OVER IN FRANKFURT they tell the story of the American who lost his way down in the middle of town. Summoning his courage, he approached the next person who came along and asked, in a rich American accent, "Verzeihung, wo ist der Bahnhof?"

"Gehen Sie hier geradeaus und dann rechts," came the answer — in an equally rich and beautiful American accent.

"Danke schoen," replied the first man. And then, as he was about to walk off, a great light dawned: "HICOG language class?"

"Yeah," replied the second man, "unit one."

* * *

MAYBE THE WHOLE THING never happened, but it could have. Because right now there are some 171 HICOG employees in Frankfurt attending German classes, part of a total of 583 State Department employees scattered throughout western Germany and Berlin. And right along with them, squeezing in German lessons wherever he can, is the 584th: US High Commissioner John J. McCloy.

If you ask them why they're bothering to twist their tongues around those ü's and ö's, or gargle those r's, they'll give a variety of answers. Stenographers will say it helps when they try to give directions to their maids. Branch and division chiefs say it makes all the difference between staring silently at German guests and actually talking with them — even if the German language gets slightly mangled in the process. And US Resident Officers will say quite honestly that a good working knowledge of German is the most valuable single asset they can have for doing their jobs.

This mass attack on the German language is the result of an elementary bit of logic. The biggest job Americans have to do in Germany is to understand the Germans; to find out what they think about, what they talk about and why they behave the way they do. To learn these things, obviously, we must talk to Germans, and if we want to talk to them, we've got to know their language. Ergo: learn German.

Mr. McCloy himself had this to say about the importance of speaking to the Germans in their own language, in a speech last December to resident officers: "I am convinced that you can have no entirely satisfactory access to the German people and their thoughts when conversational contacts with them are limited to those you must carry on through an interpreter, or when your conversations are inhibited by a too limited knowledge of the German language. I realize that to really learn a language... is a considerable chore, but it is a chore we must all face if we are going to do the job successfully."

So much for top level policy. Mr. McCloy also told the resident officers how this policy was to be implemented: "I am therefore making special provisions for funds, tutors and other language aids in order that your program of learning the German language can succeed."

LESS THAN A MONTH after this statement was made, Glenn G. Wolfe, director of the Office of Administration, set the HICOG German Language Training

TO THE LEFT, dear students, is the gentleman who wrote That Book on "Spoken German" from which you have been studying. He is William G. Moulton — a doctor of languages who abhors being called doctor for fear people will expect him to give medical diagnoses. In 1943-44, he taught German to future military government officers at the Yale Civil Affairs Training School. He went to Washington in 1944 as a civilian and later as a captain in the Army to supervise Japanese language instruction in the six Far East Civil Affairs Training Schools then being conducted under the Provost Marshal General. After the war, he worked on re-education of German prisoners of war interned in the United States. He visited Germany in May and June 1947, for the War Department, to see how these ex-PW’s were doing and find out what effect their special training had had on them... Results: surprisingly good. In 1947 he joined the faculty at Cornell, where he is professor of Germanic linguistics.

Mr. Moulton tells in his article how his book "Spoken German" happened — and why.
Program in motion with a memorandum which began with these words: "It is the desire of the High Commissioner that all HICOG officers and employees whose official duties bring them into frequent contact with Germans acquire a reasonable conversational fluency in the German language."

Groundwork for the program was laid during December by Dr. Henry Lee Smith, Jr., director of the School of Foreign Language Training at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington. With the aid of the HICOG Training Officer, Harry T. Searl, the general outlines of the program were drafted, estimates obtained on the number of students to be taught, and letters sent out to all parts of the American zone asking that suitable teachers be temporarily engaged.

In February, another member of the Foreign Service Institute, Dr. John Echols, came to Germany and set the wheels in motion. Training conferences were held in Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart and Berlin for prospective teachers; by March, classes were launched. Since then the classes have swung along under the watchful eyes of Mr. Searl and the German supervisor of the program, Walter Regel.

That's the official explanation of why it is you may see a HICOG employee stumbling down a corridor with a paper-bound book in his hand, mumbling German noises as he goes. There's no reason for alarm: he's just en route to German class. Classes are held during working hours, because everyone concerned with the program feels it's worth sacrificing an hour a day, five days a week, if it will help teach HICOG employees to speak German.

