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GOOD PROVERBS MAKE GOOD STUDENTS: USING
PROVERBS TO TEACH GERMAN QUICKLY

In 1991, Wolfgang Mieder reviewed the first edition of *German Quickly: A Grammar for Reading German*, a textbook I wrote to teach German for reading knowledge.¹ *German Quickly* assumes that students do not have any prior knowledge of German; but by the time they have reached the final chapter (36), they will be able to read any German text with the aid of a dictionary. Having taught German primarily to graduate students in the University of Chicago community since 1972 (and having had over 1,500 students), I had used proverbs to explain grammatical points long before my book was published, and thus I had been able to discover which proverbs proved most helpful for this purpose. In addition to having passages from such writers as Goethe, Mann, Kleist, Tillich, Wittgenstein, Buber, Nietzsche, Luther, and Jean Paul, my book includes over 500 proverbs to illustrate grammatical principles and to provide exercise sentences. Now that the third edition of *German Quickly* is scheduled to appear (March 2004), I welcome this opportunity to address two of Mieder's earlier valuable comments and concerns about the benefit of offering proverbs in order to learn a foreign language.

Despite his own passion for paremiology, Mieder wondered if students "would be willing to study the unpopular subject of grammar any more willingly by being oversaturated with 'ancient' wisdom in addition to 'boring' grammar rules" (p. 266). As a paremiologist, Mieder wished that I had provided the proverbs in a meaningful context so that students could also acquire a more accurate impression of German culture. I am happy to report that students enjoy the proverbs, and that they have provided a valuable tool for teaching German. I will also explain how the proverbs can be put in context even within the framework of their somewhat haphazard appearance in my book (although I do provide more supplementary information in the third

edition than I had in my original version). My use of proverbs has been so successful, I hope that teachers of other foreign languages will write textbooks using *German Quickly* as a model.²

Proverbs as a valuable pedagogical tool

In this section, I will discuss how I have used proverbs to teach German, and why they are so much fun, for teachers and students alike. Mieder's *In der Kürze liegt die Würze!* anthology demonstrates over and over that proverbs provide spice even within their very brevity,³ and it is probably impossible to pack so much wisdom and emotion into so few words in any other way.⁴ Proverbs can have a strong emotional impact, and at times they are even funny.⁵ The proverb's brevity in juxtaposition with emotion means that a sentence can be both grammatically simple and intellectually complex. This is especially important for highly educated, sophisticated adults who are forced by grammatical constraints to read sentences with the structures found in elementary school books. Students are happily surprised to encounter entertaining sentences so early in the course. Reviews of *German Quickly* on Amazon.com attest to delight, even from students who have never met me.⁶

Within the first five chapters of *German Quickly*, I have offered some of the following to engage my students:

Reiche Leute haben fette Katzen.

Das Herz lügt nicht.

Der Winter schadet dem fleißigen Hamster nicht.

Ein hungriger Bär tanzt schlecht.

Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen.

Die Leidenschaft ist ein reißendes Tier mit scharfen Zähnen.

Gutes Gespräch kürzet den Weg.

Finstere Gedanken sind die Kinder eines elancholischen Kopfes.

Zeit ist die Arznei des Zorns.

Es regnet Bratwürste.⁷

Because the proverbs are short, they can illustrate grammatical principles in a way that is easy for students to attend to. The following have been helpful for students to learn that they must look at the entire context of the sentence before determining

what the subject is (because a German sentence does not always have the subject preceding the verb, as is the case with English):

*Der Tugend ist kein Ziel zu hoch.
Einem faulen Bauer ist kein Pflug gut genug.
Die Gebete der Bettler verjagt der Wind.
Dem Reinen ist alles rein.
Kleine Feinde und kleine Wunden verachtet kein Weiser.
Dem Arbeiter hilft Gott.
Im kalten Ofen bäckt man kein Brot.
Im Hause eines Faulen ist es immer Feiertag.*

One of my favorite proverbs is: *Ein vorwitziges Schäflein frißt der Wolf*. Because a wolf can be a sign of danger in proverbs,⁸ I also use non-proverbial illustrative sentences in which *der Wolf* appears on the “other” side of the verb so that I can triumphantly announce that “*Der Wolf* is always the subject!” (Otherwise, he would be *den* or *dem Wolf*, or *des Wolfes*.) Thus I use a wolf metaphorically to indicate a grammatical peril as well.

Proverbs are especially useful for illustrating the comparative:⁹

*Ein Doktor und ein Bauer wissen mehr als ein Doktor allein.
Der Arzt ist oft gefährlicher als die Krankheit.
Ein Dummer findet zehn Dummere.
Die dümmsten Bauern ernten die dicksten Kartoffeln.
Dem Schuster ist der Schuh wichtiger als der Fuß.
Es gibt mehr alte Weintrinker als alte Ärzte.
Es gibt kein süßeres Leiden als Hoffen.
Geben ist seliger als Nehmen.*

Here are examples of other German grammatical constructions that proverbs help illuminate. *Es hackt keine Krähe der anderen die Augen aus* is useful because of the “pay attention” *es*, the separable prefix *aushacken* and the use of *der anderen* as a dative feminine, referring to *Krähe*. *Selbst unter Dieben gibt es Ehre* requires *selbst* to be translated as “even”, *unter* as “among” and *es gibt* as “there is”. *Die Tanzenden werden von denen, die die Musik nicht hören, für toll gehalten* is a grammatical treasure because it contains an adjective used as a noun, the *-d* suffix on *tanzen*, the passive voice, *halten* with *für* meaning “to consider”,

a relative clause, and the use of the dative plural relative pronoun *denen*.

I also include several proverbs from the Old Testament and proverbs common to English-speaking students. Instead of finding these proverbs so familiar as to seem boring, I believe students are happy to encounter proverbs they do know so that they can sometimes guess the meaning when given a few words.¹⁰ Examples are:

Blut ist dicker als Wasser.
Im Wein ist die Wahrheit.
Eine Hand wäscht die andere.
Es führen viele Wege nach Rom.
Es fallen keine Äpfel weit vom Baum.
Ein Vogel auf der Hand ist besser als zwei im Busch.
Ein Gast wie ein Fisch bleibt nicht lange frisch.
Osten oder Westen, zu Hause ist es am besten.

