

**Speech for:** Brian Jenner

**Title:** Intercultural speechwriting – how communication cultures differ across Europe

**Occasion:** 7. Tagung Redenschreiben

**Venue:** Quadriga Forum

**Date:** 24 April 2018

**Length:** 25 minutes

Meine Damen und Herren,

Zuerst möchte ich Ihnen einen nützlichen Tipp fürs Redenschreiben geben.

Es geht darum, wie man seinen Redner kennenlernt.

Wie kann man eine Beziehung zu seinem Redner aufbauen?

Die Antwort: Man findet heraus, was der Redner zwischen dem achtzehnten und einundzwanzigsten Lebensjahr gemacht hat.

Zum Beispiel, wo er gelebt und was er studiert hat.

Welche Bücher er gelesen hat.

Welche Musik er gern gehört hat.

Denn in den Lebensjahren von achtzehn bis einundzwanzig entwickelt sich der Charakter.

Das ist sehr nützlich, wenn man einen Charakter verstehen will.

Also, was hat Brian Jenner in diesen Lebensjahren gemacht?

Ich bin ein Kind der Margaret-Thatcher-Zeit.

Ich bin mit dem Kalten Krieg aufgewachsen.

Als Teenager haben mich Nena und ihre neunundneunzig Luftballons dazu inspiriert, Deutsch zu lernen.

Meine Deutschstunden haben mir gefallen, und ich habe mehrmals in den Ferien Austausch mit deutschen Jugendlichen gemacht.

Als Achtzehnjähriger habe ich den Erbkönig auswendig gelernt. Ich bin mit den deutschen Liedern vertraut geworden.

Ich habe Deutsch und Französisch an der Universität Oxford studiert.

Ende neunzehnhundert-neun-und-achtzig, als ich einundzwanzig war, habe ich ein Jahr in Straßburg verbracht.

Jeden Tag habe ich in den Zeitungen von den Veränderungen in Ost-Europa gelesen.

Und vor achtundzwanzig Jahren bin ich per Anhalter von Straßburg nach Berlin gefahren.

Und ich bin durch die Straßen von Ost-Berlin gelaufen.

Ich erinnere mich, Samstag nachmittags war alles verlassen.

Die Gebäude waren am Verfallen.

Man konnte keine Bananen kaufen.

Mein Leben hat also viele deutsche Einflüsse.

Ich werde sie in meiner Rede beschreiben

Es ist ein großes Privileg, zu einem deutschen Publikum zu sprechen.

Ich möchte mich bei Sarah Wagener, Jacqueline Schäfer und Christian Arns bedanken.

Jetzt werde ich auf Englisch sprechen.

I'd like to begin with some humour.

A story told to me by a German speechwriter when he came to speak to us in England.

As speechwriters, we don't need to be original.

We're all in the recycling business.

There were three Westerners

– a Frenchman, an Englishman and a German – and they are sentenced to death by firing squad in China for spying.

When judgement is passed, they're offered the chance to make one final request.

The Frenchman requests a six-course meal with champagne and a bottle of Petrus.

The German asks to be allowed to tell a joke before being put up against the wall.

And the Englishman's last wish?

"Please could I be shot before the German tells a joke."

A popular prejudice of the English about the Germans.

They don't have a sense of humour.

*How very boring, and quite untrue.*

I spent nine years studying German.

I had a remarkable tutor at Oxford,  
who challenged many assumptions.

He said there was a joke in almost every line of the *Der  
Zauberberg*.

We read Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandschaften* and he would be  
rolling around with laughter.

They say that there are no great German comedies.

But my tutor introduced us to Kleist's *Der zerbrochene  
Krug* -

It's set in the Netherlands near Utrecht.

We went to see a production in London.

It was really funny.

Many years later, I was invited to the Hague to speak to Dutch speechwriters about humour.

I remembered the jokes about Limburger cheese in *Der zerbrochene Krug*.

So I arrived a day early,  
and I bought some Limburger cheese which I could take with me to illustrate the talk.

Props are a great way to overcome language barriers.

Smelly cheese is a rich source of humour.

Limburger is said to resemble the odour of socks.

But when I got out my Limburger cheese.

The Dutch speechwriters had never heard of it.

They knew nothing of its comic potential.

This is the problem of communicating across borders in Europe.

You don't always know the audience's cultural references.

But speeches are not just about the exchange of information,  
they are about creating connections.

And to do that dull prose isn't the best tool. You need a little humour, a little spirit, a little risk.

