German even the Germans don't like

Think rules to simplify a complicated language would be well received? Think again.

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As of this month, the German language is officially "reformed." After more than a decade of bitter debate, new grammar rules for the world's 100 million native German speakers are now set in stone.

That may sound like big news, but chances are you haven't heard ein wort about it. Even in Germany the event has been met with something akin to a news blackout, but then again, the vast majority of Germans detest the reforms.

I learned about them by accident while grilling bratwurst and complaining about the language's user-unfriendliness. "No problem," my bemused German companion assured me, "as of Monday, it will be easier."

As of Monday?

"Beginning Monday, the rules will have changed for good," he continued. "And everyone must follow them."

With the smell of sausages wafting in the air and the Rhine a stone's throw away, I had little doubt that I had left the U.S. and was now living in Germany. But nothing cemented the fact quite like a discussion of German language reform and its "mandatory" adjustments. I was already having difficulty putting together simple sentences; would I now be fined for my ineptitude? Thankfully not, I learned; only children would be penalized! The government-mandated changes will be incorporated into their textbooks.

To anyone who has suffered through German's torturous grammatical rules, the concept of language reform is probably music to your ears. Every noun in the German language is deemed masculine, feminine or neuter and is preceded by its appropriate article. Depending on a word's "case," or construction, Germans have more than a dozen different ways to say "the" and "a." When I asked my German teacher why a fork is feminine, a spoon is masculine and a knife is neuter, she just...
teacher why a fork is feminine, a spoon is masculine and a knife is neuter, she just shrugged her shoulders.

Even more mysterious are the verbs, which frequently reside at the end of a sentence or are split in half and placed as far away from one another as possible. And one must not forget the compoundwords that are about this long. Given these complications, I've found myself in the unenviable position of trying to communicate without nouns or verbs. But adjectives get one only so far.

The Germans have known for a long time that their grammar is confusing, even for native speakers. The first attempts at reforming the language of Schiller and Goethe occurred more than 100 years ago, when grammarians worked to standardize it. Nearly half a century later, the Nazis planned to institute their own language reforms, but the war cut those efforts short.

The impetus behind the reform is the German-speaking world's penchant for grammatical rules and the difficulty for students to learn them. Many of these rules for spelling and punctuation, developed over centuries, have been deemed ambiguous and unsystematic, let alone unnecessarily complicated. The latest reform, begun in the early 1990s and led by expert grammarians from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, set out to simplify the language: Grammatical rules were reduced from 212 to (only!) 112, and those governing commas dropped from 52 to a mere nine. The changes mainly addressed written grammar, and -- to my chagrin -- have little effect on the spoken word. Perhaps the most important change is that der Hot dog is now der Hotdog.

Nevertheless, the so-called grammar simplification, which was adopted by the three governments' education ministries in 1996, faced stiff opposition from the public: Several German states and regional newspapers refused to adopt the measures. A number of authors, including Günter Grass, rebelled.

Until the German supreme court ruled in favor of the reforms in 1998, they appeared headed for the big chalkboard in the sky. But doubts persisted, and yet another group of experts was assembled to "reform the reform." As one German friend put it: People wanted their commas back. The new rules were instituted in 2006 with a one-year grace period that has just ended.

In the meantime, it's the German schoolchildren who will bear the brunt of the changes. It is not enough for a child to hand in a well-written essay; it also must be grammatically flawless. Teachers are instructed to count every misplaced comma and misspelled word, multiply them by 100, and then divide the resulting number by the total number of words in an essay. Enough errors, and one's grades can drop precipitously.

And I thought I had it bad.
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