Moreover, when students feel overwhelmed after having learned the passive voice, they are relieved to come across familiar proverbs that they can deal with. I believe *Rom wurde nicht in einem Tag erbaut* is especially welcome because it is easy to translate and it also illustrates the fact that it can take a long time to learn how to translate the passive. *Wiederholung ist die Mutter der Weisheit*. A grammar book is perhaps one of the few times in which repetition does not seem boring because it is needed to reinforce otherwise forgettable grammar rules. Because the sentences are the means to an end, not an end in themselves and are not meant to be edifying (unless students wish them to be), students do not feel as if I am judging them. As a German teacher, I do not care if my students believe *Erfahrung ist ein langer Weg*, but I do not want them to translate *langer* as “longer”.

As Terence Odlin notes, one of the most probable advantages of parallel structures of proverbs is their value as mnemonic devices.¹¹ Although I sometimes despair at the inability of my students to memorize vocabulary (especially words such as *doch*, *noch*, and *nach*), they say that the proverbs do help them remember words. *Der alte Ochs ist auch ein Kalb gewesen* has helped them remember *gewesen*, which they frequently confuse with *wissen*. *Ein Leben ohne Liebe ist wie ein Jahr ohne Sommer* allows students to differentiate “Liebe” from “Leben”. Because

the proverbs are even more memorable to me, I can correct homework assignments without having to look at the exercises, and I believe other teachers would be able to do so as well.

The relationship of adult students to the proverbs is quite different from proverbs being given to children to enlighten them because the students are in a position to judge and interpret the proverbs. Therefore, rather than being passive recipients, they become active interpreters. Moreover, as Mieder and Holmes have shown in *Children and Proverbs Speak the Truth*, even fourth graders can enjoy proverbs and learn from them if they are presented in a sensitive way and if students are reassured that they can interpret the proverbs without being anxious that their answers might be wrong.¹²

In his essay, “‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbors’: History and Significance of an Ambiguous Proverb,” Mieder points out that the ambiguity of this proverb is that its metaphor contains both the concept of fencing something in while at the same time fencing that person or thing out.¹³ In *German Quickly*, I include, *Liebe deine Nachbarn, aber lege den Zaun nicht nieder*. Because *niederlegen* can mean both “to put down” and “to remove,” some students (ignoring the *aber*) occasionally mistranslate the proverb as, “Love your neighbors, and do not lay down a fence.” I believe the mistake in translation occurs mainly because students wish to be more charitable to their neighbors than the proverb is.

Paremiologists have often noted that proverbs can have multiple interpretations, and that there are also contradictory proverbs.¹⁴ My students are also acutely aware of the fact that such contradictions exist. In chapter 21 (coordinating conjunctions), they translate *Entweder bekennen oder brennen*, and are usually stunned at the harshness of the command. Yet, in the very next chapter (22, a review of verb placement), they encounter: *Lerne Schweigen. Leben und Tod hängen davon ab*.

I do not want students to agree with all the proverbs in my book, especially the following:

*Kein Kleid ist der Frau besser als Schweigen.
Such' eine Frau nicht auf dem Ball, sondern im Stall.
Das Gebet ist der Witwe ein Wall und eine Hütte.*

Women have rarely fared well in proverbs from any country. Mieder notes: “Verbal stereotypes have done and still do much damage to the relationship between the sexes, and much time will still have to pass until all people realize that the proverb ‘All men are created equal’ should in fact be called ‘All *people* are created equal.’”¹⁵ Instructors who use proverbs to teach languages can use these chauvinistic proverbs to discuss whether or not such statements have shaped their views of women. Yisa Kehinde Yusuf taught three generations of second-year students the course EGL 208: *Semantics of English* at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria between 1992 and 1997. During that time, she discussed the proverbs to help students realize that they were not necessarily true.¹⁶ Anna Litovkina includes proverbs unfavorable to women in *A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*, but then also uses them to ask her Hungarian students to question their veracity, and she offers anti-proverbs to oppose them.¹⁷ When my students translate such proverbs, I usually say something like, “That was a great translation although the proverbial sentiment was terrible.”

Although I included proverbs unfavorable to women in *German Quickly*, I found some proverbs too unpleasant to incorporate, even to be challenged. Here are examples from Karl Faustmann’s *Aus tiefem Brunnen*:¹⁸

*Je lieber das Kind, je schärfer die Rute.
Das Kind sagt, daß man es geschlagen habe, aber es
sagt nicht warum.
Wen Gott lieb hat, läßt er jung sterben.
Der Tod ist des Christen Himmelswagen.
Frauen haben lange Haare und kurzen Verstand.
Stiefmütter sind im grünen Kleid am besten.*

It is so time-consuming for beginning German students to translate anything, I believe it is important for them to use their precious time to encounter passages they might enjoy reading.¹⁹

I had given the proverb, *Man ißt um zu leben, und lebt nicht, um zu essen* until one of my women students said she planned to tape it on her refrigerator. Oddly, the woman eventually dropped out of graduate school and became a caterer. I used the proverb, *Bei Nacht sind alle Katzen grau* until a student asked me what it meant. I avoid proverbs such as *Graue Haare sind Kirch-*

hofsblumen in deference to older students. Because I believe it would embarrass students to translate scatological proverbs, I omit them as well.²⁰

Some drawbacks to using proverbs

Although I have tried to include only proverbs that I believe I can fathom, the following do not always make sense to my students:

Die Hoffnung ist in den Brunnen gefallen.

Der hinkende Bote bringt die Wahrheit.

*Neue Heilige werfen die alten ins Gerümpel.*²¹

Liebe ist wie Tau, sie fällt auf Rosen und auf Nesseln.

(Many students are unfamiliar with nettles.)

Es findet auch ein Blinder ein Hufeisen. (Students do not realize a horseshoe is a symbol of luck.)

Unglück hat breite Füße.

Alte Kirchen haben dunkle Fenster.

Besser, es fresse mich ein Wolf als ein Lamm.

Translation sometimes becomes more difficult for students when they are unsure of the proverb's meaning. As a teacher, I cannot complain to students who have mistranslated a proverb with the (irritating) question, "Does this make sense to you?" because they can justifiably argue that many of the proverbs do not make sense to them, even when correctly translated.²² The proverbs can be especially difficult for Asian students to translate.

