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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

Editorial

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Welcome to the first issue of the Language Centre's English language newsletter *English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials*.

Our newsletter is meant to provide University staff members with informative and entertaining tips related to the English language. Typical problem areas will be highlighted so that staff can hone their English skills further.

Each newsletter will contain a section on grammar, vocabulary and intercultural communication as well as some exercises for our readers to try on their own.

The articles will draw upon the diverse make-up of the English Department in order to capture to some extent the varieties of English spoken across the world.

In the first issue of our newsletter, we will look to the future and explain some of the ways that future actions or events can be expressed in English. In particular, we will examine one of the pitfalls for many a German speaker, "Ich mache es morgen."

Our first section on intercultural communication will commence small by outlin-

ing how big small talk actually is.

Lastly, we will take a humorous look at toilets and throw some light upon the vocabulary used to refer to this private realm and reveal any potentially embarrassing situations.

We would be pleased to know what you think about our newsletter. Feel free to send us your comments and any ideas for future issues.

John Nixon



→ Feedback Here

Glossary

 to hone one's skills:
 to improve one's skills

 realm:
 area, sphere, domain

Currently on Offer

- **Workshop Academic Writing in English:** Friday, November 29, December 6 and 13. We are offering a three half-day workshop on the mechanics of academic writing for PhD students and academic staff. **Registration.**
- **Coaching**
One-on-one coaching is available upon request. This is especially helpful if you are preparing for a presentation or planning a new course in English. Group workshops are also possible. If you are interested, please **contact us.**
- **Editing Service**
Do you have a paper, abstract or other document that needs to be looked over by a native English speaker before it is published? If so, please **contact us.**

Grammar

They simply vary in terms of the speaker's perspective and intention.

Future? What Future?

Verb tenses in English can be a heavy cross to bear especially because the general rules on how to form tenses sound so simple. Yet, when it comes to applying the concepts the devil is in the detail.

Take the simple German sentence, "Ich mache es morgen."

If you were to ask a native English speaker to translate it, you could end up with three different versions:

- A I'll do it tomorrow.
"will" future
- B I'm going to do it tomorrow.
"going to" future
- C I'm doing it tomorrow.
present continuous

Which one is the correct one?

In actual fact, all three are possible. They simply vary in terms of the speaker's **perspective** and **intention**.

Sentence A, "I'll do it tomorrow," signals a *spontaneous* decision at the moment of speaking. The speaker has probably just heard that there is a job to be done and spontaneously volunteers to do it. Or the speaker decides at the moment of speaking that he or she will do it tomorrow.

Sentence B, "I'm going to do it tomorrow," on the other hand, is used for *planned* actions. The speaker in this case had already planned to do the action before **uttering** the statement.

Sentence C, "I'm doing it tomorrow," is used for *arrangements*. Here it has been known to the speaker that there is an important job to be done and he or she

has set aside some space in his or her schedule for it.

The difference between sentence B and sentence C is rather subtle. The present continuous is generally used for future events when they involve appointments, e.g. "I'm seeing the doctor tomorrow." or "I'm getting my hair cut this afternoon."

You might ask yourself whether a further alternative, such as "I do it tomorrow," is possible. This is grammatically incorrect in English and one of the more common mistakes among German speakers. While the present simple ("do" in this case) can be used to refer to future events, its use is restricted to a few contexts, such as timetables as in "The train leaves on Monday at 5 am." Generally, however, present simple in English, unlike in German, is not used to refer to the future. Instead, it is used for frequently occurring events, as in "I do it every day."

Unfortunately, verb forms referring to future events or actions are complicated in English. In fact, there are even more cases where we have to justify which type of verbal expression we use, for example with predictions. However, we will leave that for a future edition of our newsletter, so please be on the lookout for it.

Should you now wish to test yourself, you can try the exercises related to future verb forms that we have created for you.

Dr. Ines Böhner / John Nixon

Glossary

to bear a cross:
to carry a burden; to deal with a particularly difficult situation

to utter sth.:
to say sth.



Exercises

Intercultural Communication

Small Talk is BIG

If ever there was a misnomer, the phrase 'small talk' is it. Small talk is anything but small. It is BIG! It is a necessary social skill. It is an important art. It is, in fact, a big deal. Why? Well, 'small talk' is about human contact through conversation - person-to-person interaction and connection.

Skeptics declare that 'small talk' is superficial and a waste of time. However, they fail to realize that the ability to engage with others ensures effective communication. Small talk facilitates communication and is important on many levels. Four areas immediately come to mind: academic, business, personal, and social. Successful research and development, business deals as well as exchanges within academia and industry not only rely upon professional abilities but also interpersonal skills. A collaborative atmosphere rather than a discouraging competitive environment optimizes desired outcomes.