If you really want to find out about the program, stand outside one of the classroom doors while one of the sessions is going on. If the class is taught right, you never hear any silence, and seldom any English. What you should hear is a constant babble of German noises (some of them may sound pretty American at the moment). Perhaps you will hear a single voice for a few seconds, then a chorus of voices immediately afterwards. That will be the students learning new material — the teacher says it for them first, and the whole class repeats, imitating the German sounds as hard as they can.

Or maybe you'll hear two voices alternating, with a sprinkle of ah's and um's in between. That will be two students carrying on a conversation: they've learned the new material, they've been drilled on it, and now they're trying to use it on their own in a more or less free conversation. If all of a sudden the whole class bursts out laughing; it's 10-to-1 that someone has pulled a real blooper. But give him time. Practice makes perfect — Uebung macht den Meister — especially in the business of language-learning.

To find out still more, open the door and walk in. You'll see maybe half a dozen students ranged around the table — all ages, ranks and descriptions. At one end of the table is the teacher (distinguishable as the one who uses the fewest ah's and um's), who may be either old or young, male or female. From the first moment you discover this heartening fact: everybody seems to be having a good time. This is a class where attendance is voluntary, and there's no homework. Yet, if you've picked a class that's been going on for several months, you'll find the students have learned a surprising amount of German. They can actually stand up on their feet and talk it.

Next, take a look at the book they're using. This, too, is like nothing you ever had in school. Remember the tedious French book you had, and all the translations you had to make from it in class? In this class there is rarely any translating, because right alongside the German in this book is a parallel column with the translation already given. Because it's the German, not the English, that the class is really working on. They're going to repeat it over and over so many times that by the time they've finished a particular lesson they can practically say it in their sleep. Technically, they're doing what education people call "overlearning:" they're learning the new material so thoroughly that even after a normal amount of forgetting, it will still stick with them.

In your old French class, one of the drudgeries was writing increasingly complex sentences. But in these classes, there's no writing at all. There's common sense to this omission: when Americans meet Germans on the street, in offices and restaurants, or at their homes, they're not going to start passing little notes back and forth. They'll open their mouths and start talking. Writing will take care of itself in time; in the beginning, it only gets in the way.

Another unusual feature of the book — instead of sentences on "I give the pencil to my teacher, you give the pencil to your teacher, he gives the pencil to his teacher," or stories about the fox and the wolf, the main body of it is made up of conversational material built around a particular topic. There are learning units (lessons) on meeting people, on seeing the sights, buying clothes, driving an auto; others tell you how to order a meal, order clothing, get a haircut or rent a room; there's even one telling about going out on a date. What the book
tries to do is avoid the traditional grammar-fable-fairytale type of approach and concentrate instead on the things a person actually wants to say in a foreign country. One grateful student told me he had found his way to Frankfurt from Bremerhaven with his new car solely on the basis of having learned rechts, links and geradeaus (left, right and straight ahead) in Unit 1. "Honest," he said, "they really use those words all the time."

A LOT OF AMERICANS feel with great discouragement that they just aren't gifted in foreign languages the way other people are. But fortunately they are the victim of what is merely an old wives' tale — all one needs to learn are the usual vocal apparatus and a lot of practice.

One good reason Americans developed inferiority complexes about language-learning was the type of instruction received in the schools and colleges. Many Americans who had spent four full years in college studying French were appalled to learn, on disembarking in France, that they couldn't understand the French — and the French couldn't understand them! Of course, there have been shining exceptions to the general language teaching in the United States and this is not intended as a wholesale indictment of the system. But it is true that a language student customarily spent most of his language-study time poring over great works of French literature. That, actually, is one of the things a college student ought to be studying. But he was learning to read, with no guarantee that he would ever learn to talk.

Another trouble was that the student spent all his time learning about the language, but very little time on learning the language itself. He could reel off the rules and the irregular verbs — but he couldn't stand on his feet and talk like a Frenchman.

