

Chapter 10 – in English

Intercultural incomprehension: how to annoy, surprise or shock people in Britain

Language plays a major role in cultural understanding, but it isn't everything. In some cases, more than a knowledge of the language is required if you want to get on with the locals or if you want your British visitors to feel at home in Germany, depending on the circumstances. In this final chapter, I have gathered together a number of habits that are guaranteed to annoy, surprise or shock your friends on the other side of the English Channel. Some of them are related to language, but most are non-linguistic. Nevertheless, they are definitely things that Besserwisser should be aware of – even if they might find some of them illogical – if they want to get on with the average Britain on the street.

1. Assume British people are walking dictionaries

One of my English friends who lives in Germany recently said she had the impression that most Germans were, in general, more intelligent than the average British person she knew. Can this be true? Despite starting school two years later than their British counterparts, do the Germans really manage to cram more information into their brains and put it to more effective use? This sounded unlikely to me, so I asked her why she sometimes felt intellectually inferior. She revealed that her German colleagues were always asking her what words meant in English, and some of the time she wasn't sure of the definitions herself. Her colleagues were astounded that a person from England with a university degree in languages didn't know all the words in the English language. After all, they were convinced that they knew all the words in the German language, with the exception, perhaps, of one or two of those very obscure Fremdwörter. And they may be right. But, as I pointed out to my friend, German has fewer words than English.

Estimates vary, but we can be pretty sure that there are over half a million words in the English language, not including technical and scientific terms. By comparison, German is said

to have only around 185,000 words. These German words must be much easier to learn, as well: The standard dictionary in British households is the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, which has about 240,000 entries. In German households, as far as I know, the standard dictionary isn't even called a dictionary, it's called *die deutsche Rechtschreibung*, which implies that everyone knows what the words mean (all 130,000 of them, in this case) but not everyone knows how to spell them, especially since the spelling reform. Close behind *die deutsche Rechtschreibung* in popularity is *das Fremdwörterbuch*, which at least is called a dictionary and which has 55,000 entries. Armed with this new information, my friend went happily back to the office in the knowledge that she could use these statistics as defence, should the definition of a word in English escape her in the future.

So please: Don't assume your British acquaintances are undereducated if they can't provide an on-the-spot definition of *oxytone*, *tellurian* or *boondoggle*.

2. Talk about the weather

The British talk about the weather all the time, so why should I discourage Besserwisser from talking about it? Well, actually, you are perfectly entitled to and you're welcome to make the kind of remarks that British people do. These include, *lovely weather for the time of year*, *what a nice day, isn't it?* and *what lovely weather we're having*. These phrases can be used either when the weather really is nice or in an ironic sense if it's excessively cold, wet or generally miserable and they're quite useful to add an air of informality to an otherwise rather awkward or silent situation. However, when you meet British people huddled up under umbrellas by the Brandenburg Gate or the Heidelberger Schloss or any other location in Germany, please don't laugh and proclaim: *You're from Britain, so you must be used to this!* Firstly, I don't think it's true for all areas of Britain. The north and the west tend to be wetter than the south and the east. I remember having a gloriously sunny holiday in Devon (south-west England) while a friend of mine went to the Scottish Highlands and didn't take her wellies off for two weeks. Secondly, if you think that you're the first person to make this highly original joke, then you're wrong. Every Besserwisser I know has made this joke at some point, and it doesn't get any funnier as time goes by, especially if there's a large raindrop hanging from your nose and your feet feel like blocks of ice.

3. Complain about British food

I know, British food doesn't have a very good reputation. And I don't doubt the traumatic experiences that those of you who, in your youth, had on school exchange trips to the UK: unidentifiable vegetables, school dinners, and dishes with strange names like toad in the hole, which, you will be pleased to hear, doesn't actually contain toad but consists of sausages baked in the oven in batter. However, teenagers on school exchange trips are often away from home for the first time and are also battling with the language – particularly with local accents – and puberty at the same time. I remember that on my first school exchange trip to France – a country famed for its cuisine – I was convinced that I would be made to eat snails and eyed every dish with great suspicion, but I managed to put the experience behind me. And you should try to give British food a second chance too. I know a great many people in Britain who can cook well.

Furthermore, if you believe that all British people eat is roast beef and soggy cabbage, then I have to tell you that, fortunately, those days are over. Although a *Sunday joint* (which is a *Sonntagsbraten* and not a *Joint am Sonntag*, as a friend of mine inadvertently said it was when interpreting for a church-run visit to a centre for the underprivileged in Nottingham a few years ago) is still a common weekend meal in many households, curry has become the most popular British dish. In 2001, the late former foreign secretary Robin Cook declared a type of curry – namely chicken tikka masala – a „true British national dish“. Chicken tikka is an Indian dish and the masala sauce was added to adapt it to British tastes – because British people are used to their meat being served with gravy.

