

That Damn German Language!

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**A High-Jumping Deep Dive into the German
Language, History, People and Culture**

*Why German is Mad, Magnificent and so
Much More than Mere 'Schadenfreude'!*

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About this Book

WILLKOMMEN, curious traveller through the enchanting and mysterious landscape of the German language, history, modern-day culture and society. Whether you are a fearless German language enthusiast, an inquisitive language professional or student, a curious Germany-visitor or -afficionado or an adventurous expat living or soon to be living in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland – this book is for anyone interested in gaining a comprehensive insight into the inner workings, historical developments, and modern use of the German language and the culture in which it is spoken today.

Providing concrete explanations and fundamental know-how of German grammar and vocabulary far above and beyond the usual textbooks, *“That Damn German Language!”* is an ideal read before you delve further into any German studies, consume German media, meet German friends or business partners, or visit or move to Germany. But even if you are simply curious about new cultures, customs and linguistic peculiarities, you will find a treasure trove of remarkably useful and fascinating new information here.

Other than the usually dry and intimidating German language textbooks, *“That Damn German Language!”* will give you an entertaining and captivating insight into the multifaceted and often astonishing aspects of the language, culture, and people of the largest Western European country that has influenced the destiny of Europe and the world over the centuries. From German’s historical beginnings and developments to its unique characteristics, numerous insider tips, and practical advice – here, you’ll find pretty much everything there is to know about the German language and its speakers. And believe it or not, there’s even a touch of German humour thrown in for good measure.

Fair warning, though. In some places, where appropriate, you will come across expressions or phrases that sensitive minds may find objectionable. Everything within reason, of course, and purely for educational purposes. But if you are such a sensitive soul, best close your eyes until it’s time to turn the page.

As the obligatory disclaimer, it should be noted that the gathered information and its sources for this book have been verified as thoroughly as possible. However, the author and the editor accept no liability for any errors or omissions, nor for the accuracy of the information contained herein.

On another note: Picky readers will be delighted to learn that the chapters in this book are self-contained, which means that you don’t have to read *“That Damn German Language!”* linearly from cover to cover but can pick and choose chapters indiscriminately to your heart’s content.

Finally, you will occasionally come across German words, e.g. „*Vielen Dank*“, (“Thanks a lot” ... for noticing the German quotation marks), followed by brackets like these: [~feelen dunk]. The words enclosed show you how the German terms would be written in English to be pronounced correctly in German. And now, *viel Spaß!*

Frankfurt am Main, March 2026

Some Useful Grammar-Tables

Table: German Articles (3. Pers. Sing., Nominative)

German definite Articles Nominative	Grammatical Person it is used for	English Equivalent	How it's spoken
Der (e.g. „Der Mann, der ...“)	3. Person Singular masculine (“he”)	The ... /, who ... (e.g. “The man, who ...”)	[~dare] 
Die (e.g. „Die Frau, die ...“)	3. Person Singular feminine (“she”)	The ... /, who ... (e.g. “The woman, who ...”)	[~dee] 
Das (e.g. „Das Kind, das ...“)	3. Person Singular neuter (“it”)	The ... /, who ... (e.g. “The child, who ...”)	[~dahs] 
For a complete table see chapter “A Rendez-Vous with German Roots”. Sub-chapter “Maturity – New Friends. New Boundaries. New Freedoms”.			
German indefinite Article Nominative	Grammatical Person it is used for	English Equivalent	How it's spoken:
Ein (e.g. „Ein Mann ...“)	3. Person Singular masculine (“he”)	A/An (e.g. “A man ...”)	[~ayn]
Eine (e.g. „Eine Frau ...“)	3. Person Singular feminine (“she”)	A/An (e.g. “A woman ...”)	[~ayne]
Ein („Ein Kind ...“)	3. Person Singular neuter (“it”)	A/An (e.g. “A child ...”)	[~ayn]

Table: The 4 Grammatical Cases

The 4 Grammatical Cases	Exemplary article-changes (3. Pers. Sing. + Plural)	When to use it
Nominative	<u>Der</u> Mann <u>Die</u> Frau <u>Das</u> Kind <u>Die</u> Leute	The “ descriptive ”-case; Indicates the subject (the acting person/thing) in a sentence. E.g. „ <u>Der</u> Mann hat eine Katze.” = “The man has a cat.”
Dative	<u>Dem</u> Mann <u>Der</u> Frau <u>Dem</u> Kind <u>Den</u> Leuten	The “ receiver ”- or “ location ”-case; Indicates the indirect object in a sentence, i.e. the person/thing something is done to “indirectly” or indicating a location. E.g. „Auf <u>dem</u> Mann sitzt eine Katze.” = “On the man sits a cat.”
Accusative	<u>Den</u> Mann <u>Die</u> Frau <u>Das</u> Kind <u>Die</u> Leute	The “ action ”-case; Indicates the direct object in a sentence, i.e. the person/thing that is directly influenced by the action of the subject. E.g. „Eine Katze setzt sich auf <u>den</u> Mann” = “A cat is (about to go) sitting on the man.”
Genitive	<u>Des</u> Mannes <u>Der</u> Frau <u>Des</u> Kindes <u>Der</u> Leute	The “ belonging ”-case; Indicates that something ‘belongs’ to someone. E.g. „Die Katze <u>des</u> Mannes.” = “The cat of the man.” (Masc. & Neut. receive -s or -es at the end, Fem. & Plural don’t.)

Table: Personal Pronouns

Personal Pronouns	English Equivalent	Example	How it's spoken:
ich	i	„Ich gehe.” = “I go.”	[~eech]
du	you (informal)	„Du gehst.” = “You go.”	[~doo]
er / sie / es	he / she / it	„Er / Sie / Es geht.” = “He/ She / It goes.”	[~air / sea / ess]
wir	we	„Wir gehen.” = “We go.”	[~weir]
ihr	you (plural)	„Ihr geht.” = “You go.”	[~ear]
sie / Sie	they (plural) / you (formal)	„Sie gehen” = “They go.” / “You go.” - (2. Pers. Sing. Formal)	[~sea / sea]

German Syntax – A Truly Unique Sentence Structure

While German sentence structure is not unique globally, it combines several features in a rather distinct manner. This includes the iron law of the fixed positions of the verb in different sentence types but also the separable verbs and of course the four grammatical cases.

For English speakers, German sentence structure will probably seem counterintuitive at first. However, as rigid as German grammar is when it comes to verb position, it is just as lenient with other elements of the sentence.

German knows five types of sentences:

1. Der Hauptsatz – **The main clause**
2. Der Nebensatz – **The subordinate clause**
3. Die Ja-Nein Frage – **The yes-no question**
4. Die W-Frage – **The W-question**
5. Der Imperativ – **The imperative**

The most important word type in German (as in most other languages) is the **verb**. The verb in a sentence describes the “action” that takes place, which is why in German it also has the nickname „Das Tu-Wort“ [ˈtuːˈvɔɐ̯t], the “doing word”. In each of the five sentence types above, the verb has one specific position* which never (!) changes.

*“Position” doesn’t mean “word-number in a sentence”. Think of a position in a sentence instead of as ‘one bit of information’. For instance, let’s take the following sentence:

„Mein Kleiner, netter aber leider schwächlicher Sohn Bernd ist jetzt Pirat in der Karibik.“

“My little, sweet but unfortunately frail son Bernd is now a pirate in the Caribbean.”

Pop-Quiz: What do you think represents the “first position” in this sentence? Yep, you’re (probably) right: It’s the entire sentence-part from „Mein” until „Bernd”. And since this is a main clause, the verb follows in second position, here: „ist”.

Table: The 5 Sentence Types in German

Sentence Type	Remarks	Verb Position	Example
Main Clause	A sentence that ‘makes sense’ on its own, w/o any add-on necessary.	2. Position	„Meine Oma fährt im Hühnerstall Motorrad.“ (‘My granny rides a motorbike in the chicken coop.’)
Subordinate Clause	A sentence that appears to be missing vital info – often the add-on to a Main Clause.	Last Position	„Meine Oma fährt im Hühnerstall Motorrad, weil sie gerne schnell fährt .“ (‘...because she likes to drive fast.’)
Yes-No Question*	A question that can only be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (or ‘maybe’).	1. Position	„ Fährt deine Oma jeden Tag Motorrad?“ (‘Does your granny ride a motorbike every day?’)
W-Question*	A question that starts with a W-question word like ‘Wo’ (where), ‘Wer’ (who), ‘Was’ (what).	2. Position	„ Warum fährt deine Oma jeden Tag Motorrad?“ (‘Why does your granny ride a motorbike every day?’)

Imperative	See chapter: German Interjections – Seemingly Senseless Sounds of Significance, sub-chapter: The Grammatical Imperative	1. Position	„ Frag sie doch selbst!“ ([‘Why don’t you] ask her yourself!’)

*See also chapter: *dach* – The Magic Four-Letter Word

Now, as long as you place your verb in the correct position in a German sentence, you are already 70% of the way to creating a top-notch German phrase. Native German-speakers will forgive you almost any grammatical mistake, (as you’ll find out throughout this book) – except misplacing the verb.

It goes without saying that alongside the immovable verb, also other word types tend to crop up on a regular basis in all five types of sentences.

Table: The 11 German Word Types

GERMAN WORD TYPE	EXPLANATION
NOMEN (SUBSTANTIV)	Name of a person, thing, place, or idea.
ARTIKEL	Small word before a noun (der, die, das).
PRONOMEN	Word that replaces a noun (ich, du, sie).
VERB	Action or state (laufen, sein).
ADJEKTIV	Describes a noun (groß, schön).
ADVERB	Describes a verb, adjective, or sentence (sehr, heute).
PRÄPOSITION	Shows relation like place/time (in, auf, mit).
KONJUNKTION	Connects words or sentences (und, oder, weil).
NUMERALE	Numbers or quantities (eins, viele).
INTERJEKTION	Exclamation or reaction (oh!, ach!).
PARTIKEL	Small word that adds nuance (ja, doch, tja).

All these word types can play a role in German sentences. But naturally you don’t need to memorise their designations. Simply cram the most important vocabulary, then place your verb in the correct position in the sentence and construct the rest of the phrase “by ear” – and almost every German speaker will understand your meaning. Seriously. German is extremely flexible in this regard, except – yes, you guessed it – when it comes to verb position.

As a guideline for achieving the best results when creating a sentence, however, best don’t think of “word types”, but instead of the different “building blocks” in a sentence. A typical main clause containing all the important blocks would be, for instance:

Das Piratenmädchen kickt den Totenkopf zu dem Piratenjungen.

The pirate girl kicks the skull to the pirate boy.

- Das Piratenmädchen = **Subject** (Nominative) / First Position)
- kickt = **Verb** (3rd Person Singular)
- den Totenkopf = **Direct Object** (Accusative)
- zu = **Preposition** (for „kicken“)

- dem Piratenjungen = **Indirect Object** (Dative)

While this is the “normal” sentence structure almost everyone would use, in German, you can easily rearrange the individual “building blocks”, (yes, exactly: *except the verb*), depending on which part you would like to emphasize and put up front. This is possible because the different articles in their respective correct grammatical case declension (*das, den, dem*) will always make clear whether something is the subject, the direct or indirect object, no matter where the sentence part is placed.

You could therefore just as well say:

- **Zu dem Piratenjungen** **kickt** **das Piratenmädchen** **den Totenkopf**.
- **Den Totenkopf** **kickt** **das Piratenmädchen** **zu dem Piratenjungen**.
- **Das Piratenmädchen** **kickt** **zu dem Piratenjungen** **den Totenkopf**.
- **Den Totenkopf** **kickt** **zu dem Piratenjungen** **das Piratenmädchen**.

Although admittedly, the last line would raise some eyebrows due to the, after all, rather heavy-handed sentence structure. However, the other three are perfectly phrased and structured sentences, which would at most elicit a mild interest in your reason for placing the pirate boy and the skull respectively in such a prominent position.



Your answer to this could, of course, be that there are other possible recipients of the skull-kick and that you are therefore singling out the boy. Or that, in addition to the skull, there are other bone parts that the pirate girl could use to target the pirate boy, so you want to make clear that she kicks the skull and not the hip bone, for example. Or, of course, there’s always the possibility that you’re simply trying to imitate Jedi™ Master Yoda™ again – although in German, his characteristic speech pattern actually lives from the deliberate misplacement of the verb.

Anyway, the usual main clause sentence-order in German is simply: **Subject – Verb – (Preposition) – Object**. Then you add the *Articles*, (if necessary, i.e. almost always, except a.o. for first and family names) in the correct grammatical case in front of the *Subject* and *Object*, then you conjugate the *Verb* for the grammatical person of the *Subject* and in case place a *Preposition* after the verb and voilà: You’ve got yourself a perfectly structured basic German main clause.

That Damn German Language!



