

Portrait of a linguistic shirker

[I recently pointed out that the widespread belief that migrants refuse to learn the language of their new country does not stack up against the realities of adult language learning.](#) I summarized the research that shows that adult language learning is complex and difficult and rarely an all-out success; to blame migrants for their failure to learn a new language (well) is adding insult to injury.

These well-established facts do not mean that individual migrants may not actively choose not to learn a new language. Unfortunately, we know surprisingly little about people who refuse to learn a new language. Partly, this is a problem of methods: how would one collect data about language refusal? While many non-migrants in Western societies believe themselves surrounded by language shirkers, it seems unlikely that advertising for research participants “who are refusing to learn the national language” would produce too many volunteers. Not only because, [as I have shown](#), unadulterated language refusal is rare but also because migrants who actually might refuse to learn the language of their new society are, of course, in a double bind that would make it difficult to admit to language shirking.

Does that mean we are stuck between believing either those who see themselves surrounded by language shirkers or those who doubt their existence – depending on whether we are inclined to take a pessimistic or an optimistic view of our fellow humans? Not quite.

Let me introduce an unabashed language shirker, the German-language author Oskar Maria Graf, who spent almost half of his life in New York but was quite open about the fact that he had little interest in even trying to learn English.

Oskar Maria Graf (1894-1967) was a Bavarian “provincial author” (as he called himself) with an anarchist bent. As a committed socialist and pacifist, and an active participant in the socialist Munich revolution of 1919, which had established a short-lived Soviet republic in Bavaria, Graf fled Germany immediately after Hitler came to power in early 1933. He spent time in neighbouring Austria and Czechoslovakia but, as European countries of exile became increasingly precarious, Graf, like all German refugees, had to look for a safe haven further afield. In 1938 he and his wife were granted a US visa. They arrived in New York in September 1938 and continued to live there until their deaths.

Back home, Graf had been a successful author during the interwar period. An autodidact (he left school when he was twelve years old and was apprenticed as a baker), Graf specialized in social realism with a focus on local Bavarian themes. After he had to leave his native country, the whole basis of his literary work – based as it was in the German language and the close observation of the mundane lives of Bavarian peasants – disappeared. He continued to write in German and his best-known book, *Das Leben meiner Mutter* (“The life of my mother”), was, in fact, written in exile but the success of his Munich years eluded him. Between 1933 and

1945, his opportunities to publish in German were severely limited; and he never returned to live in Germany even after the war despite the fact that his career was tied to German-language publishing.

Having been forced from home and wanting to retain the lost home are themes that, for Graf, are deeply connected to linguistic questions of maintaining the German language and not learning the English language. Let's now examine what Graf's language refusal looked like.

Graf almost celebrated the fact that he did not know how to speak English; it is a topic that comes up again and again in his later writing. A good example comes from his 1959 novel *Die Flucht ins Mittelmäßige* ("Taking refuge in mediocrity"), which is concerned with a group of German emigrants in New York. One of the main characters, Martin Ling, is commonly taken to be Graf's alter ego, and Ling's English language proficiency is introduced early in the novel as follows:

Ling had been living in New York for almost twenty years and up to now understood little more than a few indispensable English phrases. He made no efforts to improve his language skills, either; he had adopted nothing 'American' apart from what seemed automatically and mechanically comfortable to him. As a result, of course, he had made no progress and never got anywhere.

That his lack of English language proficiency was not only coy self-effacement has been confirmed by the observations of many others who knew him in New York. Lisa Hoffman, for instance, who was his lover in the 1950s, described [in a 2010 newspaper interview](#) how his English was just enough to order beer – an essential for the heavy drinker: whenever his glass was empty, Graf would shout, "Bring me noch a little beer." – mostly a word-for-word translation of the German phrase, with the particle 'noch' simply stuck in in German.

Graf did make some half-hearted attempts to learn English; when he had been in New York for almost five years, he wrote in a 1943 letter to Kurt Kersten, a fellow refugee, who, at the time, was in Martinique:

I've been learning English for weeks now but do you think I'm making any progress? Impossible. I don't think I'll ever get it. One of the reasons for that is that I didn't learn Latin terms such as "verb," "adverb" and "masculine" and God knows what in our village school. But it is also due to the fact that I'm interacting too little with Americans; and finally the third reason is that I simply remain imprisoned in the German language.

The first two reasons that Graf identifies for his inability to learn English are familiar to any applied linguist: limited formal education makes (formal) language learning more difficult; and limited interactional opportunities in the target language are an obstacle to practice and hence progress.

