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### Keep away from babies...

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## PROBLÈMES ET SOLUTIONS

### ¶ KEEP AWAY FROM BABIES . . .

It is not pleasant to be told, "keep away from babies and children", if one happens to be fond of the young. But of course, if a man has a bad cold, he will see the wisdom of it all: "Da soll man sich von Babies und Kindern fern halten." There can be other reasons, too. If a young lady is all dressed up in a non-moisture-proof party dress, I might warn her in a beautiful infinitive construction, "To avoid stains in precious fabrics, keep away from babies and children".

I have seen a variant of this last formulation in print. As a matter of fact, I have seen it very often: "To avoid danger of suffocation, keep away from babies and children". "Um der Gefahr des Erstickens zu entgehen, soll man sich von Babies und Kindern fern halten."

When I saw this warning for the first time on a plastic garment bag at the cleaner's, I felt it my duty not to laugh out loud, for there had been quite a number of sad reports in the papers of babies and children playing with plastic bags and getting choked to death in the process. But I did think the man responsible for the original wording had produced a remarkable blooper, and I felt certain it would not survive the first printing.

How wrong one can be! I could not have been wronger. The wording I have quoted — "To avoid danger of suffocation, keep away from babies and children" — has not only survived; it has spread. All manufacturers of plastic garment bags in the U. S. now seem to use it. And stranger still: It is apparently difficult (if not impossible) to get native speakers of English to see anything funny about it.

I have been wondering why. And here is what I have come up with. "Keep away from children" is obviously ambiguous, for the event alluded to in the verb form "keep away" is incompletely described. The fun I am having with the phrase consists in my making use of my democratic right to complete the incomplete description in my own way. But here I must admit that I went about it in a tricky sort of way. In reality the description *was* complete. If it seemed not to be, it was I who cheated and withheld part of it. The meaning of "keep away" derives some clarification from the adverbial "from children", and this I quoted. But it derives full clarification from the bag on which the whole thing is printed, and this information I withheld.

The lesson I derive from these observations is that the bag on which a particular statement is printed can perform a grammatical function in that statement, and this I regard as profoundly characteristic of English. To be sure, the same phenomenon occurs in other languages too. In German too I understand that the object of "Zutritt verboten" is the room behind the door on which that legend appears. But I have a notion that this sort of thing is

much more frequent in English than in other languages. Only a careful statistical analysis can show.

If a young man complains to me about his pimples, I may volunteer the advice, "Don't wash with ordinary soap". If I put exactly the same wording on a tag in a garment, its meaning will be totally changed. You can't read an English text without coming across hundreds of examples.

I have an Indian friend who writes what I must admit is an impeccable English, and I have often wondered why in spite of that all his papers strike me paradoxically as still "just not English". One day I arrived at his apartment door and found a note thumb-tacked to it. It said: "The bell is out of order. If you wish to be admitted please knock at the door and someone will come to open it for you." Now I knew. In real English, the note would have been pasted over the bell button, and it would have said: "Please knock". But there seems to be hope for my friend. He did not explain, "admitted" to what? \*

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#### SOUS L'ÉGIDE DU "WELFARE STATE"

De nos jours, seuls les pessimistes peuvent encore parler de "paradis perdu". Succédané matérialiste des indulgences, la sécurité sociale s'efforce de pallier les conséquences de la faute originelle. Le "welfare state", conçu par Lord Beveridge, est devenu le nouvel Éden où l'Ours remplace le serpent et la bombe H, la pomme.

Le *welfare state* nous a dotés de l'assurance-chômage, des pensions de vieillesse, des allocations familiales et d'une perle de traduction: BIEN-ÊTRE pour rendre *welfare*. Le bien-être, à l'échelle sociale, c'est une conception toute épicurienne de l'organisation de la société moderne. Le bien-être n'est-il pas la "sensation agréable procurée par la satisfaction de besoins physiques, intellectuels ou spirituels?" Que peut-on demander de plus? Même le paradis rouge semble d'un rose fade à côté de cela.

Mais il y a souvent loin de la coupe aux lèvres et plus encore des traductions aux réalités. Le bien-être que procure le *welfare state* est souvent fort fragmentaire. Sans la traduction, c'est à se demander si ces deux concepts n'auraient jamais été associés. Ceux qui ne traînent pas, comme nous, le boulet du tout-traduit ont trouvé des expressions beaucoup plus justes pour désigner les réalités de l'ordre nouveau.

À l'échelon de l'État, le *welfare*, c'est la SÉCURITÉ SOCIALE, c'est-à-dire la protection légale contre les risques qui menacent les moyens de subsistance de l'individu. "La maladie, l'accident du travail (la vieillesse elle-même) sont de très graves risques pour ceux qui n'ont que leur travail pour vivre. La loi

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(\*) Également publiée dans *Lebende Sprachen*.