Although proverbs illustrate some grammatical principals splendidly, not all grammatical constructions are represented. In his review of *German Quickly*, Mieder noted that I could not use the overloaded adjective construction (also known as the extended adjective construction or the pre-noun insert).²³ Moreover, there are no proverbs that involve the past perfect. On the other hand, the use of the informal you imperative is represented quite frequently. In some proverbs, especially elliptical ones, grammar is sacrificed, and I omitted familiar proverbs such as *Aus den Augen, aus dem Sinn* for that reason. However, students asked me to include *Es lernt niemand aus, bis das Grab ist unser Haus*, despite its grammatical limitations, and I did so while noting that grammar had been sacrificed for the sake of rhyme. Because the vocabulary appearing in proverbs is rich in folk rather

than academic wisdom (while *Kuh*, *Bär*, and *Esel* appear often, none of my proverbs includes *Gesellschaft*, *Geistesgeschichte* or *Bildungsroman*), it was essential to supplement the proverbs with scholarly texts as well. Because they can provide confirmation that daily life is indeed filled with abundant adversity, proverbs often have a negative slant,²⁴ and many place too much emphasis on the value of work:

Arbeit überwindet alle Schwierigkeiten.
Fleiß ist der Vater des Glückes.
Gesundheit ist die Tochter der Arbeit.
Arbeit hat bittere Wurzeln, aber süße Frucht.
Hast bricht Beine.
Unglück, Nägel und Haar wachsen durch das ganze Jahr.
Auf der Erde ist nichts ohne Furcht.
Hin geht die Zeit, her kommt der Tod.
Des Menschen Leben hängt an einem Faden.
Gute Schwimmer ersaufen zuerst.
Die Rosen verblühen, die Dornen bleiben.
Die schönsten Äpfel sieht der Wurm zuerst.

Although I also have positive proverbs, they are less common. I do include:

Jede Wolke hat ihren Silberstreifen.
Ein gutes Wort findet einen guten Ort.
Man muß die Leute nehmen, wie sie sind.
Die Sonne leuchtet der ganzen Welt.
Kinder sind eine Brücke zum Himmel.
Jedes Ding hat zwei Seiten.
Alte Freunde, alter Wein, altes Geld haben Wert in aller Welt.
*Je dunkler die Nacht, desto schöner der Morgen.*²⁵

If German had had a proverb similar to the Hungarian one, “Whoever loves flowers cannot be a bad person,”²⁶ I would have been delighted to include it. However, I also needed to invent characters within *German Quickly* (Fräulein Meier and a mailman) who led lives more cheerful than the *Weltanschauungen* provided by the proverbs in order to counterbalance the pessimism of many of the proverbs. Another solution to the problem

of negativity would have been to have included anti-proverbs, as Mieder had suggested in his review (p. 270). *Liebe deine Nachbarn, aber lege den Zaun nicht neider* might have been more palatable if supplemented by the “twisted wisdom,” “The fence that makes good neighbors needs a gate to make good friends.”²⁷

Moreover, the lack of optimism in the proverbs is balanced by an abundance of humor. Many of my students laugh when they read some of the proverbs, especially the following:

Was in einer Wurst ist, wissen nur Gott und der Schlächter.

Wenn der Teufel krank ist, will er Mönch werden. Wenn er gesund ist, bleibt er, wie er ist.

Feuer im Herzen bringt Rauch in den Kopf.

In alten Häusern gibt es viele Mäuse, in alten Pelzen gibt es viele Läuse.

Ein Pudel, dem man eine Mähne geschoren hat, ist noch kein Löwe.

Wo Elefanten tanzen, bleiben die Ameisen weg.

Schlächter und Schwein stimmen nicht überein.

Viele wären Feiglinge, hätten sie genug Mut.

While the proverbs themselves provide colorful images, their mistranslations sometimes seem as interesting as the accurate ones. That dyslexic students seem to have a harder time with proverbs should seem obvious. Perhaps there is a mechanism that keeps them from processing sentences in the same way that it keeps them from processing words. Or perhaps the focus on the individual words prevents them from seeing the larger context. This might be another way in which proverbs could be used to determine intellectual ability and mental health.²⁸ Here are examples from two of my dyslexic students (who were nevertheless extremely intelligent):

Im Spiel gibt es keine Freundschaft.

In the mirror there is no friendship.

Faulheit ist der Schlüssel zur Armut.

Womanliness is the key to poverty.

Bellende Hunde beißen nicht.
Barking dogs do not believe.²⁹

I often console students who mistranslate proverbs by noting that the incorrect option can be more interesting than the correct one. Some of my students have suggested that I keep a list of alternative proverbs, which are sometimes charming. *Tod ist der Arzt des armen Mannes* is sometimes translated as “Todd is the doctor of the poor man.” I once had an amiable student named Todd who was somewhat lacking in common sense, and I can envision him appearing at a sick person’s side, an old fashioned black doctor’s bag in hand, looking puzzled. *Wo man Liebe aussäet, dort wächst Freude hervor* is sometimes translated, “Where one loves sows, there joy grows forth.”³⁰ Because I had placed “Proverbs” in parentheses after *Kieselsteine* to indicate the proverb was taken from the Old Testament, *Das gestohlene Brot schmeckt dem Mann gut, aber am Ende hat er den Mund voller Kieselsteine* is sometimes translated as “The stolen bread tastes good to the man, but finally he has a mouth full of *prov-erbs*.” Here are other “alternative” translations:

Es gibt keine ängeren Tauben als die, die nicht hören wollen.

The deaf are not angry when they do not want to hear.

Die Kühe, die am meisten brüllen, geben die wenigste Milch.

The cows, the majority moo, when they give the least milk.

Ungeladene Gäste gehören nicht zum Feste.

Inconvenient guests are not permanent.