Now, if you can then get the articles in the different grammatical cases right, too, (see also sub-chapter: Maturity – New Friends. New Boundaries. New Freedoms, table: The German Definite Articles), the rest of the way to your flawless mastery of

German is just small change, (well, mostly). To get you started, you will learn throughout this book, (among many other things), also how to conjugate regular verbs in the present tense, the difference between the spoken (*Perfekt*) and written (*Präteritum*) past tenses, when to use the formal („*Sie*“) and informal („*Du*“) forms of address, how to turn a command into a kind suggestion using „*doch*“, the reasons behind German's three grammatical genders and how Germany first became *Fußball* world champions in 1954. But before all that, let's first answer the fundamental question:

Part 1: Why the Hell should I learn German anyway?

Warum zur Hölle sollte ich überhaupt Deutsch lernen?

Time to say **Goodbye** to Getting by in English

„The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.“

Ludwig Wittgenstein, (1889 – 1951), Austrian-British philosopher

So, here you are, with a book on the dreaded German language in your hands. And the question that inevitably arises is, of course: Why on earth? What sparked your interest in this much-maligned language with its *“forbiddingly grating pronunciation”* and *“mystifyingly complicated grammar”*?

Well, whatever your reasons may be for stepping into the ring with the German language beast, one thing is for certain: As soon as you will tell someone back home that you are going to learn (more about) German, they will stare at you in flabbergasted amazement and uncomprehending horror, as if you had just explained that you are going to leave everything and the civilised world behind you and move to the Siberian steppe to learn Mongolian throat-singing.

Meet the Family Brat

Because, let’s face it, the German language has always been the odd kid out in the family of European languages. It’s just like that unruly and seemingly weird brat we’ve all met at some point, always pulling stunts and gleefully giving the middle-finger to its beautiful French cousin and her equally lovely Italian sister while annoying anyone trying to befriend it with its peculiar quirks and off-kilter habits.



Whenever the German brat speaks up during supper at the language-family’s dinner table, it immediately sounds like a feral cat trying to regurgitate a hairball while simultaneously spitting out feline hisses as if it will go straight for your unprotected throat any second now. And that’s just the least of it. Once you allow the little oddball to put an idea into words, it won’t be content to merely pour the premise into the form of a normal sentence but will instead nonchalantly merge a whole bunch of terms into one *Bratwurst*-long word-monster and then expect you to instantaneously grasp this linguistic abomination’s precise meaning.

What’s more, if the German pipsqueak does form a sentence, it will brutally hack off the “head” of any so-called separable verb, only to toss this prefix to the very end of the phrase with unnerving accuracy. Forcing you in turn to bite your tongue and remain shtum until the sentence is all said and done, since otherwise it may confuse the hell out of you. (Which incidentally also explains why interrupting German-speakers midsentence will often result in a look of confused consternation and the reply: *„Du weißt doch gar nicht, was ich sagen wollte“*, (“You don’t even know what I was going to say.” – And apart from that, it’s also downright rude to interrupt someone, of course.)

Furthermore, there's also that peculiar habit of the German lingo-rascal to deliberately read its numbers between 13 and 99 from back to front, (e.g. 13 = *dreizehn*, reading: "three-ten"), and from 101 upwards to 999 according to the "first the first-then the last-then the middle number"-scheme, turning e.g. 121 into "one hundred one and twenty", (*einhunderteinundzwanzig*). (Although, to be fair, this odd quirk can't hold a candle to the absolute mad method of counting displayed by German's pretty-but-crazy French cousin, which amounts to pure lunacy, even according to lunatics.)

Interlude: The German Numerals & How to Count Them

Naturally, you could write entire treatises about the way German treats its numerals, and indubitably there are already numerous such papers around somewhere. However, to make it as painless as possible, let's dive in at the shallow end of the pool first.



Probably you have noticed the use of the term "numerals" instead of "numbers" in the headline. This is because there are several numeral categories which differ from the simple *Cardinal Numbers*, i.e. 1, 2, 3 ... etc. In fact, there are all-together seven types of Arabic-Indian numerals that we use today, (in contrast to Roman numerals, where you'd write for example: "XXIV.XII.MMXXVI" for the date of 24.12.2026. So, lucky us, presumably, and kudos to the ancient Arabian and Indian mathematicians.)

Just like the Count counts – The Cardinal Numbers in German

But let's stick with the *Cardinal Numbers* for a moment longer and check out how to write and pronounce these natural numbers in German.

Table: "How Do You Say 9,921 in German?"

Number	Word	Pronunciation
1	Eins ¹	aynz
2	Zwei	zway
3	Drei	dry
4	Vier	fear
5	Fünf	fuenf
6	Sechs	sex
7	Sieben	see'ben
8	Acht	acht
9	Neun	noin
10	Zehn	zayn
11	Elf	elf
12	Zwölf	zwoilf
13	Dreizehn	dry'zayn



14	Vierzehn	fear'zayn
15	Fünfzehn	fuenf'zayn
16	Sechzehn ²	sech'zayn
17	Siebzehn ³	seeb'zayn
18	Achtzehn	ach'zayn
19	Neunzehn	noin'zayn
20	Zwanzig	zvan'zig
21	Einundzwanzig ⁴	ayn'oond'zvan'zig
30	Dreißig ⁵	dry'sig
31	Einunddreißig	ayn'oond'dry'sig
60	Sechzig ²	saych'zig
61	Einundsechzig	ayn'oond'saych'zig
70	Siebzig ³	seeb'zig
71	Einundsiebzig	ayn'oond'seeb'zig
100	Einhundert	ayn'hoon'dert
101	Einhundertundeins ⁵	ayn'hoon'dert'oond'ayns
200	Zweihundert	zvay'hoon'dert
991	Neunhunderteinundneunzig ⁶	noin'hoon'dert'ayn'oond'noinzig
1,000	Eintausend	ayn_tow'send
1,101	Eintausendeinhunderteins ⁷	ayn'tow'send'ayn'hoon'dert'aynz
9,921	Neuntausendneunhundert-einundzwanzig	noin'tow'send'noin'hoon'dert'ayn'oond'zvan'zig
1,000,000	Eine Millionen	ayne mill'yion'en
1,000,000,000	Eine Milliarde ⁸	ayne mill'yar'de

To use these *Cardinal Numbers* in German correctly, you only need to know the following:

1. The number „Eins“ (1) [~aynz] is only written and spoken with an „s“ at the end if the number stands completely alone, (i.e. no article before it, no full stop after it), or if it stands at the end of a larger number. Otherwise, it is “abbreviated” to “-ein-“ [~ayn-].
2. The number “Sechs” (6) on its own is spoken with an “-chs” letter-combination that sounds in German like an „x” and is therefore pronounced like “sex”. However, in the numbers „Sechzehn” (16) and „Sechzig” (60), „Sech-“ is pronounced with a soft „ch”-sound, while the “s” is omitted.
3. In the numbers „Siebzehn” (17) and „Siebzig” (70), the ending „-en”, of the word „Sieben” (7) is “cut off” and 17 and 70 are written and spoken only as [~seeb'zayn / [~seeb'tsig].
4. From the number „Einundzwanzig” (21) onwards until „Neunundneunzig” (99), numbers are spelled and spoken with the small number (1 – 9) first, followed by „und” [~oond] (“and”), and then by the multiple-of-ten counter, which usually ends in „-zig”.
5. The only deviation from this „-zig”-ending rule is the number „Dreißig” (30), which is written and pronounced with the slightly less hissing sound made by the „ß” (or „Ess-Zett”), which is closer to the “ss”-sound than to the far more “tss-hissing” „z”-sound.
6. From the number „Einhundert(und)eins” (101) until the number „Neunhundertneunundneunzig” (999), numbers are written and spoken in the

order “Hundreds-Ones-Tens”. Also, you usually omit the „und” between the “Hundreds” and “Tens”.

7. From the number 1,001 onwards, you spell the numbers in the order: “Thousands-Hundreds-Ones-Tens”, e.g. „Neuntausend • neunhundert • ein • und • zwanzig”, (9,921).
8. From the number of „Eine Millionen” (1,000,000) onwards, the order is: “Millions-Thousands-Ones-Tens”.

But while the Anglo-Saxon counting goes directly from one million to one billion, German uses a slightly different system where the counting goes as follows:

Number	German	English
1,000,000	Eine Millionen	One million
1,000,000,000	Eine Milliarde	One billion
1,000,000,000,000	Eine Billionen	One trillion
1,000,000,000,000,000	Eine Billiarde	One quadrillion
1,000,000,000,000,000,000	Eine Trillionen	One quintillion
1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000	Eine Trilliarde	One sextillion

“How much is the Fish?” – Prices in German

Cardinal numbers are obviously used for counting in German, but also, e.g., to express prices. In spoken German, you need to insert the word „Euro” [~d̥iˈrɔ] as the 'divider' between „Euro” and „Cent”, the latter of which is usually not said out loud, if you already said „Euro” before. Hence, you would say:

Table: Let's Talk Euro Prices

Price	Spoken
1,34 €	„Ein Euro Vierunddreißig”
99,99 €	„Neunundneunzig Euro Neunundneunzig”
77,20 €	„Siebenundsiebzig Euro Zwanzig”
0,50 €	„Fünzig Cent”
1,01 €	„Ein Euro eins” / „Ein Euro und ein Cent”
320,00 €	„Dreihundertzwanzig Euro glatt” (i.e. “exactly”)
47,30 €	„Machen Sie Fünzig!” “Make it fifty!” (“Bill me fifty and keep the rest as tip.”)

“How many Clock is it?” – Telling the Time in German

„Wie viel Uhr ist es?” [~Vee feel oo'r eest es?]. That's how you ask for the time of day in German, literally inquiring: “How many clock is it?” – since the word „Uhr” is not only the equivalent to the English “o'clock”, but also the actual term for a wristwatch or a clock.

Furthermore, as you will know, Europeans measure time on a 24-hour clock. This means, the notion of “a.m./p.m.” simply doesn't exist. Instead, you count: 01:00 p.m. = 13:00 Uhr; 02:00 p.m. = 14:00 Uhr; 10:00 p.m. = 22:00 Uhr, etc.

However, in ‘informal’ spoken German (in contrast to “formal” spoken and to written German) you usually use the numbers 1 – 12 also for the time after 12:00 noon, e.g.: 15:00 Uhr = „Drei Uhr”.

While if you’re talking in an “official capacity”, for instance to set deadlines, make appointments at the doctor, or need to clarify that you’re talking about the afternoon or evening, you will stick to the 24-hour clock.

The same distinction between “formal” [F] and “informal” [IFO] time-telling also applies to the expressions “quarter to/past” and “half to”, (Note: “half past” doesn’t exist in German – regardless of what some East Germans claim.). In day-to-day speech you’d use the informal approach (see below) while in formal situations, you’d tell the time using the 24-hour clock.



To separate the hours from the minutes in written German, you put a colon [01:00] in between the two and place the word „Uhr” after the time. In spoken German, however, you insert the word „Uhr” [ˈʊɐ̯], in-between hours and minutes and don’t say it again afterwards. So, you’d write / say:

Table: Telling the Time. Twice.

Written Time:	Spoken Time (formal/informal)
07:30 Uhr	[F] „Sieben Uhr Dreiig“ [IFO] „ Halb Acht“ [“Half to eight”]
12:00 Uhr	[F] „Zwlf Uhr“ [IFO] „Mittag“ [“Midday”/“Noon”]
14:45 Uhr	[F] „Vierzehn Uhr Fnfundvierzig“ [IFO] „ Viertel vor Drei“ [“A quarter to three”]
18:15 Uhr	[F] „Achtzehn Uhr Fnfzehn“ [IFO] „ Viertel nach Sechs“ [“A quarter past six”]
20:25 Uhr	[F] „Zwanzig Uhr Fnfundzwanzig“ [IFO] „Fnf Minuten vor halb Acht“ („Five minutes to half (to) eight”)
21:10 Uhr	[F] „Einundzwanzig Uhr Zehn“ [IFO] „Zehn nach Neun“ [“Ten past nine”]
22:50 Uhr	[F] „Zweiundzwanzig Uhr Fnfzig“ [IFO] „Zehn vor Elf“ [“Ten to eleven”]
00:00 Uhr	[F] „Null Uhr“ [“Zero/Nil O’clock”] [IFO] „Mitternacht“ [“Midnight”]

Dates demand Details – The Ordinal Numbers in German.

Now, with the primary two uses of the *Cardinal* or *Natural Numbers* safely out of the way, let’s turn to the slightly more complicated topic of German numbers as adjectives or the so-called *Ordinal Numbers*.

When written as a digit, these *Ordinal Numbers* receive a dot after them, like 1., 2., 3., (or in English also a suffix, such as 1st, 2nd, 3rd. A nice alternative that unfortunately doesn’t exist in German).

Ordinal Numbers are typically used when you assign a numerical position to something: „Die erste Mondlandung”, (“The first moon-landing”); „Jeder dritte Mann”, (“Every third man”); „Das neunzehnte Brot”,

(“The nineteenth bread”); „Am fünften November”, (“Remember, remember, on the 5th of November”).

These “descriptive numbers”, (since they’re treated like adjectives) are particularly important for German-students in two practical areas: Dates and floors in a house.

Table: Six Different Ways to Tell the Date

Date written	Date spoken	Explanation
03.02.2030	Dritter ¹ , Erster ¹ , Zweitausenddreißig	No article in front! Hence the ending: -er / -ter
Der 07.06.2030	Der Siebte ² , Sechste, Zweitausenddreißig	Definite article ³ Nominative in front. Hence the ending: -te
Am ⁴ 20.12.2030	Am Zwanzigsten, Zwölften, Zweitausenddreißig	Definite article Dative ⁵ in front. Hence the endings: -ten / -sten
Vom ⁶ / Bis zum ⁶ 07.06.2030	Vom/Bis zum Siebten, Sechsten, Zweitausenddreißig	Definite article Dative ⁵ in front. Hence the ending: -ten
Ein 1. Mai	Ein erster ¹ , zweiter, dritter ¹ Mai.	Indefinite article ⁷ in front. Hence the ending: -ter
Zum ⁶ 3. Mal	Zum dritten Mal	Definite article Dative ⁵ in front. Hence the ending: -ten

1. All regular *Ordinal Numbers* receive a „-t” at the end, followed by an adjective ending. However, **the Ordinal Numbers 1., 2., and 3.** are written and spoken differently than their original *Cardinal Numbers*. When you put a dot behind them, they turn into „Erst-“, „Zweit-“ (not „Zweist-“) and „Dritt-“, with the adjective-endings (e.g.: „-er”; „-e”; „-(t)en”) depending on the adjective-rules. And why are these three numbers treated differently? Well, because „Erst-“, „Zweit-“ and „Dritt” are old Germanic forms that are much older than the current system with „-t” at the end and became so firmly established in the linguistic system that the regular forms never caught on.
2. Just like you cut the tail from the cardinal number „Sieben” (7) when it appears in **the numbers 17 („Siebzehn”) and 70 („Siebzig”)**, so you do when it appears as the Ordinal Number 7., spelled „Sieb-te/-ter/-ten”.
3. The **definite articles in their Nominative/infinite form** are: „Der” [~dare] for masculine, „Die” [~dee] for feminine, and „Das” [~dahs] for neuter nouns. In the other three grammatical cases, (Dative, Accusative, and Genitive), these articles undergo a change. For the complete list see chapter: “A Rendez-Vous with German’s Roots”, subchapter: “Maturity – New Friends. New Boundaries. New Freedoms”, “Table: Definite Articles”.
4. In fact, „am” is a combination of two words: „an” and „dem”, (the Dative declension of „der”), which translates to “on the”. There are several **preposition-article combinations** in German, and they are one of the rare cases where German becomes pretty rigid and unforgiving, since whenever you encounter a preposition followed by an article and the possibility for them to merge exists, then you have no other choice but to combine the two into one word. But fortunately, there’s a limited number of these prepositional article contractions, so memorising them shouldn’t be a big problem. (See point 6. for the table).

5. **The Dative grammatical case** can be loosely described as the “receiver-” or “location”-case. Such a “location” isn’t bound to the physical world, however, but applies also to abstract “locations” such as dates, numbers, et. al. (Generally, this Dative “thing” can be anything that can be the answer to the question: “By/from/to/with *whom?*”). In Dative, the masculine article „*der*” turns into „*dem*”.
6. „*Vom*” and „*Bis zum*” translate to “From” and “Until the”. You’ll usually find these words together with specific dates, for instance on a sign hanging on the inside of the glass-door of a closed butcher’s shop when the butcher is on holiday, to inform customers that he’s gone „*Vom 01.06. bis zum 30.08.2030*”.
- „*Vom*” is another **preposition-article combination**, containing the preposition „*von*” (“from”) and the Dative definite article „*dem*”, (“the”). And „*zum*” is a combination of „*zu*” (“to”/“until”/“for”) and again „*dem*” (“the”) – „*Zum dritten Mal*” = “For the third time!”.
- Below you’ll find a list containing the most-used preposition-article contractions in German, all of which are used to describe a certain *location/position* (white) or a *movement towards, from, or into* a location (blue). Furthermore, prepositional article contractions with an asterisk* have a dual role as both a location signifier and a temporal indicator. (Important: When you can combine a preposition and an article, then you *must* do so!).

Table: Forced Fusion-Words – German Preposition-Article Combinations

Fusion word	Preposition + Article	Grammatically	English	Location: “I am/ go/ come ...”: Time: “I see you ...”:
am *	an dem	3 rd person singular, masculine, Dative	“on the”	am Baum = on the tree. am 1. Mai = on the 1 st of May
beim *	bei dem	3 rd person singular, masculine, Dative	“at the”	beim Auto = at the car. beim Laufen = while walking
vom *	von dem	3 rd person singular, masculine, Dative	“from the”	vom Zoo = from the zoo. vom 1. Juni = from 1 st of June
im *	in dem	3 rd person singular, masculine, Dative	“in the”	im Café = in the café. im August = in August
zum *	zu dem	3 rd person singular, masculine, Dative	“to/until the”	zum Spiel = to the game. zum 4. Juli = on/for 4 th of July
zur *	zu der	3 rd person singular, feminine, Dative	“to the”	zur Frau = to the woman. zur Weihnachtszeit = at / during Christmas season
ins	in das	3 rd person singular, neuter, Accusative	„in the”	ins Café = into the café. [No time relations]
ans	an das	3 rd person singular, neuter, Accusative	„at/on/to the”	ans Klavier = to/at the piano. [No time relations]

7. **Indefinite articles** in English are “a” or “an”. German indefinite articles always start with „*ein-*” and receive their ending according to the gender of the noun and the grammatical case. Here are all the singular indefinite articles you can stumble upon in German:

Table: All Indefinite Articles Identified

Gram. Case	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Plural
Nominative	ein	eine	ein	(keine)
Accusative	einen	eine	ein	(keine)
Dative	einem	einer	einem	(keinen)
Genitive	eines	einer	eines	(keiner)

Since „*ein-*” means “a/an” or “one”, there naturally can’t be a plural of the article. However, you can create a negative article, equal to “no” or “none” by attaching a „*k-*” to the indefinite article-root „*ein-*” and add the end-syllable

according to the table above, for instance to tell your buddy: „*Ich hab’ heute keine Lust und auch kein Geld und will keinen Menschen sehen!*” – “I have no ‘desire’ today and also no money and I want to see nobody!” (Naturally, you’d say that differently in English, but that’s as close as it gets to capture the German meaning).

“Which Floor Am I Actually On?”

Let’s finish our expedition into the *Ordinal Numbers* with a table on how to talk about the different house-floors in German houses.

You already might have experienced the German way to count

floors, which differs from American floor-counting. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, (among other countries,) the “Ground Floor” (the floor that’s level with the street), is called „*Erdgeschoss*” [~air’d ge’shoss] (literally: “Earth floor”) and is often (e.g. in lifts/elevators) abbreviated with „EG”.

From here it goes up to the 1. Floor, the „*Erste Stock*” (or, in “official” German the „*Erste Obergeschoss*” = “Upper floor”, usually abbreviated “OG”), then comes the „*Zweite Stock*”, and so on. However, depending on the way you talk about the floor you live on, the article in front and the ending of the spelled digit will of course vary accordingly.



Table: How Not to Get Floored by German Floor Numbers

English	German	Ground Floor	1. Floor
"This is ..."	„Das ist ..."	... das Erdgeschoss."	... der erste Stock."
"I live ..."	„Ich wohne ..."	... im Erdgeschoss."	... im ersten Stock."
"I go (to) ..."	„Ich gehe ..."	... ins Erdgeschoss."	... in den ersten Stock."
"From ... until ..."	--	„ Vom Erdgeschoss ..."	... bis zum ersten Stock."
"Above/below the ..."	„Über/unter ..."	... dem Erdgeschoss."	... dem ersten Stock."

What’s true for the first floor naturally goes for all other floors as well, whether it’s „*der zwanzigste Stock*” or whether you are going up to „*dem achtundachtzigsten Stock*”. (‘Note: From the number 20 onwards and all the way to infinity, the ending „*-(t)en*” – like in „*ersten*” or „*neunzehnten*” – changes to the ending „*-sten*”).

Incidentally, there exists some confusion about the German words for “floor”. On the one hand, you have the aforementioned „*(der) Stock*” for the floor in a house with more than one story. On the other hand, you will hear the word „*(der) Boden*”, which denotes the “ground” or the “floor (beneath your feet)”, as well as the “soil” or the “terrain” – and If someone is said to be „*am Boden*”, it means that they’re down, out of luck, finished and done for.

The Rest of the German Numerals Bunch.

Apart from the Cardinal and Ordinal Numbers, there are of course also some other types of numerals, which we’ll take a cursory look at.

Die Bruchzahlen – The German Fraction Numbers. Quite useful when you're out and about grocery-shopping and want e.g. half a kilo of flour or a quarter pound of butter or a tenth of a metre of sausage.

Table: The Fraction Numerals

Numeral	German	English
½ kilo	Ein halbes Kilo	Half a kilo
¾ of a pound	Ein dreiviertel Pfund	Three quarter
1/10 metre	Ein Zehntel Meter	A tenth
¼ of a litre	Ein Viertel Liter	A quarter
1/100	Ein Hundertstel	A hundredth

Next, there are the **Verfälschungszahlwörter** – The Multiplying Number words, and the **Wiederholungszahlwörter** – The Repetition Number words. These are helpful to exclaim for instance that you are the triple winner of the Frankfurt Marathon™ or that you currently weigh twice as much as you did before you came to Germany and discovered „Jägerschnitzel mit Pommes“ and „Apfelstrudel mit Sahne“, („Jägerschnitzel with chips/French fries“ and „Apple strudel with whipped cream“).



Table: The Multiplying & Repetition Numeral Words

Numeral	German	English
1 x	Das einfache Brot	The single/simple bread
2 x	Der zweifache Gewinner Der doppelte Gewinner	The two-times winner The double-winner
3 x	Das dreifache Gewicht	Triple the weight Thrice the weight
10 x	Ich hab' es zehnfach gesagt	I said it tenfold
100 x	Ein hundertfacher Gewinn	A hundredfold profit
2 x	Ich hatte zweimal Covid	I've had Covid two times
3 x	Ich hatte es sogar dreimal	I've even had it three times
10 x	Ich war zehnmal in China	I've been to China ten times
12+12+12 ...	Ich hab' sie dutzende Male gebeten, nicht zu fliegen	I've asked her dozens of times not to fly
100 x	Ich war schon hundertmal bei Nordsee™ essen	I've eaten at Nordsee™ a hundred times

Then we've got the **Unbestimmten Zahlenwörter** – The Undefined Number words. Always useful if you want to remain vague with your details or give an approximation, like in English “some”; “a couple of”; or “many”.

Table: The Undefined Numeral Words

German	English
Ich sehe einige Leute protestieren.	I see some/several people protesting.
Manche Leute denken, ...	Some people think ...
... ich hätte mehrere Autos.	... I would own several cars.
Ähm, es gibt ein paar Probleme.	Uhm, there are a couple of problems.
Ach, wir haben immer etliche Probleme.	So? We always have loads of problems.
Also, es gibt jetzt mehrere Optionen.	So, there are now several options.
Naja, ich hab' da so einige Bedenken.	Well, I've got a few concerns about that.
Sie haben doch schon so viele Autos.	But you already have so many cars.
Und ich habe nur wenige Autos.	And I have only a few cars.
Jetzt gibt es zahlreiche Möglichkeiten.	Now there are numerous possibilities.
Hey, du hast noch unzählige Chancen.	Hey, you've still got countless chances.
Wow, das ist ja eine Menge Geld!	Wow, that's really a lot of money!
In dem Elixier sind allerlei Zutaten.	The elixir has all kinds of ingredients.
Na, verschiedene Zutaten eben.	Well, various ingredients, as I said.
Oh, ich habe etwas Bauchschmerzen.	Oh, I have a bit of/ a little stomach-ache.

Finally, there are the **Gattungszahlwörter**. These Numerals indicate how many different kinds of something there are. They all come with the suffix „-erlei“ and nowadays have a slightly old-fashioned ring to them, but that makes them all the more beautiful.

Table: The “Poetic” Manyfold Numerals

German	English
Das ist mir einerlei .	That's all the same to me. / I don't care.
Wir haben zweierlei Sorten	We have two different types.
Das Brot hat dreierlei Körner.	The bread has three types of grain.
Da ist allerlei los.	There's all sorts going on.
Ich hab' schon mancherlei gesehen.	I've already seen many different things.

Exclusively for Expats & Everyone Else

Just as rigidly and unwaveringly as German insists on its counting rules, it also insists on being surprisingly flexible and pliable when it comes to metamorphosing verbs and adjectives into nouns and vice versa, or when it seemingly arbitrarily assigns one of three different genders to a noun and declines them according to the four grammatical cases.

