



# Babel

## Young Writers' Competition 16–18 winner

*Dong Hyun Kang is the winner of the 16–18 year-old category of Babel's 2017 Young Writers' Competition. Here, he looks back at forgotten tales of language change.*

# WARS ON LANGUAGE

**D**uring the 17th century, Vinschgau, a sleepy valley located at the footsteps of the Italian Alps, experienced a curious development. Historically, the region had spoken Romansh, the famous Swiss language that many linguists fear is on the verge of disappearing. The Protestant Reformation had gained ground in the area during the previous century, especially in the town of Burgusio, where, according to the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland, a pastor officially assumed his functions. However, a strong backlash soon came from the local Catholic church. The local Marienberg Abbey engaged in a negative campaign

not only against the Protestant religion but also, curiously, against the Romansh language, which it characterised as a Protestant language. These efforts not only succeeded in driving out Protestantism but also rooted out the once deeply ingrained Romansh; according to the 2001 census, 96.51% of the population currently speaks German.

For the local inhabitants of the Vinschgau valley, changing their language from Romansh to German seems to have mattered a lot: the change demonstrated their loyalty to the Catholic church. But is this an isolated incident that has little relevance to the rest of human history? No: in fact, instances of people changing their language in order to prove their loyalty to a certain

cause have occurred throughout world history, particularly during times of war and conflict.

**German in the United States**  
As an article in the Economist notes, German immigrants have “flavoured American culture like cinnamon in an Apfelkuchen”. Americans owe the Christmas tree and the Easter Bunny to German-Americans who imported them during the 19th century. The hamburger, egg noodles and the pretzel are also American dishes with German origins. Margarethe Schurz, a German-American educator, opened the first kindergarten in the United States in 1856, and when the American Civil War broke out, up to 200,000 German immigrants enrolled to fight for the Union and

prove their loyalty to their new country. They formed the largest ethnic contingent of the Union army during the war and earned a reputation for their discipline. In general, German-Americans were highly regarded and seen as hard-working and charitable. As a result, they were subjected to less of the prejudice that resulted from the prevalent nativism of the time. Newspapers in German were also common throughout the working districts of Chicago and Milwaukee, areas that were heavily populated by German immigrant blue-collar labourers.

Nonetheless, public attitudes towards German took a drastic turn in 1917, when it became clear that war against Germany was inevitable. The Zimmermann Telegram was the last straw for an American public that had already been enraged by the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Following Congress's declaration of war on Imperial Germany, German-Americans had to cope with a wave of mass hysteria and anti-Germanism. Anything with an association to the Kaiser, even the German language, was viewed as deeply suspicious. The American people began a campaign to remove German influence from the country, starting with the Americanisation of names related to German culture. For example, the small town of Berlin, Michigan was renamed Liberty, sauerkraut became 'liberty cabbage', the frankfurter became the 'hot dog' and German fried potatoes became 'American fries'.

Fearing a massive backlash, many German-Americans decided to change their names and family histories altogether. This is how Eisenhower became Eisenhower and Huber became Hoover. While the grandfather of the current President of the

United States Donald Trump was known as Frederick Drumpf for most of his life, the *International Business Times* claims that, in his later years, he began to call himself Frederick Trump, and speculates that this would have happened at about the same time as World War I. Public boycotts that made it impossible for beer halls (which were important places for German-Americans to gather and socialise) to continue their business were a serious blow to the usage of the German language. Publications in German, which, in general, were either sympathetic to the cause of the central powers or had a more pacifist stance, saw their readership plunge to an all-time low and many had died out by the 1920s.

Even the otherwise highly respected social reform movements of the time were no exception to anti-German outburst. The Chicago Woman's Club, whose prominent members included Jane Addams and Lucy Flower, suggested that public education in America make it mandatory for children to recite the Watch Your Speech pledge, which actually became a reality in 1918. Schoolchildren found themselves saying "I love my country's language. I promise: (1) that I will not dishonor my country's speech by leaving off the last syllables of words; (2) that I will say a good American 'yes' and 'no' in place of a foreign 'ya' or 'yeh' and 'nope'; (3) that I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud harsh tones, by enunciating distinctly and speaking pleasantly, clearly and sincerely."

