



The incredible
learning journey of an
Irishman in Germany
by Mel Kelly for Cambiana



Speaking in German as an Irishman

by Mel Kelly, May 12th, 2019

"Life is too short to speak German"- Mark Twain

More than 100 years ago, American author Mark Twain said: "Life is too short to speak German". I am not an American and not 100 years old, so initially I didn't understand the sentiment.

I'm from Ireland and moved to Germany in 2003. My move to Germany was just for a few years, but I quickly developed a taste for the finer things in life, Germany had to offer: beer, sausage and sauerkraut. Meanwhile, back in Ireland the Celtic tiger had turned into the Celtic car crash and my career options back home had faded very quickly. It soon became clear that I shouldn't listen to Mark Twain's warning and that I should learn some German soon if I wanted to have food on the table or clothes in my wardrobe.

Since I was not born in a German-speaking country, I had the privilege and the honor of learning German as a foreign language. Learning German at the start wasn't easy for me, on the contrary: it was difficult, very difficult. Only then did I start to understand Mark Twain's warning.

Start with buying a pair of leather pants to connect emotionally with the language

Anja, a friend, told me that I lacked an emotional connection to the language. So I considered marrying a German woman or applying for German citizenship. But I went one better and bought a pair of leather pants. But she meant that I should do something in German that I was already doing in English, e.g. public speaking. I loved public speaking, I could speak for 7 minutes with an interruption. This is impossible in back in Ireland in an Irish family with 6 brothers and sister. But how about public speaking in German? That was a terrifying idea, but maybe that was my path.

In addition to my few years of public speaking in English, I had two more secret weapons at the ready: my bad German and much lower expectations of any success in speaking in German. So I became a member of a German Toastmasters club in Munich. Of course, I noticed some immediate differences from my English Toastmasters. The most important were: the language was different; I could understand a lot less, and they understood me even less.

At the beginning, I spoke with a lot of enthusiasm in the German club, but it was hard, very hard! My bad grammar and lack of vocabulary were mercilessly exposed. I struggled for right words and I had to be satisfied with any word I could think of. Besides my wonderful musical Irish accent was completely incomprehensible to German ears. I became a stumbling, bumbling, mumbling fiasco. What a shame, an Irish man who could

no longer speak. Although I spoke at every German Toastmaster evening, it was still not enough. I realized that I had to work on my German outside of the Toastmaster meetings.

Speak slowly, use simple ideas

On the one hand, I started a weekly German course, in which my eternally patient teacher revealed and explained the secrets of German grammar. The mysteries of the universe would be easier to explain and understand. On the other hand, I found a tandem partner, who I met weekly for coffee and to share stories in English and German.

I also sought help from a speech therapist to improve my accent. She helped me to understand the difference between the English "r" and a German "r" and between the English and German vowels. And the difference between every other letter in the alphabet! Why do I live in on a street called Zweibrückenstraße? I still dream of one day being able to pronounce my address in German correctly.

Surprisingly, some of the things I learned while speaking in German turned out to be quite useful for my speeches in English. Because my Irish accent was so strong, when I spoke German, I had to speak much slower to reduce it. Lo and behold, speaking more slowly is a huge advantage for a speaker in any language. In addition, due to my restricted vocabulary in Germany I had to use simpler ideas, words and more visual language. To my amazement, this simpler and more concrete approach also worked much better in English than my previous more complex and abstract approach.

My journey learning Germany so far has been long, full of ups and downs. But on the way, there were some important milestones. My presentations have become more effective, my negotiating skills have improved and I have passed exams passed and won speech competitions. But sometimes it's the little things in life, that really give you the most satisfaction. My colleagues now tell me that my German doesn't sound so sloppy and lazy anymore. I suppose that's a compliment of sorts. But if only they knew how much work it took me to be able to half-way correctly pronounce some German words.

Sometimes I can even make a joke in German!

I can now discuss the subtleties of the football with them over lunch. Finally, I can understand almost all the opinions and jokes. Sometimes I can even make a joke myself. Surprisingly they even laugh from time to time. Slowly I'm starting to feel like I am at home in Germany. And the journey is far from over. A few months ago, I started Stand-Up Comedy in English. Maybe one day I'll be brave enough to try that in German too!

Like Mark Twain once said, "What do we need eternity for? It gives us the chance to learn German."

*What do you get when you combine an IT consultant, a stand-up comedian, a champion speechmaker and an Irishman living in Germany? **Mel Kelly**, of course! And no other. With a freshly unique take on technology trends, working as an IT guy and living internationally, Mel delivers insightful, intelligent and hilarious keynotes at business events across Europe. And he does it all in English or German, no less. Mel is a regular at IT conferences and corporate trainings for smaller companies and multinationals.*



His award-winning, engaging style keeps listeners on the edge of their seats – and laughing – no matter whether he's talking big data, AI, machine learning or other topics where technology and the world of business intersect. Mel is a seasoned performer – he's been through the fire as a TEDx speaker and has made television appearances on Bayerische Rundfunk. What's more, he is an award-winning Toastmasters speaker and bestselling humour book author who's been entertaining and inspiring audiences for over a decade with funny and fascinating performances.

Mel is also an experienced communication and storytelling trainer who has helped many team members and leaders communicating efficiently across different audiences and topics.
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