And to be clear, any resistance or complaints about the four grammatical cases are utterly futile and will only elicit a derisive „Pah!“ from the German language beast and the laconic remark that you should count yourself lucky that you only have to memorize four cases (*Nominativ*, *Genitiv*, *Dativ*, and *Akkusativ*), instead of the six cases e.g. Latin has to offer, or the sixty-four cases of “Tsez”, a language spoken in the Russian Republic of Dagestan.

And to put the icing on the linguistic *Baumkuchen*, when you least expect it, German will come around the corner and tell you nonchalantly:



The German word „**Ungeheuer**“ means “monster.”
The German word „**ungeheuer**“ means “very/exceptional”.
So, „*Das Kleid steht dir **ungeheuer** gut*“,
means: “This dress suits you exceptionally well!”
But, „*Das Kleid steht dir **Ungeheuer** gut!*“,
means: “This dress suits you, you monster!”

So, if you’ve been paying attention up to this point, then it should’ve become obvious that you’re finding yourself at this moment at the trailhead of a particularly wild and wonderous ride into the rough territory inhabited by the linguistic wildcat amongst European languages.

However, hold your horses for just a moment longer, because before you’ll truly hit the road, let’s kick your journey off by first finding out whether you will read this first chapter through the lens of an inquisitive yet neutral observer or from the perspective of someone who has already taken or is about to take the plunge into the thick of the battle by becoming part of German society, culture, and life.

You see, chances are that you already belong to at least one of the following four categories of German-intrigued people:

- A) The fearless German Language Enthusiasts
- B) The inquisitive Language Professionals and Students
- C) The curious Germany*-Visitors and -Afficionados
- D) The adventurous Expats living or soon to be living in Germany*

[*That is to say, Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, of course. For reasons of space and simplicity, when the term “Germany” is used in the following, it refers to all three German-speaking countries when relevant, unless explicitly stated otherwise.]

Should you find yourself in one or more of the first three categories, rest assured that this first chapter has plenty of knowledge truffles in store for you as well, so, please don’t go anywhere.

Nevertheless, this initial chapter has mainly been tailored to the members of the fourth group – those brave souls who are planning to navigate the figurative and factual German landscape as well as those who have already landed on German-speaking shores while still missing a metaphorical map that outlines the cultural, social, and linguistic peaks and pitfalls of the land.

Expats will therefore find in this chapter a particularly detailed and unambiguous answer to the burning question that almost every expat has on their mind at the beginning of their German-adventure, which is: “*Can I get by only with English while I’m in Germany?*”

As a current or future expat, you may be tempted to answer this question with a confident “Yes”, especially if you have been binge-watching some of the countless YouTube™ channels of American, British, Australian, Irish or other expat-YouTubers who already live in Germany. Some of whom tend to wax particularly lyrically about Germans being outright eager to chat in English with you and who like to tell you that most Germans speak at least passable and often even excellent English.

It’s not surprising then that many prospective expats planning to move to Germany ask themselves why, in the name of German-“hating”

author Mark Twain, they should take on the herculean task of learning an apparently impossible-to-tame fury of a language, when even the famous American writer and revered author of the essay *'The Awful German Language'* – first published as Appendix D in his book *'A Tramp Abroad'*, (1880) and the shining inspiration for the title of this book – once wrote that, *"surely there is not another language that is so slipshod and system-less and so slippery and elusive to the grasp"*.

And since almost every native German, Austrian, or Swiss apparently speaks and understands English better than the average London taxi driver, then it is surely superfluous to acquaint oneself with the abominable German language, right?

Well, as you will have guessed already, the harsh mistress we call 'Reality' has a rather different script in store for all expats who cling to this pipedream of a German-less life in Germany, and going off-script rarely has led to a happy ending.

Just to give you a hypothetical example, let's assume, for instance, that you find yourself one day in some small German town that is generally ignored by modern map-makers and hasn't even been visited by any Google™ street maps camera-car yet. And let's further presume that you are suddenly overcome by the desire to pop into the local butcher shop, since you're eager to try some of the countless different sausage-types that exist beyond *Bratwurst* in Germany. And since you're already there, you also decide to buy some sliced turkey for your homemade sandwiches. So, when it's your turn at the butchery's counter, you ask in slow and carefully pronounced English: *"I'd like a select range of your finest traditional wurst and ten ounces of thinly sliced turkey breast, please."*

Now, the probability that the butcher or his sales-assistant will understand your English-phrased order in this situation is about as high as that of luring the butcher's dog from under the counter with a slice of tofu. In other words, in the best-case scenario, they will nod at the term „Wurst“, (spoken [~vʊʁst] with an 'ʊʊ'-sound like in "moose"; not like "worst"), and then serve you with a *Bratwurst*, (because that's what all tourists want), and ten slices of generously cut turkey breast. At worst, you will receive an unidentifiable piece of compressed meat and some friendly advice to check the travel agency next door for trips to Turkey. However, both scenarios may at least include a friendly bark from the butcher's dog for free.



Legally Sick People's Cashpoint

No doubt, most Germans below retirement age in Germany's urban centres can answer and assist you in basic to medium-level English nowadays. Yet, once you venture beyond the bright city lights, blank stares (and eventual dog-barks) are prone to become more frequent in response to your attempts to communicate in English, even if they are as seemingly simple as asking for a loaf of bread.

Okay, simply asking for “a (loaf of) bread” („*ein Brot*“) [~brɔt] in a German bakery is nonsensical to begin with, whether in English or German, and as impractical as asking for “a meat” at a butcher's. After all, there's no such thing as just “bread” in a country that boasts over 3,000 different types of bread and bread products., from freshly baked *Roggenbrot* (dark rye bread) and *Pumpernickel* (sweet and coarse rye bread) to *Bauernbrot* (“farmer's bread”, rye and wheat sourdough) and *Sonnenblumenbrot* (sunflower seed bread), all the way to *Kartoffelbrot* (potato bread), plus a plethora of different types of *Brötchen*, the German bread rolls with a crunchy outside and a soft and fluffy interior.

But let's not get distracted by the culinary delights of German bakers' artistry. Just remember to google the names and pronunciations of your preferred bread-types before you first visit your neighbourhood bakery – or simply ask the notoriously stressed sales-assistant to explain each bread-type and to pronounce their names slowly for you. A particularly good time for this is Sunday morning, when the queue of German „*Sonntagfrühstücksbrötchenholer*“, (“Sunday breakfast bread roll fetchers”) will certainly be delighted to wait until you have made your choice of the right bread or roll.

(By the way, you'll find that a German *Bäckerei* [~beck'er'rai] usually functions also as a pastry shop, offering cakes, cookies, and other sweet delicacies. Should you be specifically looking for elaborately decorated cakes and a large variety of sweet baked goods, though, then your sweet tooth is best taken care of in a *Konditorei*, i.e., a pâtisserie.)

Anyhow, the fact remains that not every German, even under the age of ninety, will be thrilled or even able to switch seamlessly into English parlance at the proverbial drop of an “**I ♥ Germany**”-hat.

Sure, the British once ruled the waves and a vast empire. And yes, American culture is omnipresent nowadays, also in Germany. Nonetheless, neither the English language's role as the modern *lingua franca* nor the global cultural influence of the United States are dominant enough to play a significant role in the daily lives of most modern Germans.

Therefore, any misapprehension that your own quaint Kiwi accent, intriguing Irish singsong, throaty Texan twang, or endearing Glaswegian gobbledygook will suffice in all your encounters with Germans, Austrians, or Swiss is about as far removed from reality as the hard-to-kill idea that all Germans run around in *Lederhosen* and *Dirndl* as their everyday attire.

And while this is true for native English speakers from all parts of the Anglo-Saxon world, it is doubly true for expats with English “merely” as their second language. So, high time to reconsider if you have secretly banked on the assumption that your knowledge of English and your artful Argentinian accent, peculiar Polish pronunciation, or interesting Italian intonation will allow you plain sailing in the German-speaking countries. Otherwise, prepare yourself to hear a lot of responses like „*Wie bitte?*“, (“Pardon me, could you please repeat that?”), as well as the more common and less friendly, „*Was?*“, (“What?”), or the rather impolite but common, „*Hä?*“, (“Huh?”).

On the bright side, every German school kid since 1990 (and in former West-Germany long before that), will go through a minimum of four

and a maximum of nine consecutive years of learning (school)-English. So, if they haven't already forgotten everything they've learned, most former German school attendees should be able to direct you at least to the nearest public toilet/bathroom. (Provided that there is one around, of course. But best don't bet on it, considering the notorious lack of public restrooms in German cities.)

You can also safely assume that your German waiter in the restaurant will understand your request for a free Coke-, coffee- or water-refill. Just be prepared that such an outlandish demand will almost certainly be met alternatively with a blank stare, a derisive snort and incredulous head shaking, or with outright sarcastic laughter. At any rate, better forget about the preposterous idea of "free re-fills" while you're in Europe. Drinks cost money so that the waiting staff can earn a living wage and doesn't need to rely on your generous tip to survive.

Anyway, the average English proficiency in the German-speaking countries can be assumed to extent even to the point where you can start a discussion about the Europeans' seemingly baffling preference for tight-fitting swimming trunks and why most European men don't seem to have any problem with the contours of their "crown jewels" being clearly visible through the wet fabric. At that, you can usually expect a half-way coherent and often surprisingly emotional reply when broaching that topic.

Ultimately, though, the conversation will probably end in a heated discussion about modesty and "protecting children from seeing a man's private parts" which in turn will result in a clash of views on the supposed German habit of "loving to run around naked in public." A widespread misconception that seems harder to kill than the tenacious belief that Germany singlehandedly started World War One.

Speaking of which, at the latest when your conversation veers into the territory of war and the likes, most communications will begin to suffer considerably from your average German counterpart's lack of proper English terminology.

There's no way around it, sooner or later you will invariably reach a point when your conversations in English with German friends or colleagues will result in them reaching into their treasure chest of English vocabulary and finding it emptied out. This will happen not only when discussing matters of history, politics or Germany's role in the great political game on the eve of the First World War, but also whenever the conversation strays from the well-trodden path of small talk and enters the bumpy terrain of sophisticated topics. For instance, when you broach the subject of the written and unwritten laws of German car-driving etiquette on the *Autobahn*.

Most English vocabulary pertaining to this intriguing topic never comes up during English-lessons in German schools, which is why your German friends will often be hard put to translate typical traffic-related terms into English. Including such essential words like „*Rettungsgasse*“, ("emergency corridor"), „*Reißverschlussverfahren*“, ("zipper merge"), or the despised „*Mittelspurschleicher*“, ("middle lane crawler") on the *Autobahn*, (which incidentally means "car track" or "car rail").

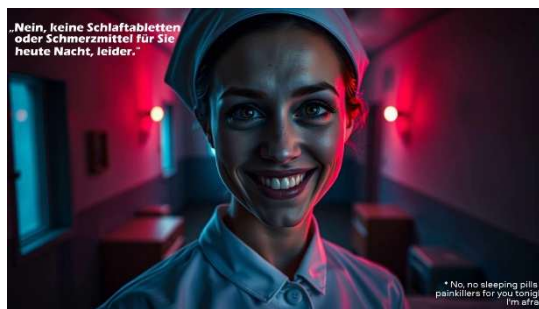
Unfortunately, also the often-used fallback method of literal word-for-word translation attempted by many Germans when lost for English

words will not only lead to inevitable confusion but, rather endearingly, also to sometimes quite amusing results. For example, few English speakers would guess what is meant by a “rescue alley”, which is the literal translation of „*Rettungsgasse*“, or that “ripping fastener procedure”, is the literal translation of „*Reißverschlußverfahren*“, denoting a zipper merge.

The same difficulties will occur with another topic most expats in Germany will rather sooner than later need to become interested in: The German public healthcare system. An essential topic that is virtually riddled with linguistic pitfalls.

Even many native Germans have little to no clue when it comes to the finer details of public health insurance, the hospital system, or medical prescription procedures. Not least, because the entire topic is fraught with technical jargon and bureaucratic lingo. So, while your average English-speaking German will try their best to explain the inner workings of German healthcare, it might not take long before they either give up or valiantly try to translate the meaning of the German terminology by literal translation – with sometimes flabbergasting and frequently hilarious results.

In this way, for example, the German term for a public health insurance, „*gesetzliche Krankenkasse*“, can quickly become a “legally sick people’s cashpoint”. And although the English term “nurse” is taught in German schools, you can still find Germans who might translate the German equivalent of „*Krankenschwester*“ literally with “sick sister” and her traditionally far unfriendlier and less forthcoming sibling, the „*Nachtschwester*“, as “night sister” or more to the point, as “sister of the night”. (Incidentally a term where the correct pronunciation of the hard [ch] sound is of some importance, since falling back on the popular 'substitute pronunciation' amongst English speakers of a [ck] sound would turn the 'Nocturnal Nurse' into a „*Nacktschwester*“ and thus into a “naked sister”.)