The third reason – "*I simply remain imprisoned in the German language*" – is less obvious, and reminds us that language learning is not only about the target language but also the first language. Learning a new language means not only adding a new language but it also means modifying the first language. It is this modification of the mother tongue that Graf objects to, rather than learning a new language per se.

German is both a prison for Graf and, at the same time, his inalienable home. In a TV interview from the 1960s he explained how he saw that relationship between language and home:

The first thing I want to say is that I have never felt myself to be an emigrant. Because I am a German writer and the German language is absolutely my home. I will never diverge from this language. And anyways, I can't

learn another language because I'm too stupid.



Our contemporary stereotype of the linguistic shirker paints migrants who fail to learn the language of their new country as lazy, as lacking responsibility, as taking advantage, as taking the path of least resistance. Graf's example would suggest that language refusal entails precisely the opposite: refusing to let go of the mother tongue was the more difficult path to pursue.

Graf was a stropy character and had extensive experience with the cost of refusal, linguistic and otherwise: as a conscript in World War I he had consistently refused to follow orders and never learnt to shoot. He narrowly escaped being court-martialled and was declared insane instead; his autobiography *Wir sind Gefangene* ("We are prisoners"), first published in 1927, tells the story of his experiences as a conscientious objector. Graf knew about the costs of refusing to conform from an early age.

Another misconception related to language refusal is the idea that failing to learn a new language is a sign of hostility towards the new society and its speakers. As a refugee, Graf certainly had more problems with his country of origin than with his adopted country. In fact, he never felt welcome in Germany again, even after the war. By contrast, it was New York where he ultimately felt at home.

For Graf, it was one of the beauties of New York that he could, in fact, hang on to German and go about his life without having to assimilate to English, something, as we have seen, he felt incapable of doing. He expressed that gratitude, coupled with the assertion that failing to learn a new language must not be confused with cultural narrowmindedness, in a lecture he delivered in 1944 at Princeton University – in German:

It is a great pleasure for me, the emigrant who does not speak English, to be allowed to speak to you in my mother tongue; because it is the language in which I grew up. I owe my literary existence to this language; it is

my inalienable home. In its spirit I try to understand the borderless world in its diversity. To understand the other, the seemingly alien, does not only mean to live in peace with the other; it also means to let oneself continuously be enriched by it and, simultaneously, to give one's best to the foreign, to the other.



Graf was closely associated with the New York based German-language newspaper “Aufbau”, where his wife Mirjam Sachs was an editor (Source: machtvonunten.de)

There is a twofold lesson in this portrait of a linguistic shirker for us today: first, it is a reminder of the complexities of adult language learning and the complex ways in which language is tied to identity, memory and loss, particularly in the life stories of refugees. Second, institutional and societal tolerance of linguistic difference can forge a viable path to secure the loyalty of those who have been forcibly displaced and provide them with a new sense of home.



References

Bauer, G., & Pfanner, H. F. (Eds.). (1984). *Oskar Maria Graf in seinen Briefen*. Munich: Süddeutscher Verlag.

Graf, O. M. (1983 [1959]). *Die Flucht ins Mittelmäßige: Ein New Yorker Roman*. Munich: dtv.

Graf, O. M. (1994 [1961]). *An manchen Tagen: Reden, Gedanken und Zeitbetrachtungen*. Munich: List Verlag.

[Few of Graf's writings have been translated into English. All translations here are mine.]

Further Reading

For in-depth explorations of Graf's relationship with English, German and Bavarian, and his views on language learning, language maintenance and language loss in migration, see:

Azuélos, D. (2008). L'exil dans l'exil Les stratégies linguistiques contradictoires des exilés aux États-Unis (Thomas Mann, Klaus Mann, Hans Sahl, Oskar Maria Graf) *Études Germaniques*, 252 (4) DOI: [10.3917/eger.252.0723](https://doi.org/10.3917/eger.252.0723)

Ferguson, S. (1997). *Language Assimilation and Crosslinguistic Influence: A Study of German Exile Writers*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

Stockhammer, R. (1991). Heimatliteratur im Exil: Oskar Maria Graf. *Exil*, 2, 71-80.

Stockhammer, R. (2012). "Lesen Sie before the Letter:" Oskar Maria Graf in New York. In E. Goebel & S. Weigel (Eds.), *'Escape to Life': German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933* (pp. 182-194). Berlin: De Gruyter.