

Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, “Where the Best German is to Be Found” (1673)

Abstract

Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (1621/22–1676) was a well-known German author and language critic from the Early Modern period. In *Deß Weltberuffenen Simplicissimi Pralerey und Gepräng mit seinem Teutschen Michel* [*The world-renowned Simplicissimus's Boast and Talk with his German Michel*] from 1673, Grimmelshausen described the region where the most beautiful and clearest German was spoken. In the process, he compared various dialects and pronunciations, addressing both local and class differences in pronunciation (e.g., scholars, merchants, soldiers, and peasants). He rejected foreign words, especially from French, as well as French clothing and fashion. He declared that the best German man of all was the one who, apart from language, practiced “old German” virtues.

Source

Chapter XI.

Where the Best German Is to Be Found.

At some point I heard a crude jackass invite another of his kind “to the fair,” or [to engage in] an obscene act (that was not the offer of a gentleman anyhow) using foul language, to which he added, “That is good German.” However, I cannot praise such filthy jokes, no matter how fine the German, or how correct the pronunciation comes out sounding, flowing out as if the person’s throat were greased with bacon. I don’t wish to relate anything about the matter here but only want to say where and by whom the best and most graceful German is spoken.

The city of Mainz has long enjoyed the fame of this honor, which I would like to grant to the dear fellow countrywoman of my heart; however, I am sorry that at this time the honor is not hers, but instead, before her and all the other cities and provinces in the whole of Germany, goes to the city of Speyer and its immediate vicinity. There, for a good stretch up to above Durlach and Baden, better German can be found [spoken] by many peasants than in many high-toned cities. Upon consideration, the cause is the Imperial Superior Court of Justice found right there, the royal baths at Durlach and the Baden baths, as well as the Bishop of Speyer’s court held in the neighborhood, and the many scholars, spiritual and temporal, residing in the same city. For this is certain: a person who reads and writes more than he converses orally with people who do not speak German properly learns without noticing to pronounce one thing or another as he is accustomed to reading and writing it. Then, when two or more gracefully speaking literati are heard by others, the latter, although uneducated or even only women and children, imitate the formers’ language right away, either approximately or even deliberately. Thus, it has come about that Speyer and its neighboring towns, because of the many scholars who are constantly there, the longer the better, produce good German.

On the outskirts of Prague, German is spoken as well as anywhere in all of Germany; that is because the German speakers have no peasant neighbors in the surrounding villages who spoil their German. In contrast, the residents of Frankfurt have to take in a great deal of indecorous language from the residents of Wetterau; the residents of Straßburg, from the residents of Kochersberg; the residents of Tübingen, from the Swabians; the residents of

Regensburg, from the Bavarians; the residents of Marburg, from the Hessians; the residents of Leipzig, from the residents of Meissen, and thus also others, from their crude-German-speaking neighbors, despite the fact that they have many rather educated people, even academies full of young students, who all command a cultivated German. [This is] because the people have more to do with the peasants than with the scholars. Of all the notable German cities, none seems to me to speak more laughable German than otherwise regal Cologne, whose language befits no one better than the womenfolk, but only those who are also beautiful besides.

In the case of the Swiss, it seems as if they, like the French roosters, form their words at the back, in their throats, or up above, in their gums. The Swabians, it appears, also use their nose for their pronunciation. The Bavarians and the Austrians draw out their words longer than the shoemaker his leather, and many cut them off as the French do the tails of their horses. The Dutch, and whoever speaks good old Saxon German or Westphalian, finish their words right at the front of their mouths between their lips and their front teeth. The residents of Meissen and their neighbors use too many superfluous words and letters. And if a person were to take one representative from each of these language varieties and lock them up together, over time they would either put together a rather mediocre German, or all of them would imitate the one person who has the most authentic pronunciation, or the one who blabbers the most.

Of individuals, the scholars who read and write a great deal, as mentioned initially, speak German the best. Second [are] merchants and others who travel a good deal, soldiers counting among them. But the very best, both in speaking and writing, are now and then found in the royal chanceries, where a very different and more respectable style is found than in the case of many language heroes, who want to be held up as if they alone know how to reform the German language and to cleanse it of all impurities, like the thresher the wheat; but they do not correct their own ways. I mean the ones who want to have German purified and cleansed of all foreign words but nevertheless disguise and hinder their bodies and minds, with French clothing, barouches, and tiny little moustaches (when they are not capable of anything more) like natural Frenchmen, indeed, as if anything more could be done in French. So much about them could and would help ruin God's very best German [language] (which is without any deceit, falseness, disloyalty, guile, and is subtly honest, upright, ingenuous, and openhearted, dauntless, serious, manly, steadfast, righteous, etc., and whatever more similar German characteristics are to be found and live). The wise man says correctly and well that at the present time words should be used and the old customs followed.

Accordingly, the very best German man is the one who lives and loves the old German virtues even if he does not speak better or more gracefully than a stunted inhabitant of Pinzgau, and the best German language to be found is spoken by that person.

Source: Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *Deß Weltberuffenen SIMPLICISSIMI Pralerey und Gepräng mit seinem Teutschen Michel*. Nuremberg, 1673, pp. 98–101. Available online at: http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/grimmelshausen_michel_1673?p=106

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