Or take for instance one of the most frequent translation-mishaps, which comes with the fact that the German word „*das Rezept*“ denotes two different things at once that have different names in English: the “prescription” and the “recipe”, (since in olden times, food in its broadest sense was medicine), leading to predictable confusion on both parts.

And at this point we haven’t even talked about the bureaucratic healthcare lingo yet, which provides German with such terms like „*Altersrückstellung*“, (“retirement provision”), „*Überforderungsklausel*“, (“overextension clause”), or „*Beitragsbemessungsgrenze*“, (“contribution assessment threshold”), all of which you will have to familiarise yourself with when joining the German public healthcare club. So, as you can see, there is another cost to “free” public healthcare in Germany after all (apart from the monthly deduction from your salary) – only this one isn’t financial.

But now on to another German peculiarity that many newly arrived expats are often intrigued and stumped by and that comes in the shape of an official-looking leaflet that some mysterious person has taped overnight onto your apartment building's entrance door.

If you ask the friendly retired postal worker next door about the purpose of this ominous "document", you might find that his mental vocab-satchel doesn't contain the English terminology needed to give you a satisfactory explanation. The problems already start with the headline on the leaflet, which states in big red letters: „*Heizungsablesetermin*“. But at least the old man's brave translation attempt of "heater off-reading date" may give you a first hint.

The ultimate clue, however, comes with your first heating-bill and the included notification that the due amount had to be estimated because you didn't provide access to the metre in the cellar for the gas-company's gas-metre-reading employee on the announced date, (as was clearly requested on the leaflet).

So, now you are understandably curious about the type of central heating that's responsible for the snug cosiness in your flat as well as for the eye-wateringly huge sum on your heating bill. Hence, you make your way down the stairs into the dark and cold cellar, (an integral part of every German apartment building). Finally, you come face to face with the impressive „*Gasbrennwertkessel mit Überdruckabgasanlage*“ and, upon recognising the word "gas" twice in the imprint, you begin to wonder if your entire housing block is going to blow up in a gigantic gas explosion the next time you even strike up a conversation with a neighbour, let alone strike a match in the stairwell.

If only you could communicate properly with the elderly gentleman next door. Then he could tell you that your building actually has a highly secure "gas condensing boiler with an overpressure gas exhaust system" – and you could stop having nightmares about a giant fireball.

But since we're already talking about nightmares, now might be as good a time as any to address another recurring theme relating to a matter exclusively concerning Germany: The question of whether it is true that, when in Germany, it is best not to broach the subject of the darkest twelve years of German history.

Interlude: "Don't mention the War."

Now, naturally not every visitor needs or wants to be bothered with the minutiae of everyday German life. After all, such mundane trivialities like traffic, healthcare, or central heating can easily be taken care of by one's



personal chauffeur, secretary, and butler. And anyway, such exalted visitors who have zero interest in the lessons of history usually come to Germany mainly to go shopping in Berlin's „*KDW*“, (*Kaufhaus des Westens*™, the German answer to London's *Harrod's*™), or on Düsseldorf's „*Kö*“,

(*Königsallee*, the high street for the rich and famous), or in Frankfurt's *Goethe Strasse*, (home of *Tiffany's*™ and a girl's many other best friends). Or they come for a liposuction to a private clinic in Munich.

In any case, their activities leave little time for (and little interest in) the details of a topic that, in stark contrast, often occupies a large part of the subconscious of "normal" Germany-visitors. To say it in the words of the brilliant Irish comedian Dylan Moran: *"You're talking to a modern, nice, affable German person and they're saying to you something like 'You know, vell, it's a critical time now for Germany within Europe, also globally, economically vee are pretty good, vee have been better. But vee are very vibrant in the theatre and arts...' and all the time you'll be listening to this, you're thinking 'Mmm, yeah, mmm. Hitler, Hitler, Hitler, Hitler, Hitler'."*

So, let's talk about *"Hitler, Hitler, Hitler"* and the apparent enigma of how on earth the entire, well-educated and industrially advanced German nation could fall for a twice-failed Austrian arts-academy applicant with a ridiculous moustache, a decidedly non-Aryan 174 cm (5.7") small corpus and only one testicle. (Yes, seriously. This fact has been well documented by Dr. Josef Brinsteiner, the prison doctor during Hitler's imprisonment in Landsberg in 1923 after his failed *„Bierkellerputsch"*, "Beer cellar putsch", in Munich in the same year.)

Predictably, putting the question about the reasons behind Adolf's rise to power to a German, (or an Austrian, for that matter), can easily open quite a large can of worms, if done "incorrectly".

Before anything else, however, you should consider that many Germans, including professional scholars, will simply lack the necessary English vocabulary to comprehensibly quench your thirst for knowledge in this regard. This also means that you will only be able to satisfy your curiosity sufficiently if you have first bitten the bullet and have internalised the German terminology related to this complex subject, sorry to say.

Furthermore, the level of complexity, accuracy, and objectivity of the answers you receive will inevitably vary depending on the age, gender, social background, education, political orientation, family history, group affiliation, and historical interests of the individual German or Austrian person you ask.

Now that we have pointed out these practical limitations, let's delve into the specifics and find out how Germans and Austrians generally approach this sensitive topic and how they usually respond to questions like the one above. Even better, you also will learn how to maximise your chances of receiving genuine, informative answers to such "dicey" questions. So, let's answer the initial question in the headline first. Is it true that you shouldn't mention the war in Germany?



The short answer is: No, that isn't true at all. On the contrary, you can and should mention the war. See, in Germany and Austria, the Second World War and the Holocaust are anything but taboo-topics. In fact, every

new German generation since the 1960s has spent countless hours in school learning all about the atrocities committed by their own fathers, grandfathers and grand-grandfathers during the Nazi era. And almost all German pupils have taken away at least one crucial insight from their school-days – a fundamental lesson that *Max Mannheimer*, survivor of the Nazi-concentration camps in Auschwitz and Dachau, famously phrased like this when he addressed the German post-war youth directly: *"You are not responsible for what happened. But you are responsible for it to never happen again!"*

In other words: "Never forget!" And in order to remember, you naturally need to talk about it. Hence, should you ever meet a German or Austrian who refuses to talk about the Second World War, the Holocaust, the concentration camps and the Nazi-atrocities, or even denies the veracity of their existence, you should hear all alarm-bells going off in your head and give this person a decidedly wide berth.

As for the reaction of the average, i.e. democratic-minded and history-aware German or Austrian when confronted with the question of *"How could this happen?"* – rest assured that they won't be put off by your interest. In fact, Germans will usually bend over backwards to provide you with as much useful and genuine information as they are able to.

Sure, there will be situations in which you might receive a snappy retort such as, *"Well, how do you think Trump became President?"* or *"Just look at Russia under Putin for your answer"*, or *"Have you heard about Brexit by any chance?"*. However, the vast majority will gladly share their knowledge with you, following the general German mentality that such conversations play an important part in keeping the memory of the unspeakable atrocities committed by the Nazis from falling into obscurity and are vital in ensuring that these horrors remain at the forefront of every German's mind as a dire warning for present and future generations.

The only small caveat in this regard may be that some serious German history-buffs and politics nerds might give you a rather resigned reply to your questions of *"Why?"* and *"How?"*, along the lines of, *"Oh, do you really want to talk about this right now?"* The reason being that they know that any answer in English worth its salt would be beyond their own English skills, while, no offense, your German skills are almost certainly not (yet) good enough to grasp the finer points of a comprehensible explanation in German.

In fact, even many Germans probably wouldn't understand more than half of the information provided by a knowledgeable and well-read compatriot. Not due to a lack of intelligence, but rather a lack of basic and advanced historical knowledge, which is indispensable for a meaningful conversation about Germany's historical guilt and its origins.

At the very least, therefore, you should bring with you a good grasp of political German terms relating to 19th and early 20th-century German and European political history, as well as a decent knowledge of German politics, socio-economic conditions and educational standards and circumstances between 1871 and 1939. Furthermore, you'd need a basic understanding of the European political landscape after World War I and a general idea of 19th century German Romanticism. And don't forget to bring your early 20th century map of Europe and a cheat sheet on inter-European cultural, political, social, and economic relations during that period. (And

you might also want to check out the sub-chapter 'Interlude: The Composer Richard Wagner – A Tragic Villain Story' in the chapter 'A Rendez-vous with German's Roots' to get a first idea of the historical breeding grounds for the later Nazi ideology).

That should do it for a start.

Or rather, not quite yet. You see, even if you came well-prepared in those areas, there still would be another hurdle to be jumped, one that isn't related to any historical or political knowledge but instead to personal tact and empathy.

Although Germans generally react with understanding and even appreciation to inquiries about the Nazi era, there is of course the right and the wrong time, place, and manner to ask such questions.

For now, let's just say that when you're sitting at a lavishly laid table at a dinner party with friends and acquaintances at your German friend's home and you suddenly blurt out: *"Hey, and what about the Nazis, eh? Terrible stuff, what? So, say, have your grandparents been involved in any of that scary shit or what?"*, this will presumably not be met by cordial chuckles and light-hearted banter. Duh.

Your best chance of having a meaningful and informative conversation on the topic will come instead in a more intimate setting, such as with a small group of German friends or during a one-on-one talk with your German buddy or BFF, perhaps over a beer in a pub or while sitting with a glass of wine at home on the couch.

Even then, though, forcing the topic out of the blue onto your German or Austrian friend isn't the ideal approach. Best wait for a situation where the topic is already on the table, perhaps after watching a movie like *'Schindler's List'*, *'Aimée & Jaguar'*, *'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas'*, *'Esther's Diary'*, or *'Inglorious Basterds'*. As an additional tip, it is best to postpone any questions about your German or Austrian partner's family's involvement in the Nazi era until you are about to buy your first house or have your first child together. You see, family matters are private in Germany – and most Germans value their privacy above almost all else.

But to make one thing on the other hand also clear once and for all, and as surprising as it may sound to some foreigners, topics like the Second World War or the Holocaust are in fact rarely brought up in day-to-day conversations between Germans at work, during lunch break or in the evening over a casual beer at the pub. And yet, and in all seriousness now, the gruesome events during the 12 years of the "Third Reich" are nonetheless never far from anyone's mind, particularly thanks to the proud German culture of remembrance.

So, with regard to your curiosity and desire for answers, you should also be aware that, synchronous with this so-called *„Vergangenheitsbewältigung“*, (roughly: "The confrontation with and reappraisal and rectification of one's nation's past"), German and Austrian post-war societies also developed an intricate linguistic culture relating to all things Hitler, Nazis, WW II and the Holocaust. This unspoken etiquette does not exist in order to silence, relativise, or downplay any Nazi-atrocities. On the contrary, these unwritten rules are in place to guard against any trivialisation, relativization, or normalisation of the atrocities committed by Hitler and his henchmen.

This is why you shouldn't bring up the brutal murder of six million Jews in casual conversation, treating it as just another small talk topic at the dinner table or in a German pub. It is also why you don't refer to Jews and other persecuted minorities during the Nazi era by any derogatory term. And it is also the reason why you don't compare other horrible historic or current events with the Holocaust, since the unintended consequence of such comparisons would be to relativise the unimaginable suffering of the Jewish people and diminish their memory. And finally, this is also why certain German words like „Rasse“ (“race”), „Überlegenheit“ (“superiority”), „Auslöschung“ (“extermination”), or „Endlösung“ (“final solution”), are almost guaranteed conversation stoppers.

Committing any of these *faux passes* in polite society will at best prompt your German or Austrian friends to suddenly fall silent and become unusually interested in the label on their beer bottles or in the room's ceiling tiles before they abruptly change the topic to something like the newest version of the „Universal-Schraubmaschine 30.82 RKS“ or, in the direst of cases, to „das Wetter“, [ˈvɛtɐ] i.e., the current weather situation.



In the most enlightening of circumstances, (for you, that is), however, you will sit across an outspoken proponent of Germany's liberal-democratic constitutional order, who will teach you all about the country's irrevocable responsibility to uphold these values and about every German's moral duty to never forget or trivialise the past. In this case, best resign yourself to getting an educational ear full and start taking notes.

Finally, and although this should go without saying: For the love of all that's genuinely funny, steer clear of so-called “Nazi jokes” and of publicly attempting the infamous “Hitler-salute” anywhere in Germany. Even if you think that this is a harmless or “funny” jest, it may rightfully punch you a ticket for a serious chat with the German police. And better believe it: those guys aren't particularly famous for their sense of humour.

At the end of the day and in the face of all the above, it may generally be your best strategy to initially holster your understandable curiosity until your German skills are on point and you have picked up most if not all of the subtle shifts in parlance, intonation, body language, and countenance that are observable with your German-speaking friends when the complex topic of the 12 years of the “Thousand Years Reich” comes up. Over time, you will develop the ability to choose the right moment, words, company and atmosphere in which to broach the subject, ensuring you have a meaningful and informative conversation. This can then easily lead to a conversation that lasts all night, until the chirping of the early-morning birds suddenly reminds you that you're due at work or university in an hour, and that you definitely shouldn't have had that last beer!