The suppression of the German language did not stop there. In fact, America's leaders were at the forefront of the campaign to eliminate German from society. In

June 1917, Congress passed the Trading with the Enemy Acts, which required certified English translations alongside all German-language printed matter. Several months later, Iowa governor William Harding made the speaking of German in public illegal, insisting that "The First Amendment is not a guaranty of the right to use a language other than the language of this country." The *New York Times* applauded the efforts of twenty-five state governors across the country to remove the German language from the American educational curriculum, calling them "good hard common sense". Even the former president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, showed up in public and asserted that "There can be but one loyalty – to the Stars and Stripes, one nationality – the American, and therefore only one language – the English language."

A one-year-old war taking place thousands of kilometres away from America virtually eliminated the existence of what had been America's second most important language. Statistics from before the war show that over a quarter of American high school students studied German as their second language, a figure that collapsed to just 0.6% by the war's end and has stayed below 1% ever since. Today, German-Americans have so thoroughly and completely assimilated themselves into the American way of life that they themselves barely remember their German origins. According to the *Economist*, German-Americans almost unanimously speak only English at home. It is very rare to hear someone speak German in the United States, except for on remote farms in the wilderness of North Dakota (the only state where German was able to

retain its status as the second most spoken language) and the semi-nomadic and deeply religious Amish communities in the Midwest. What happened to Romansh in the Vinschgau valley also happened to German in the States, this time on a larger scale and to a far more significant and influential language.

### **Alsatian in Alsace-Lorraine**

For most of their recent history, France and Germany have regarded their hegemony over Alsace-Lorraine, the land of wine and foie gras, as central to their status as European continental superpowers. The Franco-Habsburg Wars of the 17th century saw the French royal army occupying this strip of land which used to be part of the Holy Roman Empire. This gave way to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, in which a modernised Prussian army defeated the French and regained control over a region that they felt they – as the successors of the Holy Roman Empire – had the right to. For the French, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine was seen as a national humiliation that should never be forgotten or forgiven. When the first gunshots of World War I were fired, France saw the event as an opportunity to re-annex its lost territory.

Such political conflicts translated into linguistic tugs-of-war in the region. It is important to note that local Alsatians have historically had their own language – basically a hybrid of French and German. According to the *New York Times*, Alsatian may sound a bit “too French for Germany” but also “too German for France”. The reasoning behind these views becomes clear when we look at examples of Alsatian expressions. Take *güete morje* (‘good morning’): While clearly related to the German

*Guten Morgen*, one noticeable difference is that the Alsatian word has compared with its German counterpart is that the latter ‘g’ is pronounced [ʒ], a commonly occurring feature of French. Another example is *aurevouar* (‘goodbye’), which is very similar to the French *au revoir* but has been compounded – a common linguistic occurrence in German. It is, therefore no surprise that Alsatian contains expressions such as *vielmohls merci* (‘thank you very much’), a combination of the German *vielmals* (‘very much’) and French *merci* (‘thank you’).

Alsatians had a dilemma concerning their identity: while they were not clearly French, nor were they clearly German. This meant that when World War I erupted, Germans regarded Alsatians in a similar way to how ‘real’ Americans looked upon German-Americans. German mistreatment of Alsatians during the war was, to say the least, discriminating and unjust: Alsatian soldiers in German regiments were given far riskier tasks than their German counterparts, and the German high command made it mandatory for certain Alsatian households to shelter German soldiers, who would keep a close eye on the locals. There has even been a report of an Alsatian man being buried alive for not being able to express himself in standard German. There was widespread suspicion and deep hysteria, despite the fact that over 380,000 Alsatians responded to the Kaiser’s calls to “defend the German fatherland” with loyalty.

Like its speakers, the Alsatian language suffered during the war. As soon as war had been declared on the French Republic, local Prussian bureaucrats in Alsace-Lorraine began a region-

wide campaign of renaming Alsatian towns with French names. The industrial Alsatian city of Mulhouse became known as *Mülhausen*. Even sleepy communes like *Châtenois* were no exception to the frenzy of Germanisation: the streets of Metz were erased from the map and new ones were created, bearing the names of famous German historical figures. By 2nd September, 1915, Alsace-Lorraine was declared fully Germanised. The French influence on Alsatian was not only curbed through these symbolic gestures: Germans followed the advice of intellectuals, such as the Alsatian-born German poet Friedrich Lienhard. Lienhard advocated the return of Alsatian to its mother language, German, a result he believed could be achieved through the removal of ‘degenerate’ elements of the French language that rendered it ‘feminine’ and therefore incompatible with the ‘masculine’ nature of German. With the support of the German populace, authorities imposed a ban on the use of Alsatian words that were in any way related to French.

