

Linguistic adaptation of the Ave Maria

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Language is alive

Language "lives" because the perception of language changes. For example, the German dictionary by Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) knows the word "lady" in the "contemptuous or ironic" sense, with the "most insulting" meaning. Their dictionary states that the word lady "has nowadays attained full honorific status and denotes a respected, distinguished" woman. Previously, she was a respected woman at court.

More than 50 years ago, Gegrüßet-seist-du-Maria was changed because linguistic sensibilities had changed here too. According to Kluge's Etymological Dictionary of the German Language, "Weib" originally denoted a wife or an adult woman, i.e. a woman who had already had sexual intercourse - as opposed to a virgin. Over the years, however, "woman" became more and more of a contemptuous term, so that in the mid-1960s it was necessary to change "gebenedeit unter den Weibern" to "gebenedeit unter den Frauen" in the Ave Maria.

Despite this change, "Weibsbild" is still used today in Bavaria and Austria as an honorific term for an outstanding woman, especially if it is a "great Weibsbild". The adjective "feminine" has also been retained to this day without it having negative connotations. It was not changed to "womanly".

Until 1980, there was the standard translation, which was used in and outside the liturgy for over 35 years. It was a compromise between a literal translation and the general feeling for the language. The new standard translation was presented in 2016. It places more emphasis on a literal translation.

The argument that one should be careful when changing standard prayers, as these are biblical texts - the "Word of God" - can be countered by referring to the examples above. The Hail Mary was changed 60 years ago. The text of the Bible has been retranslated in the last 45 years. The content has never been changed, only the terms used. The message remained the same.

Inventory of the Hail Mary

Language continues to evolve. Grimm's dictionary still knows "gebenedeien" for "to bless" and "Gebenedeiung" for "blessing", but neither Wikipedia nor Kluge know these two terms. They have disappeared from everyday language. Only in the Hail Mary has it remained antiquated as "gebenedeit", although hardly anyone still knows its meaning. In the Eastern Church, "Blessed are you among women" is prayed at this point, which today everyone understands without explanation.

Grimm's dictionary also refers to "womb" as a child. This term is not mentioned in Kluge. Wikipedia refers on the one hand to an "embryo" and on the other to the "nasciturus", an unborn human being as the bearer of rights. In its 268th edition, Pschyrembel, the medical dictionary, refers to "embryo" as well as "fetus" for "Leibesfrucht". This proves that "Leibesfrucht" is no longer part of modern usage.

In other languages, it is not "gebenedeit" that is used, but rather the translation of "blessed." "blessed" in English,¹ "bénie" in French,² "błogosławionas" in Polish,³ "gezegend" in Dutch,⁴ "velsignet" in Danish,⁵ "bendito" in Spanish,⁶ "benedictus" in Portuguese⁷ und "benedetta" in Italian⁸.

Grimm's dictionary lists 29 botanical compounds for "fruit" and 3 in connection with humans: Leibesfrucht, Menschenfrucht, Zwillingenfrucht. According to Kluge, "fruit" is borrowed from the Latin "fructus", which is related to "fru" for "to enjoy". In Wikipedia, "fruit" is completely restricted to botany. There is no reference to humans.

Pressure to act

The German version of Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of December 1963, contains the word "understand" four times. The Council Fathers were therefore concerned that the faithful should not only celebrate the liturgy and the sacrament, but that they should also understand it. The word "blessed" is hardly understood by any Christians today. It is therefore prayed with a lack of understanding. This contradicts the meaning of SC and should therefore be changed.

"Fruit of your body" (Leibesfrucht) is no longer part of modern usage. Moreover, "fruit" clearly belongs in botany, not in zoology and certainly not in anthropology. Pregnant women therefore rightly protest when they are told - usually by old gynecologists - that there is nothing wrong with their "fruit". "I'm not a tree!" and "My child is not fruit!" are common reactions from pregnant women.

In contrast to the 1960s, when only "Weibern" was changed to "Frauen", a double linguistic adaptation of the "Gegrüßet-seist-du-Maria" is now pending. On the one hand, the faithful should understand what they are praying. Secondly, the choice of words should correspond to current usage. Under no circumstances should liturgical language offend and thus deter believers from praying. Rather, the choice of words should invite people to pray.

New version of the Ave Maria

Two urgent changes are therefore required for the first half of the Ave Maria. The new Ave Maria should therefore read:

„Gegrüßet seist du, Maria, voll der Gnade,
der Herr ist mit dir.
Du bist gesegnet unter den Frauen,
und gesegnet ist dein Kind, Jesus.“

or

„Gegrüßet seist du, Maria, voll der Gnade,
der Herr ist mit dir.
Du bist gesegnet unter den Frauen,
und gesegnet ist dein empfangenes Kind, Jesus.“

"Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you.
You are blessed among women,
and blessed is your child, Jesus."

or

"Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you.
You are blessed among women,
and blessed is your conceived child, Jesus."

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1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hail_Mary

2 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Je_vous_salue_Marie

3 <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zdrowa%20Maryjo>

4 <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weesgegroot>

5 https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hil_dig_Maria

6 https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_maria

7 <https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave-maria>

8 https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria