

the Attic

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Schiller at the pub. An excellent introduction to German culture.

Dance

The chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, has declared multiculturalism in the country a complete failure. This can only mean she desires a turn to monoculturalism. This culture, as the CSU's Herr Seehoffer has helpfully explained, is something called *die Leitkultur*.

Lovely word. I like the way it sounds. But I'm damned if I know what it means. At least not exactly. And my German friends are no help. They just roll their eyeballs when I ask them.

Beethoven and Haydn are part of the story I guess, and all those philosophers who gave the Oxford English Dictionary words like *Übermensch*, *Zeitgeist* and *Doppelgänger*. Yes, I've heard of them.

I'm pretty sure Goethe and Schiller are in there somewhere. I have long had plans to read *Faust* in German but, well, you know how it is with worthy intentions to read Great Literature in foreign languages.

Learn German. Yes, of course. Right and proper. And you can have way more fun as a foreigner if you know what the locals are saying.

But what about beer? Luckily enough I'm a natural fit with the *Bierkultur*. I come after all from a hop-based culture. But there are teetotalers and health nuts and the religiously observant to consider. What do these people know of beer, let alone the cultural, no, spiritual significance that attaches to the interaction of hops, malt and pure water?

The difficulty is soon apparent. What must a foreigner understand to pass the *Leitkulturprüfung*? This is a land of norms and some lists would be appropriate.

And we must not forget the *Deutschetürentanz*. That's another lovely word, but I don't think I'll ever be able to learn this folk dance.

Most Germans have never heard the term *Deutschetürentanz* before. Probably because I just made it up. It is a word that is needed to describe the curious *pas de deux* that Germans use when sharing a door. Since the moves of this dance are as complex as cricket, suffice it to say that you know you have successfully completed the ritual if both parties pass through the opening at precisely the same time. This is impractical, and surprising

considering Germany's reputation for efficiency. I know of no quicker way to confuse Germans than by holding open the door for them and simply waiting.

I am mystified. Perhaps Herr Seehoffer could explain this dance to a perplexed immigrant.

Cat Food

The Internet is a great place for strange animal stories. I have previously reported on animals that like to climb into warm engines for a snooze. And there were the ducks, variously lost, trapped or endangered. Now comes a series of unusual animal-kingdom contests.

The first bout featured a mountain lion (fighting weight 68 kg) that lost decisively when it was chased up a tree by an 8-kilogram Jack Russell terrier (and was subsequently shot by the terrier's owner). The dog apparently makes a habit of chasing cats and was not deterred by the difference of a few kilos. A cat's a cat, right?

Then there was the black bear sent up a tree by a ginger cat called Jack. Jack was described by his owner, Ms Donna Dickey, as 'very territorial'. The bear tried to make a run for it, only to be treed a second time by the ferocious tom. Happily, this drama ended with no more than hurt pride for Yogi when Ms Dickey called Jack inside for his supper.

Another cat was filmed at a Louisiana theme park facing down a full-grown alligator. The razor-toothed reptile was forced to retreat to the safety of its pool to escape Pussy's vicious claws.

But the felines don't always have it their own way. Footage from Moscow showed a rat challenging not one but five alley cats and living to tell the tale. This rodent had some amazing jumping and bouncing kung-fu moves that had the cats running in all directions. I expected to see credits at the end telling me it was from a Disney film, *D'Artagnan the Rat*, starring Ratty Chan.

I suppose what all this really tells us is that rats, cats and Jack Russell terriers are not all that bright. I mean, I could step into the ring with Wladimir Klitschko and try to confuse him by hissing, yapping

and generally jumping about. He might mistake me for Muhammad Ali in his prime and run up a tree. Or he might just do what that pacifist mountain lion should have done to that pesky dog and pummel me into cat food.

1,000,000,000,...

I used to have a problem with very large numbers. I could never remember them. They were on an order of magnitude that was beyond my ability to grasp.

What's the population of China? Aah, two billion? How old is the earth in non-Biblical time? Er... How about the universe? Um... Number of cells in the human body? Let me think...

The answers are 1.3 billion, 4.5 billion, 13.7 billion and 100 trillion respectively (and approximately). As I said, there was a time when such figures made my head spin. Not anymore. Nowadays very large numbers are a commonplace.

Once upon a time somebody described as earning in the six figures was considered successful. We thought it a big number then but it's chump change today. On Wall Street the term 'buck' is now used to denote a million. For most of us a buck is still a dollar, one lousy dollar. For the Masters Of The Universe it is a million, one lousy million.

The *Wall Street Journal* reports that the MOTU are shocked to learn that their bonuses for this year are going to be lower than last year. This goes against the Street's fourth law of thermodynamics which states that remuneration must always go up and can never come down.

The WSJ goes on to say, 'Total pay for the top three dozen publicly held securities and investment-services firms is expected to top \$140 billion...' That's an impressive number. It's a bigger number than the age of the universe. But in this case it merely represents the yearly income of the employees of some 36 companies. That's less than 4 billion per company. A drop in the bucket really.

The bailouts produced some large numbers. In 2008 we were astonished by TARP: \$700 billion! But it doesn't seem such a big deal now. It's only a couple of

years' worth of MOTU compensation.

The United States' national debt as of November 30, 2010, is \$13,860,774. Millions, or bucks. (The Treasury writes 'millions of dollars' in very small print at the top of the chart in the hope we won't notice.) That's 13,861 million millions of dollars. Or, if you prefer, it's just 13.8 trillion greenbacks. Still way less than the number of cells in the human body.

Pixelated

I saw a guy at MOMA last year snapping photos of paintings. Each one got five seconds. Frame the shot and push the button. At each click he moved crabwise to the next picture. His eyes never left the monitor. He had the real McCoy right in front of him but he preferred to view it miniaturized on a three-inch screen. Only the tiny pixelated experience is real.

And...

During the recent snow storms that affected large swathes of western Europe the RTL news ran a report on how the neighbours, unlike the well prepared Germans, were failing to cope with the conditions. First to France where the uncleared autoroutes looked like Alaska in dog-sled season. Then on to similar scenes of white chaos in Belgium. The last report came from outside London's snow-covered Houses of Parliament, where a smirking correspondent explained how just one snowflake was all it took to bring the British capital to a standstill.

As I watched this little exercise in intra-European schadenfreude I had two simultaneous thoughts. One was, 'Oh, do stop sniggering, you clever-dick Krauts.' The other thought was, 'Boy, I'm glad I live in Germany.'

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