Of Creased Jeans ...

But now back to the not yet fully answered question of whether you can (or should) cruise through your time in Germany with English as your only means of verbal communication.

Admittedly, one point that speaks in favour of such a monolingual approach is the afore-mentioned fact that a significant number of urban Germans are quite able to decode your English plea for directions to the nearest pizzeria. And once you've arrived there, the waiter will probably also understand your request in English for a pizza with lactose-free cheese and gluten-free dough. (Though, in that case it will probably forever remain a mystery why you have chosen 'suicide-by-chef' in an Italian-run restaurant in Germany of all things.)

To put this into perspective and to anticipate a statistic that will follow in more detail further down below, roughly 12 million Germans claim in fact to speak 'good' or 'very good' English. With a German population of about 84 million, this means that your attempts to inquire or chat in English will on average be met by success every seventh time, while in most urban areas this quota will probably be even higher.

In other words, the bare numbers seem to play in your hands and speak for your cunning plan to remain monolingual in Germany. Well, at least if you have no problem with five or six preliminary blank stares before you finally manage to buy your *Brötchen* at a local *Bäckerei*, order a *Pils* at the corner *Kneipe*, or instruct the *Taxifahrer* to whisk you off to the *Flughafen*. But that's all "par for the course" for Mr. or Miss Monolinguist, of course – or as Germans would casually quip: „*Das ist kein Ding.*“, ("That's not a thing.", i.e., "That's no problem at all.")

And if you are headed for any of the sprawling urban landscapes of Hamburg, Munich (*München*), Cologne (*Köln*), Frankfurt am Main, Hanover (*Hannover*), Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, Leipzig or Berlin to work at a bigger company, it may well be that your daily convos at the office will indeed be predominantly held in English and that your social circles will be exclusively filled with English-speaking expats. And perhaps your only encounters with the German language will actually be confined to short sorties to the supermarket and to some shops for household errands and, when it comes to the crunch, to the occasional bump-in with your neighbours. So, rudimentary German vocabulary should certainly suffice, right?

Sorry to burst your bubble, but unfortunately, you've forgotten something rather important. Sure, German supermarkets can be navigated without having to talk to anyone. Well, at least if you stay away from the often amazingly well-stocked in-house bakeries, butchers, fishmongers, and fromageries.

But things can quickly get more complicated when it comes to something as simple as daily household tasks, such as taking your dirty clothes to the dry cleaner, buying tools from the DIY store, finding batteries for your remote control or getting your treasured watch repaired.

One obstacle you may encounter in such situations is the need to be familiar with specific German terms relating to your requests. However, the more significant issue is that the friendly shop assistant at the dry cleaners, as well as many other service providers you will almost certainly encounter daily, will likely have roots in Turkey, Ukraine, Vietnam, Poland,

Tunisia, France, Italy, South Korea or elsewhere, and will therefore only speak German as a second language. For many of these naturalised Germans, the idea of learning English has never even crossed their mind. And why should it have when they have been living in Germany for two, ten, twenty or even fifty years?

According to the OECD, 16.2 million people – around 19.1% of the total population in 2024 – were considered “foreign-born” (i.e. born abroad, regardless of nationality) and lived in Germany. And you can bet your treasured wristwatch that you will regularly encounter many of them whenever you are out and about, whether in facilities management, sales, crafts, building, services, tourism, manufacturing, catering, hospitals, banks, sports clubs or even your language school. While most immigrants have invested considerable time, effort and dedication into improving their German, many have left English proficiency to the younger generations.

So, good luck trying to explain to your Vietnamese domestic help that you have a deep-seated disdain for jeans with ironed creases down the legs. However, shouldn't your luck hold and you find your jeans starched into a plank and ironed with creases straight from the 1950s, best brace yourself for a barrage of Dad-jokes coming from your younger office-colleagues when you show up in the morning in your Gary Cooper commemorative denim.

And if you're of the female persuasion, the same good luck to you with your attempts to explain to your local dry cleaner's Ukrainian proprietor that the stain on your expensive new evening dress is not a “Monica Lewinsky



memorial stain” and does not require special treatment, thank you very much. But better prepare yourself for the proprietor's laconic response of „Nicht mein Problem.“ ("Not my problem.") when she doesn't understand your protestations.

... and Avoidable Executions

Now, if you're still convinced that the German words and phrases you might pick up in bits and pieces along the way will somehow suffice, then perhaps you should consider the fact that German is a particularly unforgiving bedfellow in matters of nuances and precision.

For example, merely setting a virtual comma at the wrong place in your spoken sentence, - i.e., by inserting a short breather break, called a “micropause” – has already the potential to decisively steer your entire future path in life in new and unexpected directions.

You see, depending solely on such a micropause, Tom's answer to Sabine's question, “So, are you interested in going out with Monica or not?” can make or break Tom's dream of a shared future with the mesmerising Moni. Because Monica's BFF Sabine could understand his answer either as,

„Naja, weißt du, ich will, sie nicht.“

“Well, you know, I want, but she doesn’t.”

or as,

„Naja, weißt du, ich will sie nicht.“

“Well, you know, I don’t want her.”

Furthermore, if Sabine harbours a bit of a mean streak or if she fancies Tom herself, she might just go and gossip about some juicy detail regarding Moni’s and Tom’s blossoming relationship. Depending on her decision where to set the micropause in her sentence, she could then either tell the other girls in her clique,

„Hey, habt ihr schon gehört? Monica versprach Tom, keine Textnachrichten mehr zu schicken!“

“Hey, have you heard the news yet? Monica promised Tom not to send any more text messages.”

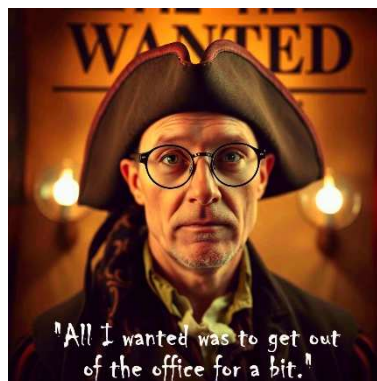
or,

„Hey, habt ihr schon gehört? Monica versprach, Tom keine Textnachrichten mehr zu schicken.“

“Hey, have you heard the news yet? Monica promised to send no more text messages to Tom.”

Sabine’s first version makes Monica seem like a loyal and devoted girlfriend who is determined not to send anymore texts to other guys. The second sentence, however, turns Moni in the eyes of the other girls into a “strumpet” who likes to play games behind Tom’s back. Which would ruin Monica’s reputation, although she didn’t do anything wrong at all. Subsequently, disgraced Monica will drop out of Secondary School/High School, run away to the big city, fall in with the wrong crowd and ultimately meet a terrible end by becoming a certified real estate agent. And nobody deserves such a cruel fate just because of a single micropause.

However, although it is hard to believe, ending up in a real estate job is not even the worst consequence of a misplaced micropause. In fact, where you place your comma can literally be a matter of life or death, as the following hypothetical scenario shows. Here, the governor of a small South Pacific island colony asked the crowd gathered for the execution of the famous pirate Black Bernie whether he should show mercy and let the former office clerk turned popular high-sea raider go free, or whether they would rather see him hanged. Unfortunately for Bernie, however, the governor seemed to be hard of hearing, because he “mistook” the crowd’s yelling of



„Hängt ihn nicht, laufen lassen!“

“Don’t hang him, let him go!”

for the (at least for the governor) rather more convenient,

„Hängt ihn, nicht laufen lassen!“

“Hang him, don’t let him go!”

And if the story were true, then it would’ve been a tiny micropause which ultimately sealed the end of accountant-turned-pirate Bernd “Black Bernie” Müller, formerly assistant junior auditor at *Wiesel & Söhne Buchhaltung GmbH* in the town of Castrop-Rauxel in the federal state of Nordrhein-Westfalen in the far-away land of Germany.

But then again, particularly as a person of the male persuasion, you don’t even need an allegedly hard-of-hearing governor to put your neck in a noose of your own making. For that, all you need is a sloppy pronunciation when paying an innocuous compliment to your girlfriend or wife. If you do it right, she’ll just grin cheekily at you after you’ve charmed her with the compliment:

„Du hast den schönsten Hintern weit und breit.“

“You have the most beautiful bum far and wide.”

However, if you are a little tipsy or not quite on the ball and put your micropause in the wrong place in this sentence, then you can be safe in assuming that you will have to get your bedding out of the bedroom and camp out on the sofa in the living room for the next few days, where you can then repeatedly bite your foot while agonising over your unforgivable mistake to tell the love of your life:

„Du hast den schönsten Hintern, weit und breit.“

“You have the most beautiful bum – wide and broad.”

Now, you may not be a notorious pirate in the South Pacific, and you may not even have a girlfriend or boyfriend – but that’s beside the point. These examples serve to emphasise that knowing just a handful of German words and phrases simply doesn’t cut it – at least, if you are determined to live your happiest life in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland.

Of course, you might still be able to navigate the most basic everyday situations and interactions with half-decent charades skills, your smartphone’s unreliable AI translator, and a few French pantomime impressions. However, if you want to become an integral part of the world you live in, rather than merely observing life from the outside, the only sound long-term solution is to

Level Up! – Humble Beginnings at Level A1

Alright, don’t panic just yet. Believe it or not, there really is a fun part to learning German, and it begins right after you have crossed the inevitable valley of tears known as the A1 beginner’s level.

Yes, there's no denying it: your initial encounters with German at your language school will probably be marked by feelings of overwhelming incomprehension, and every new word, grammar rule and pronunciation will seem to have been invented just to make your life a living hell. And every weekly trip to the "torture chamber" that calls itself a language school will be filled with the same devilish gobbledygook that you are supposed to learn, comprehend and repeat correctly.

This is the period in your life as a German-student when you will drag yourself home after evening classes with tears in your eyes and murder on your mind. Yes, in fact you will most likely be consumed by just one feverish desire: to meet the evil mastermind and inventor of this horrible language in some dark back alley for just five minutes and a "quick chat".

It is also the period when you are most likely to respond with a hearty "*Fuck off!*" to your friendly German neighbour's incomprehensible morning greetings or vehemently flip off the young supermarket cashier who is trying to tell you something about the avocados in your shopping trolley in what sounds like harsh German gibberish to you.

To be totally honest, there even have been rumours about some rather "volatile" A1-level German-students who allegedly were sneaking out at night into the dark German forest, wrapped in a hooded robe and holding a petrol can in one hand and their German course books in the other.

The grapevine on German tutor-forums has it that some of these lost souls then proceeded to light a bonfire in some old monastery ruin in a secluded forest clearing to sacrificially burn their German books, all the while loudly and hysterically conjugating the German verb „brennen“ ("to burn") over and over again, while dancing around the fire and howling like a wolf under the full moon on a cold, cruel, and callous German night.



Undeniably, those and even more ludicrous experiences may quite likely be waiting for you during the initial phase of your journey into German. However, and of course there's a "however", this period of madness will pass. You might not believe it at the beginning, but the day will definitely come when you will leave your home one fine morning and your tenaciously friendly neighbour's greeting of „*Ich wünsche Ihnen einen schönen Tag!*“, will suddenly make total sense to you. Not only that, but you will actually hear yourself replying in flawless German, „*Danke, das wünsche ich Ihnen auch!*“.

What's more, instead of flipping the bird to the young supermarket employee after she commented once again on the avocados in your shopping cart when you pop into your local supermarket after work, you will now thank her with a grateful smile for letting you know that, „*Die Avocados sind noch nicht reif*“, and for her friendly offer, „*Wenn Sie reifere möchten, hole ich sie Ihnen gern.*“

And on your way home in the evening, you will think fondly of your neighbour's wishes for a nice day („*Ich wünsche Ihnen einen schönen Tag*“

= “I wish you a nice day!”) and your flawless answer of, “Thank you, I wish you the same!”. Then you remember the friendly advice of the shop assistant about the not yet ripe avocados you had chosen („*Die Avocados sind noch nicht reif.*” = “The avocados are not ripe yet.”) and her kind offer: “If you like, I am happy to fetch some riper (avocados) for you.”. When you arrive at home, you switch on German television, order some pizza in German and surf on your neighbourhood website to check the schedules for the next neighbourhood flea market, summertime street festival, and local football team match.

That is the day when all your hard work will pay off in an immensely satisfying way. So, clench your arse cheeks, grit your teeth and get through the A1 valley of tears with dignity and determination, *verdammt!*

Level A2 – *Vereine*, Fun, and New Friends

“*Bullshit!*”, you may succinctly opine upon reading the above headline, before kindly elaborating that, “*there’s no way that finishing the A2 level will suffice for participating in German club-life and fun-activities! Most probably it’s barely enough to order a Bratwurst!*”.