Small talk is the BIG art of communication and as such must take into account many aspects of communication together with good grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The intricacies of culture alone must be carefully negotiated in order to avoid blunders and unintentional slights or rudeness. Hierarchy, gender, and body language are just three aspects of culture that must be considered during small talk. The interaction can be fraught with potential missteps.

What qualities are necessary for successful exchanges? Be prepared. Learn about hosts, visiting professors, potential business partners. Listen to what the person actually says (and doesn't say). Small talk is much more than polite noises and chit-chat about the weather. Pick up on potential topics whilst being sensitive to potential 'no go' areas. Awareness of cultures and traditions along with observance of the other's behavior aids in

conversation, too. Being open and friendly, establishing eye contact to show interest, and including others in the near vicinity are all signs of positive and respectful human-to-human interaction. Anyone who knows himself/herself and is interested in knowing others, knows that 'small' talk is 'big.' On so many levels, small talk is a rewarding skill: personal growth, learning something new, networking for business and academia. Small talk can be a positive and pleasant human experience whether with the taxi driver or as a way to establish good rapport before getting down to the business at hand.

Clearly, small talk is a desirable art to be acquired and appreciated. Intercultural competence and the "how tos" to cope with personal introductions and initial forays as well as more in-depth personable but not personal conversations require practice and guidance. These are topics which shall be addressed in future editions.

In this edition of our newsletter, we would like to provide you with a few phrases and expressions you can use when making small talk. As the weather is often considered a simple and safe topic, it has the potential to be a very good starting point. Below are some small talk phrases you can use when talking about the weather.

Teresa Bernards



Small Talk Phrases

Is it cold enough for you?

Glossary

misnomer
an incorrect or inappropriate name for sth.

blunder
clumsy mistake

to be fraught with
to be full of problems

to establish good rapport
to create a good relationship

foray
an attempt at something new



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Vocabulary

Excuse me, where's the toilet?

john

Why might this seemingly harmless question provoke a smile from the stranger you just asked this question of in public?

outhouse

The answer lies not simply in the differences between American and British English, but also reflects the tendency in English to refer euphemistically to a toilet. In other words, the word "toilet" is avoided, especially in North America, as it denotes a toilet bowl/seat, a rather unpleasant association.

powder room

Instead, the most commonly used term in the United States for a public toilet is "restroom" or "bathroom" and in Canada "washroom". (At one's home, the bathroom is the room that contains a bathtub/shower, sink and toilet.) For many a German speaker this might be regarded with *bemusement*, as one does not lie down in a restroom, nor does a *Waschraum* contain a toilet.

restroom

bathroom

washroom

loo

Other synonyms for restroom in the United States include: men's/women's room (and not man's/woman's room), powder room (for women), little boy's/little girl's room (humorous), the facilities (rather indirect and not always clear), the john (slang), latrine (in the army), head (in the navy, as toilets used to be located in the bow of a ship) and outhouse (an outdoor shack in the woods or at a cottage used as a toilet). Of course, there are countless other euphemisms for the word "toilet", many of them quite colourful.

In Great Britain and Ireland "public toilet" and "toilet" are perfectly appropriate terms to use in public spaces, such as railway stations. In pubs and restaurants, however, "ladies and gents" is more common. At home the word "loo" (origin uncertain) *prevails*. Other terms you might hear include:

lav (short for lavatory), privy and bog. Brits, like other English speakers, also tend to use humorous euphemisms, such as "Is it alright if I inspect your facilities?" This roundabout phrase means that the speaker would like to use your loo. Incidentally, the term "WC", while an English abbreviation of water closet, is not common in English-speaking countries despite its widespread use throughout continental Europe.

To complicate matters further the word "toilet" is associated with class distinctions in Britain. According to Prof. John Joseph of Edinburgh University, it is shunned among the upper class because it was adopted by the middle and lower classes in the Victorian era. The latter began using the word "toilet" because it sounded French and thus more sophisticated. The Earl of Onslow was quoted as having once said, "I find it almost impossible to force the word 'toilet' between my lips" (New York Times, April 24, 2007). Kate Fox, in her book *Watching the English* notes that the terms "loo" and "lavatory" are favoured among the upper-middle and upper classes today in Britain.

So, should a guest of yours ask to use your bathroom, he or she is most likely not looking to take a bath, but rather to go to the toilet.

John Nixon



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Glossary

bemusement
confusion
(not to be confused with
the word "amusement")

to prevail
to predominate; to be
the most usual