The HICOG program attacks the problem from an entirely different angle. The basic principle is: get yourself a native speaker of the language you want to learn, and try to talk just the way he does. Since you yourself are in no position to know whether you have made a reasonably good imitation of him, you've got to rely on his judgment — if what you say doesn't sound right, he'll make you repeat it over and over after him until it does sound right.

IF YOU'RE GOING to learn a language by imitating what a native speaker says, the next question that arises is: what do you want him to say? Certainly not any more of that business about "Where is the pencil of the rich uncle's brother?" You'll want down-to-earth, practical material, and you'll want to begin with easy things and build up as you go along.

Knowing what you want to say may be easy for you, but for getting the grammatically graded material, you'll need someone who has made a study of the language and knows what constructions are common and what rare, and which will be the easiest for you to learn first. What you want, in short, is a "linguistic scientist."

If every person learning a new language had to have both a native speaker and a linguistic scientist constantly at his side, that would be quite a large order. There's no way of getting around the native speaker — you've got to have him. But fortunately, the linguistic scientist can write a book.

When he does, he's got to promise that he's really giving you the kind of material you'll be using in daily life, and he's got to start off with things that are relatively easy and build up as he goes along. A large order — but when his book is done, you and the native speaker can go to work on it.

In the HICOG German Language Training Program, the role of the native speaker is played by the 166 teachers that have been hired so far. The one absolute requirement is that they should have been born and brought up speaking German.

There are other requirements for teachers: they should be able to keep the class going at a lively clip and be committed to the ideal of keeping the students speaking, in German, all the time.

WHY ALL THIS EMPHASIS on talking? Well, for one thing, that's what you're trying to teach the student to do. But there's also a theoretical reason: learning a new language is not primarily an intellectual activity, but a matter of acquiring new habits. And the only way to acquire new habits is through practice, practice, practice, until it becomes almost second nature. Of course, at least certain amount of intellectual equipment is required, but it can't be more than that possessed by any normal five-year-old child, since a child of that age knows how to handle his native language almost perfectly.

The fact that language-learning is so much a matter of habit is precisely what makes it so much harder for adults. It's a common experience to have a HICOG language student exclaim, "I wish I could speak German like my five-year-old kid. He picked the whole thing up in the last six months, too."

The reason for this is that the five-year-old has no fixed language habits as yet. He spends all his early years learning to talk and can pick up one language just as easily as another. An adult, however, has spent years and years wearing down a fixed number of habit grooves.
in his native language. When you suddenly ask him to start making new grooves, he finds it very difficult.

Since a teacher must learn certain new techniques to teach adults in this particular method of language training, each goes through a training session which explains as much as possible the theory and practice underlying the HICOG program. Dr. Echols gave the training at the outset; now, when new teachers are to be hired they train under the German supervisor, Mr. Regel.

Actually, the teachers are the one indispensable part of the program. Some students confuse the relationship between teacher and book. They feel that if they study the book long enough and hard enough, they will end up being able to speak German. Nothing could be less true: they might learn to read German in this way but never to speak it — at least, not in a manner recognizable as German. To make the right noises, you must imitate a native speaker of the language.

THE BOOK USED in the HICOG program bears a relatively harmless title, "Spoken German." An added notation gets a bit more complicated: "War Department Educational Manual 518-519." But then comes the stopper: "Published for the United States Armed Forces Institute by the Linguistic Society of America and the Intensive Language Program, American Council of Learned Societies." Any book with a designation like that, no matter how harmless its title, certainly bears further looking into.

Back in 1939 a group of linguistic scientists and others interested in languages came to the conclusion that the United States possessed very few competent speakers of some of the more exotic languages (Korean, for example); that we were soon going to need considerable numbers of such speakers; and that when the time came, we would need them in a hurry. These same people were also skeptical about the value of traditional language training in the States.

In order to test some of their new ideas and to work at the same time on establishing a pool of people who would be able to speak some of the exotic languages, they turned for help to that organization with the fabulous name: the American Council of Learned Societies. The ACLS eagerly agreed, and in 1940 organized its Intensive Language Program. As director of the program they selected the secretary-treasurer of the Linguistic Society of America, Professor J. Milton Cowan, now director of the Division of Modern Languages at Cornell.

