

The language expert

Tony Stevens left the arrivals building at Munich airport and walked towards the long line of taxis. It was a hot summer morning and not a very busy time of the day. Drivers were standing in groups or sitting in their cars reading books and magazines. Tony went to the front of the line and a smiling taxi driver took his bags and put them in the boot. "Die Uni, bitte," Tony said. "Oh, are you English?" the driver asked. "That's right," Tony replied, surprised he had been recognized so quickly as an Englishman. "I thought you were," the driver said as he started the engine and drove away. "I can usually tell. The clothes you wear, or the way you speak." "I've hardly said anything," said Tony. "I can still tell. The university. You're the third person I take there today." "Have taken," said Tony automatically and thought, the Germans always make the same mistakes. "Okay, okay," said the taxi driver. "A real expert. You're the third person I have taken there today. So what's happening? A big meeting?" "An international conference," said Tony. "It's about teaching English as a foreign language." "Is that right?"

They left the airport and turned onto the motorway. Within seconds they were driving at top speed towards the city, overtaking every vehicle on the road. Tony had the feeling they were going to take off again. "You know something?" said the driver. "No teacher has taught me English." "Really? Where did you learn it then?" "Here in this taxi. I teach myself. When I have no passengers, I learn English." He pointed to a book and a number of cassettes. "English is good. I like it. It's easy. Not like German." "How do you mean?" asked Tony. "Well, look at German: 'der', 'die', 'das'. It's crazy. Who needs three words? You've just got one word. 'The'. And that's it. It's much better." "Yes," said Tony. "I'd be much happier myself if you only had one word for 'the'." "And what about 'du' and 'Sie' and 'ihr'? Who needs them? Why not one word, like in English? 'You'. It's great. No problems. And we've got so many long words. Take 'Wochenende'. Wochenende. What do you say? 'Weekend'. It's short. It's good. 'Weekend'."

Tony looked out of the window. What do you say to that, he wondered? As they came towards the end of the



motorway, the traffic got heavier and heavier. Vehicles were coming from all directions. The driver already had his window open, now he started shouting at every other driver on the road. Tony began to think he was in a tank.

"Don't kill anybody," he said. The taxi driver threw his cigarette out of the window. "The people here can't drive," he said. "They're all sleeping. They

sit in their cars and sleep." He shouted at another driver, blew his horn a few times, and their speed got slower and slower. As they entered the city, they finally stopped.

They were in the middle of a Munich traffic jam. "I get a lot of passengers from other countries. Sometimes I learn a little bit of their language. It's fun. I tried to learn Hungarian once. They talk backwards."

Tony looked at him, surprised. "They do what?"

"They really have a crazy grammar. They don't say 'on my table', they say 'table on my'. Instead of saying 'on Tuesday', they say 'Tuesday on'." He laughed. "Isn't that crazy?"

"I don't know a lot about Hungarian," said Tony.

"Lovely people. Just a crazy language. But do you know what's wrong with the English language?"

"Tell me," said Tony, realizing that they were going to be in the traffic jam for a while, so he might as well pass the time in a conversation with the taxi driver. "I'll tell you. The tenses. They're crazy. I once had a university professor in the taxi and she said you can speak English easily if you know a lot of words. You just put them together in a long line. You don't need a lot of grammar. But the tenses. 'I wait', 'I'm waiting', 'I have waited', 'I have been waiting'. Oh boy, what a language. Why don't you say: 'I wait now', 'I wait every day', 'I wait tomorrow', 'I wait for two hours'? Basta."

"Why don't you say 'der Fenster' or 'das Frau'?" "Das Frau? Oh boy. I like it. Just imagine. 'Das Frau'. But we say 'das Mädchen'. You know, when you think about it, Germans are even crazier than the Hungarians. In our language the moon is male, the sun is female, but our girls are neither male nor female." Slowly the traffic moved forwards as they followed a route over the river and through the city centre towards the university. "But it's a good question," said the driver. "Why don't we say 'der Fenster'?" "Because grammar is crazy," said Tony.

"It isn't logical. Languages don't have logical grammars. But we all accept our own grammars as normal and think that those of other languages are silly."

The taxi driver stopped outside the university entrance. "Twenty-six euro," he said. "You know something? Perhaps we're all crazy people because we have crazy grammars. What do you say?" Tony got out of the taxi. "Don't drive away. This door is ajar," he said. The driver looked at him confused. "It's what?" "It's ajar." "I learn a jar of coffee. How can a door be a jar? It's made of metal." "Not a jar, ajar." "Sounds the same to me."

"Look it up in a dictionary," said Tony with a smile. "Like you said, languages are crazy." He waved to the driver and went into the building. Inside he looked for the rooms where the conference was taking place. That afternoon at two o'clock he had to give a talk on how to make the teaching of English tenses easier. He wondered if he should invite the taxi driver to give the talk instead.

Working with the text

A first look at the text

Munich German language airport
take a taxi by plane talk about
conference about university
taxi driver hot summer day

Use the words in the box to say in a few sentences what happened to Tony Stevens in Munich. Start like this: *Tony Stevens had come to Munich by plane. He wanted to ...*
Go on.

A closer look at the text

1. Go through the text and find what the driver likes/doesn't like about German and English.
2. Why does/doesn't he like these aspects of the two languages?
3. What does the adjective 'crazy' mean for the driver?
4. How does Tony confuse the driver when he gets out of the taxi? Try to explain Tony's joke.

Beyond the text: The 'crazy' English language

1. 'Crazy' pronunciation: blood — good — boot / although — through — enough. Find more words in which letters or combinations of letters are pronounced differently.
2. 'Crazy' spelling: the famous Anglo-Irish writer George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) fought against English spelling all his life. To show how 'crazy' the English spelling is, he made up the 'word' ghoti. That's how you could spell "fish" if you applied the spelling you find in the words cough, women and nation. Make up a few funny words like ghoti and see who can read them properly.