Well, actually, at this point your German will even be good enough for ordering a „*Thüringer Rostbratwurst mit mittelscharfem Senf*” (“with medium-hot mustard”) *und einem frisch gebackenen Brötchen*”, (“a freshly baked bread roll”). And you also won’t have any problem to order „*ein frisch gezapftes Pilsener*”, (“a freshly tapped Pilsner beer”) to go with your Thuringian roasted bratwurst.

More importantly, however, and far beyond merely allowing you to enjoy a *Bratwurst* and a *Bier* in proper German style, mastering the German A2.2 level will open up the almost boundless universe of German *Vereine*, i.e. clubs and associations to you.

Why this is such a big deal? Well, because *Vereine* are simply your surefire way to joyfully circumnavigate and completely avoid the infamous “German unapproachability” many expats like to complain about.

In the unlikely event that you aren’t familiar with this quite justified grievance shared by most newcomers in Germany: Many say, and reality seems to confirm this, that a majority of Germans prefers to keep a polite distance even after this one “legendary night” when you painted the town red together and broke your personal beer-intake record, or after that one fun-filled summer-weekend when you went camping together at a crystal—clear forest-lake in the German countryside.

Considering the stereotypes about Germans that have been flapping around for decades, it might be hard to wrap your head around it, but this perceived “social wall” has in fact nothing to do with some German-specific “arrogance” or even “xenophobia”.

And how do you know that this is true? Well, easily, since Germans actually treat each other just the same way.

Interlude: German Friends & How to Find Them



Expats who complain that *"It's hard or even impossible to make friends in Germany"* usually tend to compare their own, often more welcoming culture to German society, and might also have a differing understanding of the term "friends". However, any seasoned expat with several years in Germany under their belt may tell you that, *"Yes, it's true that it can be hard to find friends in Germany. But once you've found them,*

you've found friends for life". If you're lucky, he or she will even explain to you that the word „Freund“ (“friend”) has a different status for Germans than it may have in your country, where the term is perhaps used more freely. Germans count themselves lucky if they can call four or five people their „Freunde“, whereas the average number of genuine friends for most Germans is probably closer to two or three.

In fact, the term “friend” or „Freund“ has such a strong and almost “sacred” meaning for many Germans, that they feel slightly wary whenever they are addressed as *"My friend!"* by e.g. the jovial market vendor at a Tunisian bazaar, the welcoming *Döner*-chef at the local Turkish *Döner* (kebab) shop, or the slightly tipsy American tourist after sitting next to them on one of the long benches and tables in a typical Hessian cider tavern or Bavarian beer garden.

This attitude may discourage you at first – but consider what it signifies when a German will genuinely regard you as their “friend”. For one, this “title” is sparingly and carefully bestowed and if you receive it, you have undoubtedly earned it through your impeccable conduct during your lengthy trial period.

For another, it means that you'll now have a true friend for life, someone who will come and pick you up long after midnight when you've had one Tequila too many and are lighter by one lost purse; who will help you move your newly acquired piano up the winding stairwell to the 3rd floor on a Sunday morning, (or to move a dead body down the same stairs late on a Sunday night); and who will bluntly tell you with typical German directness that your flirting technique isn't as sophisticated and compelling as you perhaps think. In short, someone who has your back in all situations.

However, this still leaves us with the question: How do you go about making a friend like that in Germany, without first having to sit at home alone in front of the television for three or four years? And: How do Germans actually make any friends at all, when the road to friendship is so hard, long, and steep?



Well, to answer the second question first: Most friendships between Germans already develop early on, either in the kindergarten or a bit later at school. Many young Germans find their best friends also simply in their neighbourhood, where they usually meet up in the afternoon after school to play football or “cops and robbers” together, or just roam the area on their bikes.

When they are a bit older, people often connect at the university, or during their apprenticeship, or by chance during outdoor-activities like playing football in the park on weekends, or when visiting an after-dark open air-cinema, where everyone brings their own food and drink and sits together on blankets on the grass in front of the big screen, chatting, toasting each other with wine glasses and beer cans, passing around bags of crisps and having a good laugh together at the film. At times, small events like that can really spark things off.

Another, while rather rare possibility to find one’s magnetic opposite pole is of course the workplace. However, finding genuine friends here becomes increasingly difficult the higher up the career ladder you climb. You might go out for a drink together, perhaps even develop a “work-husband”/“work-wife” relationship, but often this type of “friendship” is limited to the time spent at work. Although, your chances increase if you share common interests that go beyond the job and that you can pursue together outside of work.

This brings us neatly to the one area not yet mentioned, in which many Germans also find their best friends and soulmates. It's the perfect way for you to avoid the lengthy and difficult “traditional” method of making friends in Germany, and to skip those lonely evenings alone at home in front of your laptop or television.

***Vereine* – Ah, that’s where all the Germans are!**

Welcome to the “fast lane” and the perfect way to forge genuine friendships with Germans without having to invest years of nerves, love, time, and unwavering dedication. So, if you would please sign here?

Thanks, and congratulations; You are now an active member in a *Verein*!

By joining a *Verein* (“club” or “association”) it is almost guaranteed that you will find at least one, but probably many more soulmates in your chosen club, since the other members will share the same passion and interest for the *Verein*’s *raison d’être* with you.

And you will certainly be spoiled for choice: No less than 63,690 *Vereine* formed Germany’s elaborately rich tapestry of topic-specific private associations in 2024. If you think that’s already impressive, then check this out: With over 50 million *Verein*-members in Germany, (59.5% of the German population), the gross value of all *Vereine* taken together comes up to no less than 4.1% of the entire annual German gross domestic product (GDP). That’s roughly 90 billion Euro per year. A figure that vividly demonstrates how big of a deal *Vereine* truly are in Germany.



Legend even has it that whenever two or more Germans meet and discover a shared interest, they will instantly establish a *Verein*. And since this is Germany, naturally any proper *Verein* needs to be accurately and officially documented as a government-registered and tax-exempt association, with notarised statutes and rules as well as a democratically elected president, treasurer, and minute-taker.

This “organised fun” might seem laughable or even ridiculous to visitors from more easy-going and spontaneous cultures. Yet, this apparently ingrained penchant for orderly procedures does have its merits when viewed from a German perspective. Written rules, an elected final arbiter (president), and regular member- or board-meetings with democratic voting and minute-taking all serve to maintain a harmonious communal life and to avoid unnecessary friction, discussions, or arguments among members and “sub-tribes”. In this positive environment, many Germans find it therefore automatically the easiest to establish bonds, which will grow over time until one day they deserve the esteemed designation of „*Freundschaft*“ (“friendship”).

See, you and your fellow expats may agree that it is indeed “*easier to win in German Scrabble™ than to befriend a German*”. However, for most Germans, “merely” spending a wild night of raucous debauchery together or sharing the warmth of a nightly campfire after a day at the lake is not regarded as sufficiently meaningful to determine whether you are “friend-material” or should rather remain a „*Bekannter*“ (“acquaintance”).

A German will tell you that it simply takes time to find out if you’re sharing the same interests, world views, attitudes, affectations, and, most importantly, the same humour, which are all important preconditions for establishing a genuine friendship, i.e. a relationship based on unconditional trust and dedication, also and particularly in hard times.

For most Germans, the designation „*Freund*“ (male) or „*Freundin*“ (female) is therefore one of the rarest and most valued accolades and neither lightly given nor taken away. Which is why making friends, (in the true meaning of the word), often takes years rather than weeks or months. With one notable exception to this rule, of course. Yep, you know it: the *Verein*.

If you are German, you are usually careful by nature about who you trust with anything other than the time of day. Not because you’d assume the worst in people, (that would be exhausting), but because you value your own time, nerves, money, ideals, and convictions enough as not to “waste” them on the “wrong” people. Instead, you want and are more than happy to go all out on your chosen interests in the company of like-minded people with whom together you can spend your time to laugh, cry, cheer, talk, drink, work, play, and enjoy life. And a *Verein* offers you the possibility to find these like-minded individuals already “pre-sorted”, while at the same time representing what some would probably call a “safe space” for its members. A place where any naturally occurring initial wariness is

considerably reduced, because everyone here shares the same interest and the same passion or even “weakness” or “weirdness”, as the outside world might see it. Here, you are amongst brothers and sisters in spirit.

Furthermore, club-members will often compete as a team against other clubs, no matter your *Verein's* area of expertise, whether in Rugby or competitive dog-grooming. You will share victories and defeats, successes and struggles, rainy days and summer celebrations – all in all resulting in friendships forged in the fire of your common experiences.



And here's the kicker: German *Vereine* are open to everyone, including (and especially) expats and newcomers. In other words, becoming a card-carrying member of a *Verein* is the ultimate life-hack to avoid any experiences with the dreaded “German aloofness”, while at the same time skipping months or even years of lonely friendlessness. It simply couldn't be easier to find like-minded bros' and sis's who share your passion as well as your specific jargon, humour, and ideas on how to have a great time.

“And what if I'm into some fringe activity that no one else seems to know, for instance Porcelain dolls or real-life Quidditch™?”, you may be asking now.

Well, without going too far out on a limb, there is probably almost no interest, sport, or hobby strange or unusual enough for there not to be a *Verein* for it. No matter if you are into Warhammer 40K™, Pokémon™ or classic arcade games, there is a *Verein* for that. If your heart beats for vintage cars, Formula One™, American Football, Japanese Manga, Star Wars™ or original 19th-century China dolls, there is a *Verein* for that too. And if you really are into playing Quidditch™ as a serious sport, the *Deutsche Quaddballbund e.V.* has you covered as well.



All you need to do is fire up Google™, type in "*Verein*" together with your specific interest and your city, then shoot them an email and before you can say „*eingetragener Verein*“, (i.e., “registered club”, abbreviated: „e.V.“, always written after a club's name), you will receive your invitation to the next *Vereinsmeeting*. All that's left for you to do then is to dress up in your best racing car attire, Manga cosplay, football jersey, or Gryffindor™ gown and go having fun.

Level B2 – Food, Fairs, and Festivals

Happily chatting away with your newfound mates and gals in your *Verein* (and attending further German-lessons) will almost automatically elevate you to the B2-level in German.

With your B2.2 course exam under your belt, the time will then have come to set out and discover the universe of German cultural events – (and yes, cultural Germany has more to offer than brass band music in beer halls, you philistine.)

A B2.2 German-speaker is in fact spoiled for choice in Germany with all the art exhibitions, theatres, operas, book readings, public lectures, poetry slams, guided tours at medieval castles or some of the world's most famous zoos as well as all types of museums, impressive historical sites and mesmerising botanical gardens. And if all that still isn't enough, there's also an endless number of outdoor activities, from mushroom-hunting expeditions and wild herbs-picking excursions to skydiving and rock climbing, and from skiing to forest hiking, lake-diving and sea-swimming to mudflat hikes in the North and mountain hikes in the South.

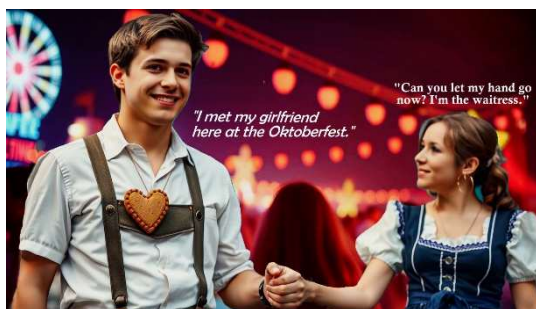
Not to mention the countless festivals that almost every city, town, and village organises several times a year. With your new-found linguistic expertise, all kinds of imaginable and even some unimaginable experiences are now within your reach.

Find your Festival!

So, don't be a slouch, pack your tent and sleeping bag and join for a couple of days the crowd at one of the massive summertime open-air music-festivals like '*Rock am Ring*' or '*Hurricane*'.

Three days of jumping on the spot under a summer-sky with tens of thousands of fellow rock music fans and jeering along to songs performed by the biggest bands in the rock-world will certainly get your blood pumping. And in the evenings, you wind down around the warming campfire with your new-found pals, some cold cans of German beer and with stories told and songs sung that you'll never forget.

Sorry, what? Mega-concerts aren't your cup of tea? Well, then why not instead get into the thick of things by visiting any of the many city festivities and village fairs that spring up everywhere throughout the warmer months? Now, let's see ... Oh, how about, for instance, the largest public festival in the world, the *Münchner Oktoberfest*? Once there, start off by testing your mettle by competing against fellow beer-lovers in a contest to see who can hold a full beer mug at arm's length for the longest time - but don't forget to drain the mug afterwards, of course.



After some more „*Maß*“ ([~mahss], the name for the unit of beer in a „*Maßkrug*“ [~mahss'kroog], i.e. a “stein”, you'll likely be hollering the

traditional folk song *‘Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit’*, (‘A cheers to congeniality’) together with the other 10,999 beer-fans in the *Hofbräu*-tent – the largest of 37 beer-tents on the „*Wiesn*“, the “Meadow” where the *Oktoberfest* is annually held – until you too will feel the famous German „*Gemütlichkeit*“ (“congeniality”) with every fibre of your body.