I placed the proverb, *Unter den Blinden ist der Einäugige König* as an example of *unter* meaning “among” rather than asking students to translate it because too many people envisioned a one-eyed king situated under a mass of blind people. I included *Wie du mir, so ich dir*, as an example rather than a translation exercise because students found the lack of a verb confusing. I used *Es ist nicht jede schwarze Katze eine Hexe* as an example of the *es ist* format because I did not want to keep explaining the difference between “Not every black cat is a witch” and “Every black cat is not a witch.” My favorite mistranslations came from

a kind-hearted student from Africa who had fallen behind in his studies (in part because he had not yet learned to speak English fluently) and who could not complete my course. He often placed an exclamation point after some of his translations, perhaps in order to give them more credibility. (Nevertheless, he successfully translated Nietzsche's aphorism, *Überzeugungen sind gefährlichere Feinde der Wahrheit als Lügen.*) I was left with these treasures:

Die Augen sind größer als der Magen.

The stomach is bigger than the eyes.

*Die Kühe fremder Leute haben größere Euter.*³¹

People have cows with stranger udders.

Gelehrte Narren sind die besten.

The best learned played fools.

Schlaf nach dem Mittagstisch ist so gesund wie ein fauler Fisch.

How so healthier is fish lunch after a bad sleep!³²

Although I do not use proverbs for didactic purposes, I try to be sensitive when calling on students to translate some of them. I do not ask married students to translate the following: *Die Heirat gleicht einem Vogelhaus; wer darin ist, will hinaus.* Nor do I ask short people to translate *Ein Zwerg bleibt immer ein Zwerg.* There are so many proverbs regarding lazy people that I try to divide them among all my students in case they feel as if I have singled them out. One quarter, I had a student who talked incessantly, however, and who annoyed all the other students. I asked him to translate the proverb, *Solange ein Narr schweigt, hält man ihn für klug.* He did so, happily, without realizing I had targeted him, but the rest of the class knew, and they smiled.

I excluded some German *Redewendungen* from *German Quickly* because they are hard to translate specifically because they are outside the framework of how English speakers think.³³ When I tried giving expressions such as *blind wie ein Maulwurf*, *ein Elefant im Porzellanladen*,³⁴ *Eulen nach Athen tragen*, or even *Die Bäume wachsen nicht in den Himmel*, I discovered that students were distracted by my elaboration of cultural differences because they were more eager to learn German grammar in order to read texts within their own fields. I subsequently de-

cided that it was better to discuss expressions if questions surfaced naturally while doing exercises.

Moreover, I did not give the proverb, *Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Lebelang*, not only because it was ungrammatical, but because *sein Lebelang* is best translated as “his whole life long,” and I wish to emphasize to students that a better translation for *lang* when used as time is “for” rather than “long”. Instead of giving students the more common *In der Not frißt der Teufel Fliegen*, I found an equivalent proverb, *Not lehrt den Affen geigen*, which creates a more pleasing image and is more interesting grammatically.

I did include the engaging phrase *schleichen wie die Katze um den heißen Brei* as an example of the preposition *um* (so that students did not have to generate a translation), and then gave both the literal meaning and the English equivalent. I also employed *durch die Blume sprechen* in my chapter on how to use a German dictionary (chapter 17). I require my students to translate the sentence, *Fräulein Meier lebt wie Gott in Frankreich* (and tell them that the English equivalent is *to lead the life of Riley*, with which most of them are unfamiliar). Some are so baffled by the phrase that they translate it as “Fräulein Meier lives with God in France.” During class, I note that I have heard three explanations of this from my German friends, and that the interpretations are all apocryphal. The first is that French food is so good that God would most happily dine there. The second is that the cathedrals are so beautiful, it would be most pleasant for God to be worshiped there. The third is the explanation, debunked by Archer Taylor,³⁵ that the expression occurred at the time of atheism in France when God had the delight of being omnipotent, but did not have any responsibility. Although Germans themselves might not know the origin of the phrase, my German friends are in agreement that it is probably more fun to live like God in France than to live like God in Germany.

I did not include *Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde* in earlier editions of *German Quickly* because students found it confusing when I tried introducing it in a supplementary exercise for an early chapter (5) covering prepositional phrases. However, I decided it would be remiss to exclude this popular proverb.³⁶ In my revised edition, it appears in chapter 17 (how to use a German dictionary) in order to show students how a literal translation is

less useful than a figurative one. Because Mieder and Holmes were able to convey the value of this proverb to fourth graders,³⁷ I am hopeful that adult students will be as astute.

Proverbs and their context

A major concern of Mieder in his review of *German Quickly* was that I had included proverbs without giving their context. In my foreword, I state:

Some of the proverbs included are unfamiliar to most Germans and are not representative of German culture. However, I have included them because they are intriguing. They contain a wide variety of ideas about life and human nature – some insightful, some bizarre, and some whimsical – which tend to add to the interest of learning a foreign language.³⁸

Although I do provide proverbs out of context to some extent, I am hopeful that *German Quickly* can provide enough of an introduction to German to inspire students to continue their studies after I have provided them with enough German grammar to make such studies possible. If I had been a paremiologist rather than a language teacher, I obviously would have offered a more extensive context for the proverbs I did use. If a fourth edition of *German Quickly* appears, I will provide more paremiological information and include a list of the 450-500 proverbs with which Germans are most familiar.

However, I already do have a reading selection (after chapter 9) that gives a brief overview of proverbs and how they are used. Because I wanted students to learn about proverbs early in the course, I needed to write in a grammatically straightforward way. Perhaps I should have provided a second reading selection on proverbs later in the text when students have a better understanding of German grammar. When I cover the exercise sentences in class, I often give more context.³⁹ I also ask students for alternate explanations of proverbs if it seems appropriate. I would hope that any instructor using my book would supplement the proverbs in a similar manner.

If my course had been a conventional introductory German course that included conversation, I believe it would have been much more important to provide the proverbs in context. For, as

Lutz Röhrich writes: “Erst wer auch Sprichwörter in der Fremdsprache richtig anzuwenden weiß, beherrscht eine Sprache wirklich.”⁴⁰ Among others, Ursula S. Hendon notes that a knowledge of the codes of behavior of another people is important if a foreign language student is to understand how to communicate in the language in question.⁴¹ Anna Litovkina also emphasizes that proverbs are an important part of the cultural heritage of almost any language.⁴²

Actually, I do include many proverbs that are familiar to Germans. I added the disclaimer in my foreword in part to reassure native German instructors who might feel uncomfortable with the overly didactic slant of the proverbs. Thus, they can emphasize the proverbs that they relate to while dismissing others that they do not enjoy.⁴³ Moreover, I include quotations from a broad range of authors and thinkers to give students a diverse idea of German culture, and at the end of my book I include a list of famous Germans, when they lived, and why they are famous.

