old friends and with family is that those people are part of childhood and part of *Heimat*. Indeed, in the biographical film, "Der junge Freud" (Corti, 1976), Freud is asked if he considers Vienna to be his *Heimat* after living there since age four. Freud replies simply that it was

“*nichts Gemütliches*” (not *gemütlich*). It is enough to say that Vienna lacks *Gemütlichkeit* for it to be clear that the city could not be his *Heimat*.

Given the close relation between *Gemütlichkeit* and the key word, *Heimat*, it would be difficult to claim that *Gemütlichkeit* does not have cultural significance in German. Even aside from this connection, however, the word’s association with numerous deep communal and familial themes and its lack of an English equivalent support the idea that *Gemütlichkeit* is a highly relevant concept to German culture. Indeed, a word so closely bound to soul, friendship, family, and *Heimat* must warrant further consideration as a key word of the German language.

Works Cited

Corti, A. (Director). (1976). *Der junge Freud* [Film]. Austria.

Klein, J. (2013, April 23). Personal interview.

Terrell, P. (1993). *Collins German-English, English-German dictionary: Unabridged*. Glasgow: HarperCollins.

Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding cultures through their key words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. New York: Oxford University Press.