The Dutch didn't get my joke,  
but they appreciated I had made the effort.

I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak to you today in Berlin because by making speeches we can change the future.

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My journey into the world of speechwriting began with an invitation to speak at a conference of speechwriters in America in 2008.

The British and the Americans share one language,  
but are divided by two cultures.

By temperament, the Americans believe that life is  
serious, but not hopeless.

Whereas the British believe that life is hopeless, but  
not serious.

I was an independent speechwriter working in the English  
provinces.

I'd never met another speechwriter.

I strolled into the Mayflower Hotel on Pennsylvania  
Avenue in Washington DC and there were 220 speechwriters  
in one room!

Unlike my family, my local business association and my  
former teachers, they understood what I did!

It was overwhelming.

I made lots of new friends.

They asked me, how does speechwriting work in Europe?

I didn't know.

This speaking opportunity in America  
led to the creation of the UK Speechwriters Guild.

The second speechwriters' network in Europe.

Only the second network.

The Germans were the first European country to set up a  
Guild of Speechwriters.

Thilo von Trotta was a man ahead of his time.

Over the past 20 years you've campaigned to make  
speechwriting respectable in Germany.

That means only another 26 European Union countries still  
to go!

The UK model is different.

The UK Speechwriters' Guild is a business – I didn't have  
a gang of like-minded people to get started.

When I began organising conferences, I discovered something unexpected.

The British Government speechwriters really weren't interested.

After a few conferences, speechwriters from the Netherlands, and Germany and Belgium were asking if it was acceptable for them to join the UK Speechwriters' Guild.

Their job was to write speeches in English as their second language.

So we became the European Speechwriter Network.

In 2014, a member of the Verband Redenschreiber deutscher Sprache,

Willi Vogler,

a speechwriter from Lufthansa,

addressed our conference in Oxford.

He was the one who told the joke.

He told a familiar story:

It was difficult to get 'speechwriters' talk about their work. Politicians were embarrassed by their existence.

Germany's experience of dictatorship meant fear and suspicion surrounded the art of rhetoric.

He mentioned that his favourite speechwriting tips came from a short piece by Kurt Tucholsky:

*Ratschläge für einen guten Redner*

*Hauptsätze, Hauptsätze. Hauptsätze.*

*Tatsachen, oder Appell an das Gefühl. Schleuder oder Harfe.*

Tucholsky's recommendations are not to a specifically German audience, they are universal.

Having listened to Herr Vogler,

I came to a conference organised by the Verband Redenschreiber deutscher Sprache in Berlin.

But as a British person, with very rusty German, I have one memory.

The then President, Vazrik Bazil, used figures of speech.

Figures of speech, the packages we put words into, to make ideas more intelligible to our audience.

Other speakers I struggled to follow,  
but a trained rhetorician I could listen to.

This is very important if you're writing for non-native speakers in the audience.

If you use rhetorical figures of speech, it's easier to follow.

The basic structures are the same in English, French or German.

They are:

Rhetorical questions

Contrasts

And three-part lists

Are we all aware of these tools?

As speechwriters we don't just produce content,  
we create structure,  
apply style  
and break things up into short sentences.

How do we best define the work of a speechwriter?

We are translators.

My passion for speechwriting came from my school work  
translating French and German into English and English  
into French and German.

I remember learning unusual words like  
'unternehmungslustig', 'Weltschmerz'  
or one I heard last week, 'Unhintergebarkeit'

How do we translate them into English? It's a fun  
challenge, like doing crosswords.

When I was learning French,  
I had a vocabulary book and I'd copy down idiomatic  
phrases like:

Mon violon d'Ingrès or il pleut comme une vache qui pisse  
or faire la grasse matinée.

There's a delight in using colourful language.

While a translator has to follow the original text  
closely, the joy of being a speechwriter is that you have  
a licence to experiment with language.

There's a creative element.

To speak well you can't just use dull prose, you have to  
add some spirit and humour.

I have observed that the Dutch –  
whether it's because of their education system, or  
because of the influence of the BBC – can write brilliant  
speeches in English  
– they're not exactly as a native speaker would deliver –  
but they have their own vitality, style and beauty.

In this era, when we need European politicians, I would  
single out a Dutchman as the only genuine 'European'  
statesman.

When the Vice President of the European Commission makes political statements, I listen.

Frans Timmermans speaks five languages.

He came to London and he quoted Monty Python.

He's given TED talks in English.

Like all the best politicians, you can listen to him and say,

I agree with that, or I disagree with that.