4. Take off your clothes

Over the years, I have discovered that the British have a rather impractical approach to clothing. In some cases, they obviously wear too few. Until fairly recently, boys at primary schools (that is, up to the age of 11) generally wore short trousers as part of their school uniform – all year round. Fortunately for young British boys, this trend is dying out, and in my class photo from 1979 only one boy is wearing short trousers: Alexander, whose mother was a teacher at the school and whose blueish-coloured legs were a permanent feature of my primary school education. But lack of clothing can be witnessed in other situations now: If you go out on a Saturday evening in any British town, you will invariably see crowds of scantily clad young people staggering from pub to pub, even in the depths of winter. The girls are sometimes wearing tops that look more like underwear, while the boys are in T-shirts or

shirts, and there isn't a coat, hat, scarf or glove in sight. If you ask these people why they aren't protecting themselves from the cold and draughts, they might well reply that there are no Garderoben (which are *coat racks* or *cloakrooms* in English, not *wardrobes*) in the overcrowded pubs, and they would probably be too drunk to remember to put them back on when they left. You can decide for yourself whether you think this is an acceptable explanation.

In most other cases, the British are very conservative about nakedness. Apart from a spate of lone streakers invading the pitch at various rugby and cricket matches in the 1970s, they prefer to keep their clothes on. Even in saunas, it is usual practice to wear a swimming costume or swimming trunks, especially if the sauna is mixed. I know you will argue that this is uncomfortable or even unhygienic, but I feel that I have to warn you – just in case you stride confidently into a mixed sauna in your birthday suit and wonder why you are greeted with looks of horror and disgust.

Judith, an American friend of mine once had an embarrassing encounter with near nudity – proof that having a good knowledge of American English cannot rescue you from (or may even cause) awkward situations in Britain. She was staying with friends in the UK and had made an appointment to have her legs waxed. On arrival at the beauty salon, she asked the beautician, *Shall I take my pants off now?* The beautician looked aghast and said *Oh no!* This confused Eleanor. She wondered how on earth the beautician could wax her legs if she was wearing trousers – or *pants*, as she called them. After some discussion, she discovered that *pants* – meaning trousers in American English – should not be confused with *pants* – meaning underpants – in British English.

5. Don't shave your legs or armpits (applies to women only)

On the subject of body hair, please don't be surprised if displays of it are greeted with looks of disgust in Britain. I think it is safe to say that it is still optional in Germany, although companies manufacturing razors, depilatory creams and waxing products have definitely identified the German market as a potential source of revenue in the past few years. In the UK, however, women with bodily hair tend to be regarded as man-hating feminists. I'm not saying that I agree with this, but I think you should know about the kind of reaction it could provoke.

I vividly remember Nena appearing on the British pop music programme *Top of the Pops* with the song *99 Red Balloons* in the mid-1980s. She was wearing a sleeveless top and, as the song got underway, raised her hands above her head to clap – and revealed a dark mass of underarm hair. How vile! This glimpse of hair was the main topic of conversation on the school bus the following morning and the memory of it remains with me to this day. None of us could understand how it was possible to reveal such a thing on one of the most-watched programmes on national television.

I have to admit that due to a combination of laziness and living in Germany, my hair removal activities are not as frequent as they once were, but I always make sure that my legs and armpits are perfectly smooth and hair-free when I visit friends and family in the UK, as I don't want to recreate a Nena-style offence that will make a lasting impression.

6. Expect male visitors to sit down to pee

Now here's a final point, this time aimed at the male readership (or aimed at the male readership's aim). In Britain, the vast majority of men do not sit down to *pee* – otherwise known as to *wee*, *spend a penny* or *relieve themselves*. Slightly less polite is the phrase *take a leak*, and reserved for your passive vocabulary only are *piss* and *siphon the python*. In fact, I would not be surprised if most men in Britain claim that it is biologically impossible to urinate while sitting down. In Britain, the male-female toilet debate centres not on whether men should sit down or stand up, but on whether they are permitted to leave the toilet seat up after going for a pee or whether they should put it back down. And yes, I mean the toilet seat – not the toilet lid. Of course, the men among you are perfectly entitled to sit down when you go to the loo in Britain, as I can't imagine that anyone would be watching you. I do not want to enter into a long discussion about what's right or wrong or hygienic or unhygienic, but be warned: If you're staying in Britain or if you have British guests at your home, it's worth checking that the seat is down before you go to the loo – because the feeling of cold porcelain on one's bottom can come as quite an unpleasant surprise.

On that note, I think this book has become personal enough and we should move on to the final exercises before I start discussing other bodily functions. After all, that would be most un-British.