Within a short time, Cowan had the Intensive Language Program going full force — little groups of students in all parts of the country were busy learning Hindustani, Annamese and the like. Now the Army began to get interested. One of the outstanding young linguistic scientists in the country, an enthusiastic reserve officer, was the Henry Lee Smith, Jr. already mentioned. Partly through his own efforts and partly through the influence of the ACLS, he obtained an assignment with the Information and Education Division working on language materials.

THINGS BEGAN TO HUM. Cowan became consultant to the Army on language instruction under the Army Specialized Training Program, and assisted in drafting the ASTP language and area curriculum. And from Smith’s office there began to pour a stream of foreign language dictionaries and manuals, large and small, including those millions of little language guides which helped troops learn handy phrases in the language of the country they were about to enter.

In late 1942, realizing that a supplemental course would be needed to teach some soldiers to speak foreign languages reasonably well, Smith worked out a plan for a general purpose language manual — a plan that could be used for any language, with the needed variations. In early 1943, he and Cowan set to work farming out the various languages to linguistic scientists who had specialized in them. Before they were through, manuals had been completed in well over 20 languages.

As this particular victim of their machinations can testify, Cowan and Smith were a terrifyingly effective team. Once they had picked their man, they wheedled, cajoled, threatened and intimidated him until the job was done. Work on “Spoken German” began in April 1943; exactly one year later, a broken man, I sent final copy to the printer. Since during that year I was also teaching German to military government officers at the Yale Civil Affairs Training School, plus handling normal undergraduate and graduate classes, “Spoken German” had to be written in what I hopefully call my “spare time.”

Fortunately I had the help of my wife, a native speaker of German, who, though quite untrained with the pedantries of linguistics science, was also an experienced language teacher. Without her help the book would never have been finished.

SPOKEN GERMAN” — like all the books in the spoken language series — is based on the principles already described: that to learn a foreign language, you get hold of a native speaker and copy him as exactly as you can; and that you learn a language by constantly talking it, until the new sounds and forms become a matter of habit. The book contains 25 Learning-Units (plus five Review Units), all built upon the same pattern. They contain a set of Basic Sentences, which the student learns by heart with his teacher; following these are Hints on Pronunciations, which tell him to watch for new sounds and give suggestions on how to imitate them.

Along with his Basic Sentences, the student gets a section called Word Study, calling his attention to such things as endings, thus helping him to memorize the Basic Sentences and showing him how they can be varied. This is followed by some exercises which test whether he understands what he has been saying and gives him practice in applying the material of the Word Study.

By now he has pretty well mastered the new material and is ready to use it in sample conversations called Listening Ins. Next, having been guided slowly toward independent use of what he has learned, he is ready for the real thing: free conversation — which is the goal of the whole course.

With suggestions to help him and to keep him within the bounds of what he has learned, he begins talking. He makes mistakes, of course, but the teacher is there to correct him. He doesn’t translate, but tries to put his
conversation together out of bits of sentences already learned by heart. Nor does he reason out cases and tenses and moods of each word — he says lots of things just because they “sound right” — that is, because they have become matters of habit.

For the linguistic scientist, grammar of a language is the total description of the way speakers of that language talk. And to find out the way they talk, he just listens. He does not worry about what is “correct,” though he does note (since he is part anthropologist) that different forms are used at different social levels.

Most people tend to believe that grammar of a language explains why the Germans (or the French, or whatnot) talk the way they do. In actual fact, a grammar “explains” nothing at all; it merely analyzes and systematizes what the linguistic scientist has heard. It can tell you that the German word zu is always followed by a type of form which people usually label the dative; but it can’t tell you why this should be so. The only answer as to “why” is simply that “Germans talk that way.”

But, without allowing grammar to “get in the way,” the HICOG language program attempts to utilize it in two ways: first, it calls the students’ attention to grammatical items which they might otherwise have missed, thus helping them to learn new material more easily. Secondly, a little grammar can show a student how to vary the material he has just learned.

The student who knows a lot of grammatical rules may possess some very fine knowledge — indeed, it is often a source of great pleasure to him — but when he’s trying to talk, it will never do him any good until he’s practiced applying the rules enough so that they come automatically.