That's the leadership we need in Europe.

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Three years ago, when I came to this conference, I remember asking some of you whether you wrote speeches in English as well as German.

And most of you said, no, we send it to the translation department.

That's not good as it drains your text of the colour,  
which you really need to make a good speech.

Are they're not ways to avoid doing that?

Mr Macron has shown,  
it's a huge advantage if a European politician can speak  
in English.

Our former Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, was capable  
of making a speech in five European languages.

Boris Johnson, Teresa May and Tony Blair have given  
speeches in French.

They're often awful, but this is the future.

In politics and in business, especially in the digital  
era, you have to speak the language of the audience.

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The other important act of translation we do as  
speechwriters, is turn the abstract into the concrete.

European leaders and institutions do this with various degrees of success.

The French are fond of abstraction.

They have no network of speechwriters.

A lady called Marie de Gandt wrote a book about her experiences with Mr Sarkozy.

It was too literary and too academic for my taste.

However, the French are the only country to make a full-length comedy film about the problems encountered by a Government speechwriter.

Has anyone seen *Quai D'Orsay*?

The European Central Bank produces unfathomable speeches. But the European Council, by contrast, takes speechwriting seriously.

The Dutch political philosopher, Luuk van Middelaar, brought some colour to the voice of the former European Commission President, Herman Van Rompuy.

The European Commission has some excellent speechwriters, probably because they're all multilingual.

But we all face a big problem:

Complex financial instruments,  
European Commission bureaucracy,  
executive remuneration,  
nuclear safety,  
immigration policy.

These issues have to be communicated to the public.

Politicians have assumed that these things are too complicated for the general public to understand.

And in European countries they are supported by young people in Government who are academically brilliant, but hopeless at communication.

Modern day universities may turn out political scientists, economists and MBAs, but they don't often produce good writers.

Now the general public is expressing its incomprehension in unpredictable and disruptive ways.

As speechwriters, our job is to translate complex ideas into simple language, but also to add our own creativity, wit and arts of persuasion.

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I would like to end by mentioning a good thing that came out of my visit to this conference three years ago.

I heard Jörg Hackeschmidt from the Bundeskanzleramt speak.

A few months later we had a European Speechwriter Network conference here in Berlin at the Neue Mälzerei on Friedenstrasse in October 2015.

I invited Jörg to attend.

During the coffee break someone asked him, can you name the top German speeches of all time?

He had to admit he couldn't.

This created an opportunity.

Last year he came to speak about great German speeches in Oxford.

He talked about speeches by Ernst Reuter, Willi Brandt, Richard von Weizsäcker and Roman Herzog

We learnt more about the German public speaking culture.

I recently read a book called *Berlin Rules* by a former British Ambassador to Berlin.

The author writes, 'political rhetoric is not a skill which in Germany is highly prized. Reputation in the Bundestag... are made by expertise and hard work in committees'

We can't change that in the short term, but I'd like to think that the fact that someone from the Bundeskanzleramt made that speech is a step in the right direction.

It was another example of how invitations make things happen.

So I hope that you will invite many more non-Germans to speak at this conference in future years.

It's my job to brush up my German.

It's your job to work on your English.

Looking to the future, the role of the speechwriter in Europe is bright.

At our recent conferences, we've had speechwriters of the Maltese, Portuguese and Austrian Prime Ministers attend as delegates.

We've had speechwriters who write for OPEC, the World Trade Organisation and the Commander, U.S. European Command.

The Norwegians sent a large delegation to our recent conference in Cambridge, the Swedish Prime Minister's speechwriter delivered a keynote and the only freelance speechwriter working in Finland has persuaded us to host our autumn conference in Helsinki.

Last year there was an in-depth article about Spanish speechwriters in the political magazine, El Pais.

A speechwriter from the Erdoğan Government in Turkey said he wanted to speak to us but he didn't show up in the end.

Politicians and business leaders, in the modern era, just don't have the time to peruse books of quotations, craft elegant sentences or research the background on the places they visit, so they need us.

This is the 7<sup>th</sup> Tagung Redenschreiben. We've had 16 conferences of the European Speechwriter Network. There have been speechwriter conferences in the US for over 30 years.

We're here. We're part of the modern communications skillset. There are few better ways to explore the rich cultural differences of the nation states of Europe than by analysing the way they do public speaking.

Since my first visit to Berlin nearly 30 years ago, the whole place has changed beyond recognition. I hope speechwriters can change the landscape of European public in a similar way over the next three decades.

**ENDS**