Although I include parables from Kafka and colorful aphorisms by Nietzsche, students realize that such ideas do not represent German cultural beliefs in general. Perhaps it speaks to the power of the proverbs that when people hear them, they feel as if they are being exposed to the authority of a universal truth even when there is no clear documentation of the source.⁴⁴ There is a delicate balance between characterizing nationalities and stereotyping them. As Mieder notes: “Überhaupt ist die größte Vorsicht bei solchen Sprichwörterbeitragen zur Völkerpsychologie geboten, weil sie oft auf stereotypen Vorurteilen und fälschlichen Verallgemeinerungen beruhen.”⁴⁵ Perhaps there should be a proverbial equivalent to the adage, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, do not say anything at all” that would be along the lines of, “If a proverb is unflattering to a nation, it should not be used to portray a nation’s character.”

Mieder devotes a chapter of *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season* to proverbs in Nazi Germany, a chapter that makes for painful, but informative reading, in which he shows how National Socialists such as Karl Bergmann, Julius Schwab, Helene Heger, Hartmann Schiffer and Ernst Hiemer deliberately used proverbs to promote anti-Semitism. As Mieder points out, “Proverbs in themselves might be harmless pieces of folk wisdom, but when they become propagandistic tools in the hands of malicious per-

sons, they can take on unexpected powers of authority and persuasion."⁴⁶ In *Sprichwörtliches und Geflügeltes*, Mieder further notes that proverbs such as "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," which have the formula "*Nur ein toter X ist ein guter X*," can also be used to demonize virtually any possible "enemy."⁴⁷ However, Mieder concludes his article by offering hope that a "live and let live" proverb could emerge to counter this dangerous phrase.

A book of *Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases of Illinois* that collected proverbs in use in Illinois from 1944-1950 contained the following disturbingly bigoted proverbs:⁴⁸

Bad as a Jew. (cf. as mean as a Jew)
 Lazy as a nigger on Sunday.
 Sweating like a nigger on election day.
 A nigger in the woodpile.
 Dumb as a Polack.

Collections such as Taylor and Whiting's *A Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases 1820-1880*, George Smith's *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, Burton Stevenson's *The Macmillan (Home) Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* and Whiting's *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* also have proverbs pejorative to African-Americans and to Jews. Mieder's *American Proverbs* seems like a much kinder collection to me because he includes proverbs by Native Americans and African-Americans, rather than proverbs that unfairly characterize them.⁴⁹

Archer Taylor notes that the temptation of proverb compilers to reprint older sources without any real effort to enlarge upon them or to verify them by reference is a temptation that besets all collectors and one that makes even the best collections unreliable.⁵⁰ Many of the proverbs in *German Quickly* have their roots in the Bible and in Aesop, and are used by people from many countries. I also tended to use proverbs and Redewendungen that had English equivalents (*ein Herz aus Gold*; *den Nagel auf den Kopf treffen*) so that they would be more familiar to my students.

Although I thought some of my proverbs were exotic, I was surprised to see a few of them surface in collections of other countries. For example, variations of the following proverbs also appear in *Proverbs of the Pennsylvania Germans*:

*Kinder sind der Reichtum armer Leute.
 Wer fürchtet, er tue zu viel, tut immer zu wenig
 Der Teufel war schön in seiner Jugend.
 Die Dummen sterben nie aus.
 Bauern lieben lange Bratwürste und kurze Predigten.
 Hühner, die viel gackern, legen keine Eier.
 Pfau, schau auf deine Beine.⁵¹*

Although Litovkina carefully documents references for the proverbs she cites in *A Proverb a Day*, my American students either are unfamiliar with the following proverbs (which also appear in *German Quickly*), or they would be surprised to learn that they were originally English:

*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step
 (which is listed on a greeting card as a Chinese proverb).
 Where God builds a church, the devil will build a chapel.
 He must have a long spoon who sups with the devil.
 A crown is no cure for a headache.
 It is a good horse who never stumbles.
 Hope is the poor man's bread.⁵²*

Because I found the proverbs especially vivid, I used Martin Hürlimann's collection, *Stimmen der Völker im Sprichwort*, as a resource for *German Quickly*. However, he did not do careful research on the proverbs, and the origins of his proverbs are occasionally suspect.⁵³ For example, he attributed non-Western origins to some proverbs familiar to me.

Kinder sind der Reichtum armer Leute. (Persian) (cf. the proverbs of the Pennsylvania Germans, already cited.)
Die Augen sind nie satt. (African) (cf. Proverbs: *Unterwelt und Abgrund werden niemals satt, und der Menschen Augen sind auch unersättlich.*)
Selbst ein Experte hat seinen Meister. (Japanese) (cf. Herbert, 1640.)

I included the following proverb from his collection, which nevertheless does seem to be Persian: *Wer Pech hat, den beißt ein Hund, auch wenn er ein Kamel reitet.* Although it stands out

as a proverb that is unlikely to be German because camels do not appear in proverbs of German origin my students enjoy it.

It is unlikely that everyone in a country would agree with every proverb. Certainly, if a proverb such as “A rolling stone gathers no moss” can have two contrary meanings, even if people can relate to it, there is no guarantee that everyone is interpreting to it in the same way. When I attended a boarding school in Berlin in 1965 (Schulfarm Scharfenberg), the proverb *Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde* did not find much favor with teenagers who were supposed to rise each morning at 6:00 and engage in *Frühspport* in the winter cold.

In “Geschichte des Sprichwortes im Deutschen” Wolfgang Mieder lists modern proverbs such as *Trau keinem über dreißig*, *Eine Frau ohne Mann ist wie ein Fisch ohne Fahrrad*, *Berlin ist eine Reise wert*,⁵⁴ none of which appear in *German Quickly*. Although these proverbs might stand the test of time, I felt more comfortable with proverbs that were hundreds of years old rather than those that were thirty or forty years old. Yet because modern proverbs and anti-proverbs are more favorable to women, I am certain my students would welcome them. Perhaps I will first test them by using them in class and then use the ones that find most favor in a subsequent edition of *German Quickly*.

