

# What Paddington tells us about German and British manners

By Stephen Evans

BBC News, Berlin



Paddington stories reveal a lot about this cultural difference

**'Hallo Mrs Bird,' said Judy. 'How's the rheumatism?'"**

This doesn't appear in German editions of "A Bear called Paddington"

***Are Germans ruder than the British? Are Britons more dishonest than Germans? Fortunately, we don't have to rely on blind prejudice for answers. Serious academic research has been done on both sides of the North Sea.***

There are Britons in Berlin who get taken aback by the directness of Germans. And there are Germans who get really annoyed when Britons (and Americans), in an effort to appear friendly, say things they don't really mean. Some Germans call this "lying".

So, what do the experts say on the matter? Professor Juliane House, of the University of Hamburg, has studied groups of people interacting in controlled situations, watching with academic rigour how they behave as human guinea-pigs.

She found (or verified) that Germans really don't do small talk, those little phrases so familiar to the British about the weather or a person's general well-being, but which she describes as "empty verbiage".



There is no word in German for "small talk"

In academic language, this is "phatic" conversation - it's not meant to convey hard information but to perform some social function, such as making people feel good.

The German language doesn't even have an expression for "small talk", she says. It is so alien that in the German translation of A Bear called Paddington - Paddington unser kleiner Baer - it was omitted.

So this exchange of small talk occurs in the English original: "'Hallo Mrs Bird,' said Judy. 'It's nice to see you again. How's the rheumatism?' 'Worse than it's ever been' began Mrs. Bird." In the German edition, this passage is simply cut. Might a German talk about the weather, then?



But small talk is a staple of social interaction in the UK

"In a lift or a doctor's waiting room, talk about the weather in German? I don't think so," she says.

So does that mean the British are more polite? No, just different.

For their part, the British have what House calls the "etiquette of simulation". The British feign an interest in someone. They pretend to want to meet again when they don't really. They simulate concern.

Saying things like "It's nice to meet you" are rarely meant the way they are said, she says. "It's just words. It's simulating interest in the other person."

From a German perspective, this is uncomfortably close to deceit.

"Some people say that the British and Americans lie when they say things like that. It's not a lie. It's lubricating social life. It's always nice to say things like that even if you don't mean them," says House.

### **Blunt or direct?**

For Britons it's German directness that most often gives rise to bafflement or even fury. House, who married a Scouser - a native of Liverpool - gives an example from her own experience.

She would tell her husband to bring something from another part of the house - without the British lardings of "would you mind...?" or "could you do me a favour...?"

He would hear this as an abrupt - and rude - command.

This gap between German directness and British indirectness is the source of much miscommunication, says Professor Derek Bousfield, the head of linguistics at the University of Central Lancashire, and one of the editors of the Journal of Politeness Research.

There are many documented cases where the British understate a very

serious problem with phrases like "there seem to be one or two problems here" or "there seems to be a little bit of an issue with this", he says.



British understatement might note that the Grim Reaper can rather spoil the mood

A British listener knows there is a gap between what is said and what is meant - and this can be a source of humour, as when the Grim Reaper's arrival at a dinner party in Monty Python's *Meaning of Life* "casts rather a gloom" over the evening.

Sometimes it's endearing, or at least the British think it is, as when this announcement was made by British Airways pilot Eric Moody in 1982, after flying through a cloud of volcanic ash over Indonesia:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have a small problem. All four engines have stopped. We are doing our damndest to get them going again. I trust you are not in too much distress."

But it can also be confusing if you're not used to it.

When BMW bought the British car manufacturer, Rover, it took a while for the seriousness of some of the problems at Rover to sink in. All too often, British managers spoke in euphemisms that their German counterparts took at face value.

### **Beach towels at dawn**

Both professors reject the idea that one nation's manners are better than the other's. Each has its own rules of communication, or patterns

of behaviour, and neither can be blamed, they say, when clashes occur.



Reserved your sun-lounger yet?

What about those sun-loungers - the seats by the pool, which German holidaymakers allegedly grab at the crack of dawn?

"I think what you've got there is a clash of prototypical German efficiency with the prototypical British sense of fair play," says Bousfield.

House reckons the British do get the sun-loungers in the end, by one means or another.

"The British want the sun-lounger, but they do it differently," she says.

"Are the British devious? Yes, but why should you directly go for something if it doesn't work? Devious is not a bad thing."