Alsatian writer and painter Charles Spindler recounts the implications that this policy had in his home region. One day, as he walked through the local market, he saw a client greeting a street food vendor with a relatively German *güete morje*. The vendor responded with a friendly *bonchour*. The client immediately reported this incident to the authorities, prompting the law enforcers to appear and demand that the vendor pay a fine for the offence. The poor vendor herself was not even aware that *bonchour* was a French-ism, having lived in Alsace-Lorraine all her life and naturally learned the

language of her home region. If even a small and harmless utterance like *bonchour* was enough to create concern for authorities, one can imagine the frustration local Alsatians felt at not being properly able to express themselves in their own language.

The long-term effects of World War I on Alsatian are still a matter of debate. Some say that the oppressive language policies carried out by German authorities have rendered Alsatian attitudes towards German influence less favorable and that, therefore, the Alsatian language was reinvigorated as a symbol of resistance to German linguistic domination. Nonetheless, the general consensus is that Alsatian has shifted more towards German than French ever since. Today, even the French Ministry of Culture classifies Alsatian as a dialect or offspring of German. The war did not spontaneously create more loyalty towards the Kaiser; Alsatians have generally been loyal to the German cause from the very beginning. What it did change, however, was the nature of their language. Younger generations of Alsatians, no longer feeling the sense of distinct Alsatian identity that the Alsatian language used to create, regard themselves as French, and do not see a clear difference between Alsatian and German. If Alsatian is so close to German, they wonder, why bother to learn Alsatian in the first place? Alsatian had maintained a stable presence in Alsace-Lorraine throughout the centuries. Now, only 39% of the population speaks Alsatian, while virtually the entire Alsatian population professes itself to be fluent in French. It is true that, in this particular scenario, war did not wipe out a language in the same

way it did Romansh and German. However, it did plant the seeds of its slow but sure decline.

### Languages as casualties of wars

Humans are not the only casualties of war. Languages are, too. Throughout, we have observed the drastic yet silent collapse of the German language in the United States. We have seen, through examples such as the conversion of Berlin into Liberty and sauerkraut into 'liberty cabbage', the deep suspicions that the American public harboured regarding German immigrants: for them, the war was a matter of fighting for the cause of liberty. We have explored the similar feelings of mistrust that the German public reserved for its Alsatian-speaking minority and the frustrations that local Alsatians felt with regards to restrictions on their language use.

These stories have the common feature of oppressive language policies in the event of war. Yet on a brighter note, wars are not only destructive for languages: the fact that World War I has transformed *frankfurter* into 'hot dog' illustrates the creativity of the human mind. One can legitimately ask: why an overheated dog, instead of 'bread sausage' or even 'liberty sausage,' in the style of sauerkraut becoming 'liberty cabbage'? And why did Berlin, Michigan suddenly become Liberty? Did Americans view their cause, liberty, as antithetical to Germany? Wars can serve as mechanisms that speed up the linguistically intriguing and thought-provoking processes of conversions of words from one socio-historical context to another. Each and every word transformed by the ugly events

of war can actually prove an important asset not only for linguists but also professionals across other fields, including historians and psychologists, in enabling a better understanding of the human psyche of past times. War is, in some respects, like a volcanic eruption: in the short term, it is destructive and toxic for all forms of life but, in the long run, it can add fertility to the soil and become crucial for our understanding in the future. ¶

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**Dong Hyun Kang** is a senior at Seoul International School in South Korea, with a keen interest in historical and comparative linguistics. He is looking forward to majoring linguistics at university next year.

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### Find out more

German in the United States: 'The silent minority' is a great Economist article that explores the forgotten history of German cultural and linguistic assimilation into the American fabric. A quick Google search will yield many other interesting articles, such as National Public Radio's 'During World War I, U.S. Government Propaganda Erased German Culture'.

Alsatian in Alsace-Lorraine: try typing a few words of English-Alsatian online translators and you can contrast Alsatian with French and German. There are several online articles in English and French dealing with Alsatians' dilemma over their identity, including the New York Times' 'Strasbourg Journal; Too German for France, Too French for Germany'.