The proverbs I have chosen are most probably more revealing about my own *Weltanschauung* than they are of the German national character. I included the biblical passage from Matthew, *Selig sind die Friedfertigen, denn sie werden Gottes Kinder heißen*, because I was revising my book just before the U.S. was to invade Iraq, and it was a small way of protesting the looming war. Because I have assembled the proverbs in a way that I enjoy most, I believe *German Quickly* has a literary cohesiveness in which the proverbs blend in with the romance between Fräulein Meier and a mailman, and they harmonize with insights from Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. While my arrangement of the proverbs might make paremiologists justifiably uncomfortable, I believe the overall result is that students who use my textbook might know more proverbs than native Germans. Many of my former students have continued studying German to the point that they are fluent in the language. As far as I know, none of them have become paremiologists – yet.

Although Litovkina in *A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away* uses proverbs in a much richer context to teach English to Hungarian students, the complexity of the passages included in her text (including poetry by Ted Hughes, James Boswell, and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer) require her students to have an extensive knowledge of English before they can use it. There is such a wealth of material about German proverbs that it would be a delight to provide a book consisting of reading selections about proverbs and from the Grimms' *Märchen* for more advanced students. Selections from Mieder's *Deutsche Volkslieder, Texte, Variationen, Parodien*, for example, with annotations specifically for English-speaking students would be a special delight. Other anthologies by Mieder, such as *Deutsche Sprichwörter und Redensarten* as well as *Kommt Zeit – Kommt Rat!?* would also be valuable.⁵⁵ Or aphorisms by Rilke's mother, or Mozart's letters would also shed light on German culture in passages short enough for students to be able to read in one sitting.⁵⁶

Conclusion

If I am interested in my subject, my students will be, too. I have tried various pedagogical strategies during my thirty years of teaching German, and have found it crucial to continue trying new methods (and additional proverbs) to reach even my most reluctant students. The proverbs allow students (and me) to bring our experiences and intellectual backgrounds to the class, even if it is not for lessons in ethical behavior. In addition, the proverbs have helped sustain my own enthusiasm for teaching. Every time I approach *Es kann kein Prophet den anderen ansehen ohne zu lachen*, I laugh in happy anticipation of the prophets greeting one another. When we translate *Tod ist der Arzt des armen Mannes*, I wonder if death will be the doctor of the poor man, or if it will be my former student Todd. It is a delight to watch my students and to know that even if the proverb is not translated correctly, it might be translated in an interesting manner.

Wolfgang Mieder began his review of *German Quickly* with the biblical proverb "There is nothing new under the sun," a proverb that also appears in my book. Other than the orthography reforms of 1996 and some new words, there is nothing new to German grammar. And there is nothing new to the proverbs I have used.⁵⁷ However, the ways that my students relate to the

proverbs and discover that German grammar can indeed be learned quickly are always refreshing and a source of insights for me as well as them. Proverbs, indeed, are never out of season!

Notes

¹April Wilson, *German Quickly: A Grammar for Reading German* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989, 1996, 2004); Wolfgang Mieder, (1991). April Wilson, *German Quickly. A Grammar for Reading German* (New York, 1989). *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Scholarship* 8, 265-270. I will list page references from this review in the body of my article.

²Although there is ample literature about the value of using proverbs to learn a language, I am not aware of any textbook using proverbs in the same way that I do. However, I found it discouraging to read reviews of valuable texts in *Proverbium* only to discover that they were unavailable at the University of Chicago Library. Regina Hessky and Stefan Ettinger's *Deutsche Redewendungen: Ein Wörter- und Übungsbuch für Fortgeschrittene* (*Proverbium*, 2000, pp. 451-458) probably was not purchased because of the cost. Moreover, this book assumes an advanced knowledge of German. The following books recommended by Mieder in his review of *German Quickly* (p. 269) were also missing from the Regenstein Library collection: Christa Frey, Annelies Herzog, Arthur Michel and Ruth Schütze, *Deutsche Sprichwörter für Ausländer*; Annelies Herzog, Arthur Michel and Herbert Riedel, *Deutsche idiomatische Redewendungen für Ausländer*; and Barbara Wotjak and Manfred Richter, *Deutsche Phraseologismen. Ein Übungsbuch für Ausländer*.

³Mieder, *In der Kürze liegt die Würze*, 2002

⁴Röhrich describes a proverb as a "Kunstwerk im kleinen." *Sprichwort*, 1977, p. 52.

⁵Neal Norrick, Humorous Proverbial Comparisons, *Proverbium*, 1987, pp. 173-186; Neal Norrick, Proverbial Emotions: How Proverbs Encode and Evaluate Emotion, *Proverbium*, 1994, pp. 207-215; Richard Honeck, *A Proverb in Mind*, 1997.

⁶I am fortunate to have some excellent reviews on Amazon. This is a sample: "Using proverbs to teach German [is] a great idea that should be used in teaching any language. Proverbs are those little simple sentences that somehow stick in our minds more than other things do." (Arnab Chakraborty) "In fact I like this book so much that I can't wait to get home to look at it." (Julie Zuckerman) "What really gives this book its charm, however, are the examples and practice translations....these reading exercises not only take the drudgery out of practice, but make language learning an outright pleasure!" (maguzza)

⁷I tell students that "Es regnet Bindfäden" is much more common, but they love the image of Bratwursts pouring down.

⁸Dmitrij Dobrovol'ski and Elisabeth Piiranien, "Keep the Wolf from the Door": Animal Symbolism in Language and Culture," *Proverbium*, 1999, pp. 61-94; Donald Ward, "The Wolf: Proverbial Ambivalence." *Proverbium*, 1987, pp. 211-224; Röhrich, *Lexikon der Sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, 1973, pp. 1157-60.