And by that time, he has no more use for his rules.

The emphasis in the HICOG program, then, is placed exclusively on applying grammatical rules. The students are shown how a given grammatical feature works and given a few examples. Then, with books closed, the teacher gives the English of these examples, has them translated into German, and follows this with further drill illustrating this same grammatical point.

A very important reason why the study of grammar is restricted to applied grammar is that no person, without special training, can make sensible statements about his native language. If you don’t believe this, ask some German to explain to you what position the word nicht occupies in a German sentence. And if that isn’t enough, watch what you yourself say the next time a German asks you when you say “I saw” and when you say “I have seen” in English. It’s a wise teacher who has learned to say “I don’t know.”

This brings us around again to the most essential feature of language learning: it is primarily a matter of habit, not of intellect. A linguistic scientist, with his expensive training, may be able to give you a fair statement about the position of nicht or the distinction between “I saw” and “I have seen.” But after nearly half a century of good scientific work, linguistic scientists still don’t feel they are anywhere near able to give a full description of the grammar of any one language. And yet the normal person has practically mastered the use of these complicated forms by the time he is six years old. Here is a beautiful example of how habit and practice can attain something which not even the best intellects can equal. Perhaps it will explain why the HICOG program puts so much emphasis on habit, and so little on grammar.
DURING JULY and August, I served as consultant to HICOG on the German Language Training Program; I was to examine the whole setup, see as many classes as possible, and make suggestions for improvement. I had a typical busman’s holiday: I saw classes at Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, Bremen, Bremerhaven, Hamburg, Bonn, Berlin, Munich, Augsburg and Stuttgart and paid visits to about 25 different resident officers in Hesse, Bavaria and Wuerttemberg-Baden. And when I was through, I wrote the inevitable final report.

There is no question but that the program is in good shape. The students are learning to speak German, and they seem to like it. If there is any word of wisdom I might pass on to them, it would be this: keep up the good work, but try to attend classes more regularly. Even if you don’t owe it to yourself, and to your fellow-taxpayers, you owe it to your teachers, who are an extraordinarily fine lot.

During my travels from place to place, I heard an awful lot of German. Most of it was good, some of it excellent, and some of it — well, you can’t have everything. I had people rush up and shake me by the hand and tell me this was the most brilliant language book they have ever studied from. Others rushed up and shook me — and asked why in heaven’s name I had used the old-fashioned Fraktur type for the German part of the text (answer: everybody used it in 1939, the last time I had been in Germany; Hitler later ordered the use of roman type so the occupied peoples could read German more easily); or why I used that ridiculous speaking in the Aids to Listening (answer: the printing is there only to remind you of what you heard your teacher say and the funny spelling does this a lot more efficiently than the regular spelling); or why I hadn’t arranged the cases in the Latin order (Answer: since this wasn’t Latin, I just arranged them in the sequence in which you learn them and called them 1, 2, 3 and 4). All in all, I got off rather well — for an author.

PART OF THE FUN for me was hearing the little legends and stories that have already grown up around the book and the program. I’ve already told the one about the two Americans in Frankfurt. Let me close with another one — which I know is true, because the two victims told it to me.

It seems that two charming American girls (as a result of their experience, they’re now attending class religiously) went for a weekend in Austria, to a certain city where they would join two other girls for their holiday. When the first two arrived, they went to their hotel room and lay down for a brief rest.

A few moments later, there was a knock at the door. Thinking it was their friends, one girl gave a loud “come in!” It turned out to be the hotel maid, who was immediately embarrassed at having disturbed them. Wanting to put the maid at her ease, the girl tried to explain she had said “come in” because she thought it was the friends they’d been waiting for. She knew that “wir warten auf unsere” means “we’re waiting for our,” and she knew that friends was “Freunde.” What she didn’t know was that this means boys, and that the word she needed was Freundinnen (girl friends).

At any rate, what she said, lying there in bed, was: “Wir warten auf unsere Freunde.” The results were quite spectacular. The little Austrian maid gasped, turned red to the roots of her hair, walked out and was never seen for the rest of the weekend. All of which goes to show what a big difference a little ending can make!

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