

Toiletological English

Can you guess what kind of product the following text is promoting?

Your well-being is close to our heart

rail&fresh [product] areas are bright and friendly and leave nothing to be desired. The [product] facilities are kept perfectly clean round the clock. Scent sprayers, pleasant music, an attractive design and attentive, friendly and helpful staff round off the rail&fresh service package.

If you've taken your clue from my heading, you may have guessed it: [product] is a toilet. However, the text itself is pretty surprising as an ad for a public toilet with its generic corporate expressions that could be used for almost any product or service: "Your well-being is close to our heart," "bright and friendly," "leave nothing to be desired," "attentive, friendly and helpful staff." While these expressions are thoroughly familiar from corporate advertising and could refer to almost anything, it's the first time I've ever encountered them in toilet advertising. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I've encountered toilet advertising! Until now I was under the impression that there is no need to advertise for public toilets as you either have to use them or you don't. Now, the image that goes with the text seems to suggest differently, and I'm wondering whether I've missed a trend where public toilets have become whole-of-family excursion destinations.

Are you wondering how I came across [this website advertising the public toilets at Munich Central Station](#)? Let me put it on record that I was NOT googling international toilet destinations! Rather, the name of the toilet in question, *rail & fresh*, was mentioned in [an article about English in Germany published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*](#). The article argues that it is silly to object to English loanwords or English-based brand name creations such as *rail&fresh* in German. Reasons include that loanwords have always been around and are a normal part of all languages; people should be free to speak in whichever way they wish; there are more important things in life than loanwords and purists get worked up about nothing; and, finally, the usual clincher, the tide of loanwords can't be stopped anyways.

The article's target are German purists in general and, specifically, the [Verein Deutsche Sprache](#) ('German Language Society'), a not-for-profit organization aiming to strengthen the German language and to enhance its reputation. Their main target is the use of English loanwords and English-derived brand names. Personally, I have little patience for linguistic purism. At least that's what I thought until I read the *Spiegel*-article and found myself getting really annoyed with it. The reason I found the article annoying has nothing to do with the arguments put forward, which I've read countless times and which are the standard fare of the anti-prescriptivist tradition. Instead, it has everything to do with the identity of the author and the language in which the article was written: the author is a British expat based in Munich and the article was written in English in a German-language magazine. "Does an old and tired argument become fresh because it is presented in English instead of German?" I wondered.

My negative gut reaction against an ok, even if uninteresting, position goes to the heart of the matter: as many a language-ideological debate the debate about loan words in German is not about language but about identities, and my reaction was against the cultural defeatism that is implicit in offering a large public forum ([Der](#)

[Spiegel has 5.91 mio readers](#)) in a German-medium publication to an English native-speaker rehashing a tired old argument.

In the end, both *Der Spiegel* and the *Verein Deutsche Sprache* completely miss the point: whether you think it's a good idea – or not – to call a public toilet in Munich *rail&fresh* is not a matter of personal linguistic taste but of accessibility: toilet signage in a space frequented by such a diversity of people as Munich's central station needs to be as language-neutral and as widely recognizable as possible. But the question of accessibility runs even deeper. Public toilets are a public necessity and as such it's unfair to have them operate competitively and subject to the capitalist imperative for profit. *Rail&fresh* users are charged Euro1 per visit (at today's rate that's AUD1.40). Admittedly, you get half the fee back as voucher on a loyalty card (and, no, I'm not making this up!). I don't know what the alternative for those who can't pay the fee are at Munich Central Station. The key point is that access to decent public toilets is an equity issue that all citizens are entitled to irrespective of whether they can afford a 1-Euro-pee or not. Public toilets used to be truly public and maintained out of taxes. Privatizing them has given us toilet advertising, toilet brand identities and toilets with a bilingual website. That's a pretty heavy price to pay for equal access.

Debating the use of English in the brand identity of a German toilet serves to obscure the continued assault on the welfare state and the dismantling of social justice. And that is why I object to toiletological English – because it dulls the critical faculties.



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