⁹See Anna Litovkina's book, *A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*, pp. 69-75. She also devotes sections to grammatical principles such as pronouns ("all," "every," "everybody," "everyone," "everything," "nobody," "nothing," and "something"), pp. 80-85; uses of "always" and "never," pp. 76-79. I am indebted to Wolfgang Mieder for giving me this fine book. Friedrich Seiler notes that the *besser...als* construction of the proverb helps console people by reminding them that their lives could be worse (*Sprichwörterkunde*, p. 324). However, I have found that my students found the following two proverbs so depressing that I could not include them in my latest edition: *Besser eine Laus im Kohl zu finden als gar kein Fleisch* and *Es ist besser, den Arm zu brechen, als den Hals*.

¹⁰Röhrich (*Sprichwort*, 1977, p. 19) and Wolfgang Mieder (*Proverbs are Never Out of Season*, 1993, p. 9) have both noted that a familiar proverb that is begun need not be finished because the end is obvious to the listeners.

¹¹Terrence Odlin, "Constraints on Proverbial Form," *Proverbium*, 1986, p. 33.

¹²*Children and Proverbs Speak the Truth*, 2000.

¹³Wolfgang Mieder, *Folklore* 2003, 155-179

¹⁴See especially, Archer Taylor, *The Proverb and an Index to the Proverb*, 1962; Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs are Never Out of Season*, 1993; Anna Litovkina, *A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*; Michael Lieber, "Analogic Ambiguity: A Paradox of Proverb Usage" in: *Wise Words*, 1994, p. 99-126; Kwesi Yankah, "Do Proverbs Contradict" in *Wise Words*, 1994, pp. 127-42; Neal Norrick, "Proverbial Perlocutions," in *Wise Words*, 1994, pp. 127-42

¹⁵*Proverbium*, 1985, p. 277.

¹⁶*Proverbium* 2001, p. 365-374.

¹⁷*A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*, 117-123.

¹⁸This is admittedly a strange resource. Because I was not a paremiologist, I randomly chose sources available at the University of Chicago library. Although I was dubious about Faustmann's selections, I found them entertaining. My other resources were: Philipp Kremer, *German Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases with Their English Counterparts*, 1955; Martin Hürlimann, *Stimmen der Völker im Sprichwort*, 1945; Walther Oschilewski, *Deutsche Sprichwörter*, 1925; Angela Uthe-Spencker, *English Proverbs: Englische Sprichwörter*, 1977. Distressingly, Wolfgang Mieder's *Deutsche Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979) was not available, or I would have used it.

¹⁹I have found that students evaluate sentences differently when they are in an unfamiliar language. For example, the saga of Fräulein Meier and the mailman is as predictable as a Harlequin romance, yet students appreciate it, much as they do the familiar proverbs, because they believe that the sentences will be easy to translate (and they usually are).

²⁰Alan Dundes has shown that "anality would appear to be an integral part of general German national character and is not limited to either an occasional peasant or a single exceptional theologian, musician, or poet." *Life Is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder*, 1989, p. 75.

²¹The first is authentically German, however. Lutz Röhrich notes that *in den Brunnen fallen* originated with Hans Sachs (*Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, p. 173). Röhrich explains that *der hinkende Bote*, which has been

found in Petrarch, Oldecops, Grimmshausen and Henisch, means that after good news, often bad news, which is the truthful news, comes later. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-59. Kremer translates *Neue Heilige werfen die alten...* as: The novelty of noon is out of date by night. (p. 50)

²²Occasionally, my use of proverbs subsequently causes students to make even ordinary sentences colorful. I made up some sentences specially for a student who had trouble finding correct definitions in the dictionary. He translated *Der Taube ist stumm* as "The pigeon is mute" and wondered what that could possibly mean.

²³*Proverbium*, p. 269. However, there is one exception that I am aware of: *Ein auf die Spitze getriebenes Recht kann unter manchen Umständen zu einem großen Unrecht werden.*

²⁴Friedrich Seiler, *Sprichwörterkunde*, p. 320. In "The Proverb and the Problems of Education," Dumitru Stanciu notes that "rough experience and failure are mainly retained by the proverb as sources of learning." Because transfers cannot be achieved without difficult trials, the proverb lays little stress on pleasure. *Proverbium* 1986, p. 163. Moreover, pleasure, praise, and reward are poorly represented by proverbs. (p. 164)

²⁵Yet, proverbs can also be enormously comforting. As Wolfgang Mieder noted, proverbs and proverbial expressions gave Victor Klemperer the courage to go on, despite Nazi persecution. *Reflections on the Holocaust*, 2001, p. 114.

²⁶Litovkina, "Conducting a Proverbial Experiment in Hungary, *Proverbium* 1996, p. 177.

²⁷*Twisted Wisdom*, p. 90

²⁸Because they require imaginative leaps, it is not surprising that proverbs have been used to assess intelligence and mental health. Hanna Ulatowska and Gloria Olness have shown how people with aphasia process proverbs differently, "Reflections on the Nature of Proverbs: Evidence from Aphasia," *Proverbium*, 1985, pp. 329-46. Michael Cyrus Abadi, "Proverbs as ESL Curriculum" has noted that "not only are proverbs compact and context-dependent, they also violate the cooperative principles of conversation that a statement be clear, truthful, informative, and relevant (Grice, 1975)...Proverbs require the listener to make connections and perhaps this is why researchers have believed that their interpretation could shed light on how the mind works." *Proverbium*, 2000, p. 5. Richard Honeck also discusses proverbs in the context of "Brain, Development, and Intelligence" in *A Proverb in Mind*, pp. 214-246. Tim Rogers has written "Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Importance of Context" (*Wise Words*, 159-182). Wolfgang Mieder writes about the need to establish a "Paremiological Minimum for Cultural Literacy" (*Wise Words*, 297-316) and notes that there is a rather low familiarity with proverbs by American students. p. 303. See also, Nancy Andreasen, "Reliability and Validity of Proverb Interpretation" (*The Wisdom of Many*, pp. 218-229) and Franziska Baumgarten, "A Proverb Test for Attitude Measurement," (*The Wisdom of Many*, pp. 230-241).

²⁹A delightful alternative to this proverb is found in Mieder and Holmes's *Children and Proverbs Speak the Truth: A barking dog eats a cookie*. (p. 192). See also, Wolfgang Mieder and Anna Litovkina, *Twisted Wisdom*, which in-

cludes, “A barking dog never bites, but a lot of dogs don’t know this proverb. p. 7.

³⁰Some students also confuse *Freude* and *Freunde* and consequently translate the latter part of the proverb as, “there friends grow forth.”

³¹Although this is admittedly a strange version of “The grass is always greener,” it is useful grammatically because it gives students an opportunity to identify *Leute* as genitive plural, to realize that there are many translations of *fremd*, to identify *größere* as a comparative and to realize that *Euter* is plural.

³²Traditionally, I have students read their translations out loud in class. Although I call on students, they always have the option of not answering. They give me their homework to read primarily if they have missed a class. My African student was so concerned about how he performed in class that he would give me his translations in advance; I would then call on him only when I knew he had translated a sentence correctly. (Because I was the only person who knew about his mistakes and because he was unaware of their grammatical magnitude, it is extremely unlikely that he would remember having made these errors even if he were to read this article.)

³³I did not include *Das Ei will kluger sein als die Henne*, not only because it was difficult for students immersed in the logistics of translation to make the cognitive leap of an egg thinking, but also because most dictionaries (*Harper Collins, Oxford Duden, Cassells, Langenscheidts*) all give the English equivalent, “Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs,” which students found even more mystifying than the German. In *Deutsche Sprichwörter*, Wolfgang Mieder notes that proverbs can sometimes be translated quite badly, or not at all. Some of the mistranslations he cites are both un reassuring and amusing: *Die Axt im Haus erspart den Zimmermann* – “The axe in the house economizes the apartment man; Einmal ist keinmal – *One time is no monument*. p. 69.

³⁴For wonderful explication of this proverb, see Olga Trokhimenko, *Wie ein Elefant im Porzellanladen*, 1999.

³⁵Archer Taylor, *The Proverb and an Index to the Proverb*, 1962, p. 195.

³⁶Wolfgang Mieder and Helmut Walther, “‘Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde’: Neues zur Herkunft und Überlieferung des populärsten deutschen Sprichwortes,” *Proverbium*, 2000, 267-282.

³⁷*Children and Proverbs Speak the Truth*, 2000.

³⁸*German Quickly*, 2004, p. vi.

³⁹For example, when we translate *Ein Stein, der rollt, setzt kein Moos an*, I ask my students what they think it means, and the interpretations tend to be evenly divided between the positive and the negative interpretation of the accumulation of moss. Although most students seem familiar with this proverb, many of them do not seem to have thought about what it might mean until I ask them.

⁴⁰*Sprichwort*, p. 106. Röhrich notes that in cloister schools of the Middle Ages, students had to translate German proverbs into Latin for language exercises. p. 105. Currently, many readers of *German Quickly* are pursuing degrees in theological or biblical studies. Perhaps proverbs and theology will always be in harmony.

⁴¹Foreign Language Annals, 1980, p. 191.

⁴²Neal Norrick notes that the weight of traditional or majority opinion gives proverbs a special kind of authority. *How Proverbs Mean*, 1985, p. 28.

⁴³*A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*, 2000, p. vii.

⁴⁴Although the proverbs in *German Quickly* create the impression that all doctors kill people and that all farmers are lazy, students are more willing to take these unfair stereotypes with a grain of salt. They also do not seriously believe: *Advokaten und Soldaten sind des Teufels Spielkameraden*.

⁴⁵Wolfgang Mieder, *Sprichwort*, p. 70.

⁴⁶*Proverbs are Never Out of Season*, 1993, p. 251.

⁴⁷Mieder, *Sprichwörtliches*, pp. 165-74. See also: Lynne Ronesi, "'Mightier than the Sword': A Look at Proverbial Prejudice," *Proverbium*, 2000, pp. 329-347.

⁴⁸Nevertheless, this collection has some colorful proverbs, including "Delicate as a butterfly walking on a lily pad." Cows seem to be viewed in a less favorable light than those in German proverbs, so that one finds "Clumsy as a cow on crutches." It is unlikely that Illinois farmers would relate to the metaphorical proverb, *Wer als Kalb in die Fremde geht, kommt als Kuh heim*. However, I seem to have found proverbs atypical of cows in the collections I consulted. According to Röhrich, a cow is an animal of clumsiness in the German proverb, *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, 1973, pp. 552-56.

⁴⁹*American Proverbs*, 1989.

⁵⁰Taylor, pp. 10-11. However, Taylor, writing in 1931/1962 might be out of date. Wolfgang Mieder is especially careful to document sources whenever possible, and has devoted entire books to single proverbs, such as *Die großen Fische fressen die kleinen*. In *A Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases 1820-1880* (1958). Barlett Jerre Whiting and Archer Taylor themselves seem to have provided documentation more careful than that of previous generations.

⁵¹*Pennsylvania German Proverbs*, 1995.

⁵²See: *A Proverb a Day Keeps Boredom Away*, 2000.

⁵³Hürlimann, Martin. *Stimmen der Völker im Sprichwort*. Hürlimann wrote: "Unsere Sammlung verfolgt keine wissenschaftlichen Zwecke. Wir mussten uns auf andere Sammlungen stützen, und manches war uns nicht in der Sprache, sondern in Übersetzungen zugänglich, die wir unsererseits meist aus dem Englischen noch ins Deutsche übertragen mussten." p. 181. I wonder if some of the so-called Asian and African proverbs were actually proverbs brought to these countries by missionaries.

⁵⁴"Geschichte des Sprichwortes im Deutschen," *Proverbium*, 1996, pp. 235-252

⁵⁵cited in Mieder's review of *German Quickly*, p. 269.

⁵⁶Phia Rilke's *Ephemeral Aphorisms*, 1998, might be especially interesting to use.

⁵⁷Although Mieder has shown that proverbs must adapt to current times, it is interesting to see what proverbs go in and out of season. While views about women, stepmothers, raising children have changed, and proverbs have been adapted to incorporate modern technology ("Garbage in, garbage out, etc."), many proverbs about government and justice seem all-too-true. Examples are: *Weh dem Lande, dessen König ein Kind ist; Wenn Gott ein Land strafen wollte,*

würde er den Herrn die Weisheit nehmen; Die Liebe der Bürger ist des Landes stärkste Mauer; Wenn Macht kommt, so geht die Gerechtigkeit auf Krucken; Wenn man die Gerechtigkeit biegt, so bricht sie.

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