Just don’t over-do it, lest you end up with the other „*Bierleichen*“ (“beer-corpses”), who traditionally sleep off their beer binge on the so-called „*Kotzhügel*“ (“vomit hill”), a grassy knoll at the perimeter of the *Wiesn*. Much better to end the day instead with a „*Lebkuchenherz*“ (“gingerbread heart”) on a ribbon around your neck and a pretty girl in a dirndl or a strapping lad in lederhosen on your arm.

You don’t want to wait until autumn to have this much fun? Well, there’s no need to. Already in late spring you can, for instance, head up north to the *Hamburg Hafenfest*, the largest Harbour Festival in the world. The ideal venue



to watch Hamburg natives and Germans from everywhere dancing in the streets to northern German rap music and traditional folk songs as well as international musicians on numerous open-air stages. Go and cheer for the international marching bands and their mesmerising choreographies all along the harbour’s wind-swept landing stages while munching on some Hamburg delicacy and drink some proper Pilsener beer.

Why not dare yourself to try a “German Sushi roll”, i.e., a „*Fischbrötchen*“, for instance. Nope, that’s nothing fancy, only a sliced bread roll with raw fish filet, i.e. either „*Bismarckhering*“, „*Kräutermatjes*“, (“soused herring in herbs”), or alternatively „*Nordseekrabben*“ (“North Sea shrimp”). If you like fish, you’ll love this.

Should you feel particularly courageous, expose your palate also to the famous „*Hamburger Aal-Suppe*“ (“eel-soup”), which is exactly what it sounds like and certainly more for the adventurous palate. If you rather prefer to stay on the safe side, though, you can definitely never go wrong with a plain yet delicious „*Currywurst*“ [~corr’ee’vurst], either made from „*Rindswurst*“ [~reents’vurst], (“beef-sausage”) or „*Bratwurst*“ [~braht’vurst], that gets cut into thick slices and served either with a hot, a very hot, or an eye-wateringly and mouth-burningly hot curry sauce.

Having survived these culinary adventures, you’ve then absolutely earned it to reward yourself with a sweet treat. Grab a „*Franzbrötchen*“, (sugar and cinnamon pastry), sit down on a bench along the windy harbour pier and finally feast your eyes (for a change) on some of the most majestic sailing ships on the seven seas passing you very close by on the river *Elbe* while the sun is setting in a rose-tinted sky.

A few months later, in August, your stomach will hopefully have recovered and you’re ready for an excursion into the heart of Germany in the middle of the country. Once arrived, you can join the more than 2.5 million fellow visitors who’re descending each year on Germany’s financial-

and skyscraper-capital during the annual three days of the *Frankfurter Museumsuferfest*, (Museum Embankment Festival).

Now, visitors to Frankfurt can of course find a unique collection of museums lined up along the southern riverbank of the river *Main* all year round – from Germany's fabled *DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum* to the German *Architektur Museum*, the *Museum für Kommunikation*, and the *Museum Angewandte Kunst* for arts and crafts with a focus on design and fashion all the way to the world-renowned *Classical Arts Museum Der Städel* and the adjacent *Liebighaus Sculpture Collection*.

The important difference is that on the three days of the festival, the entrance to all Frankfurt museums is completely free of charge. But that's by far not all. During the three days of the festival, the air along



this „Museumsmeile“ (“museum mile”) in the borough of *Sachsenhausen* vibrates with live music from different open-air stages and wafts with the scents of familiar and unfamiliar culinary delights available at countless international food-stands.

Put on your comfortable walking shoes, skip lunch at the hotel and go and have your share of delicious treats from countries like Ethiopia, Brazil, Turkey, Korea, China, France or Germany, to name but a few.

Between “courses” fetch yourself a freshly tapped beer at one of the many drinks stalls, or enjoy a glass from a wide variety of red and white wines. Or refresh yourself with a typical Frankfurt „Äbbelwoi“, („Apfelwein“ = “apple wine”). Or sip on any type of cocktail you can think of.

Traditionally, the morning of the second festival-day is then reserved for curing your hangover with a hearty German breakfast in one of the numerous cafés around town, before taking full advantage of the actual main-point of the festival, the free entrance to all museums in the city during the *Museumsuferfest*, including those not part of the cultural “pearl string” of museums along the southern bank of the *Main* but situated across the river from *Sachsenhausen* on the Frankfurt city-side.

Once your hangover is history, get back into your walking shoes and allow yourself to get bombarded with new perspectives and outstanding creativity at the *MoMA - Museum of Modern Art*. Have a blast at the *Caricatura Museum* for political caricatures and cartoons and scare yourself and you kids at the *Struwwelpeter Museum*.

Look behind the scenes at the *Feuerwehrmuseum Frankfurt*, (Firefighters Museum), and re-ignite your Techno- and House-music vibes at the *MOMEM – Museum of Modern Electronic Music*. Walk in the footsteps of the hunters and gatherers of the Palaeolithic Age, the first farmers of the Neolithic Age, the Celts, the Romans and the Germanic tribes at the *Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt* and gawk at life-sized skeletons of genuine dinosaurs like the *Tyrannosaurus rex* and marvel at the lifelike reconstruction of a fossil showing a *Protoceratops* and a *Velociraptor* who

died together in battle, all at the *Senckenberg Museum of Natural Science and History*. (They also have Egyptian mummies and a whale-skeleton).

After you've fallen into your bed with heavy feet but a swirling mind full of new impressions, get a good night's sleep before you can then use the third festival day for some general sightseeing and one or the other visit to a museum as well as some mild debauchery at the festival food-stands again, before watching the truly extraordinary fireworks in the evening that herald the end of the festivities.

Interlude: Der Struwwelpeter – Beloved Nightmare Fuel

"Hey, hang on", I just heard you thinking, "Who or what on earth is a "Struwwelpeter" and why does it have its own museum where I and my kids will get scared?"

Hey, well spotted – and an excellent question.

So, as you may know, generations of children in the Anglo-Saxon language-sphere grew up with the books of author and cartoonist *Theodor Seuss Geisel*, better known as *Dr. Seuss*. And in certain ways, the 19th century German children's book '*Der Struwwelpeter*' can be seen as the German equivalent to stories like '*Green Eggs and Ham*' or '*The Lorax*'. Only in a more, let's say, "German" style.

If you are familiar with the tonal differences between the beloved Disney-versions of traditional German fairytales like '*Rapunzel*' or '*Schneewittchen*' ('Snow White') and the original German versions of the old tales, then you have at least an inkling of the kind of bedtime stories that Frankfurt physician and psychiatrist *Heinrich Hoffmann* had written for his then three-year-old son Carl in the year 1844 and that were published in 1845 in the book '*Der Struwwelpeter*'.

The rather short and in rhyme form written cautionary tales in '*Der Struwwelpeter*' have not only traumatised generations of German kids but have also been read to each new generation by parents who had overcome their own *Struwwelpeter*-trauma and gradually convinced themselves of the "educational value" of these stories. A generations-spanning phenomenon that led to passages of the book even finding their way into the collection of common idioms in German, particularly in the shape of the book-characters' names or nicknames from the individual stories.

Which is why a boy who is constantly fidgeting and twitching around is known in German as a **Zappel-Philipp**, since „zappeln“ is the German verb for "fidgeting". Philipp is the boy's name in the story which ends with Philipp falling backwards on his chair and pulling the entire dinner and ultimately the dinner table down with him, burying him underneath.

Similarly, a child being particularly picky with food or refusing to eat what's on the table is called a **Suppen-Kasper** in German, after the boy Kasper in the story of the same name who refuses to eat his soup and



withers away until he ultimately dies of malnutrition, with the final story-illustration by Hoffmann showing Kasper's sad little grave, accompanied by the lines:

„Am vierten Tage endlich gar
Der Kaspar wie ein Fädchen war.
Er wog vielleicht ein halbes Lot -
Und war am fünften Tage tot.“

„Finally, on the fourth day,
Kaspar resembled a thin thread.
Perhaps he weighed half a pound -
And on the fifth day, he was dead.“

Then there is of course the titular **Struwwelpeter** himself, a boy called Peter who refuses to have his hair and nails cut for a year, until his hair is completely „*struwwelig*“ (“shock-headed”) and he looks apparently wild enough to be “deservedly” insulted by a stranger with the words:

„Sieh einmal, hier steht er,
Pfui! der Struwwelpeter!“
„Mit seinen langen Haaren
und seinen ungewasch'nen Klauen:
Pfui!“ ruft da ein jeder,
„Pfui über den Struwwelpeter!“

“Look, there he stands,
Yuck! The Struwwelpeter!”
“With his long hair
and his unwashed claws:
Boo!” everyone cries at that,
“Shame on you, Struwwelpeter!”

Further stories in Hoffmann's book for unruly children include the tale of **Daumenlutscher Konrad**, (thumb sucker Konrad), who won't stop his “nasty” habit until his mother calls the master tailor with his huge scissors, who springs right into action and into unsuspecting Konrad's room – only to gleefully cut the little boy's thumbs right off. (Yes, both.)

Another character whose name has become a common nickname in German for someone displaying the same trait as the protagonist in one of Hoffmann's tales is **Hanns-Guck-in-die-Luft**, or Hans-Look-in-the-Air, a boy who



never watches where he is going. Instead of looking at the road, his feet, or the world around him, he always stares into the sky, daydreaming or watching clouds and birds. Because of this habit, he constantly bumps into people, stumbles, and causes trouble. One day, while walking near the river and looking straight into the air as always, Hans falls into the water. Passers-by have to pull him out, and he returns home soaked and humiliated.

And then there's the 'Very Sad Story with the Lighter' – and “sad” is in fact the least you can call it, while “gruesome” would probably be more adequate. In the story, the girl **Paulinchen** plays with a shiny lighter while repeatedly disregarding the dire warnings of the two talking housecats. Predictably, the story ends with the little girl going up in flames and burning alive. Heinrich Hoffmann describes Paulinchen's end in a child-friendly rhyme like this:

„Verbrannt ist alles ganz und gar,
Das arme Kind mit Haut und Haar;
Ein Häuflein Asche bleibt allein,
Und beide Schuh',
so hübsch und fein.“

“Burnt up is all and everything,
The poor child with skin and hair,
Alone, a heap of ashes remains,
And both her shoes,
So pretty and so fine.”

‘Reviled Tousel-Head Peter’, ‘Thumbless Konrad’, ‘Nearly-Drowned Hann’s’, ‘Incinerated Paulinchen’ and all the other ill-fated children in Hoffmann’s beloved book have a firm place in German culture and language as well as on countless children’s bedroom shelves to this day.



So, should you bring your children to Frankfurt, then take a little side trip to the *Struwwelpeter*-museum and show your offspring how children who step out of line are traditionally dealt with in Germany. You'll be surprised how well they conduct themselves afterwards. To hammer the message home, you can of course also buy ‘*Der Struwwelpeter*’ in any well-stocked bookshop in Germany and read your kids a very German good-night story before bedtime. Although, in this case you might want to start putting some money aside for possible future psychotherapy-sessions.

Plunging right into the Middle of the Middle Ages

Anyway, if large festivals and huge crowds scare you about as much as the *Struwwelpeter*-stories scare children, then instead you might perhaps rather want to dive into your wardrobe and dress up in your best medieval garments, (or keep your uncreased jeans on), and join one of the numerous Renaissance fairs, „*Mittelalterfeste*“, sprouting at the foot of many medieval German castles during the summer.

After you’ve paid the toll to the gatekeepers, you can literally dive right into the Middle Ages by jumping into an open-air communal wooden bathtub, chatting and singing along with your equally unwashed fellow burghers while enjoying a drinking horn of *Met* (i.e. “mead”, a strong honey wine).



Once you’ve left the dirt of the road and your sobriety back in the tub, don’t forget to dress again before hunting down a travelling meat roaster and sinking your teeth into some roasted meat on a stick with some freshly baked bread.

Thus fortified, stroll over to the jousting field, where some suicidal knights in full armour gallop at each other on equally suicidal horses to lift one another out of the saddle with wooden lances. Usually, pages clear away the inevitable mess left behind by this spectacle before other iron-clad warriors enter the tournament grounds and hack at each other with

swords, axes, and halberds to determine who is reckless enough to deserve the favour of the fair maiden observing the chaotic melee calmly from the royal box.

Emboldened by some German beers, you might then feel your fighting spirit welling up and decide to sign up for a membership at the local „*Mittelalter Verein*“, (“Middle Ages club”), ready to throw yourself into the fray next year.

In the meantime, evening has fallen and you join other weary travellers from all parts of the former Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation at the large campfire, where you stretch your legs and listen to the local bard’s melodious tunes, sip on a cold brew and contemplate the undeniable amenities of such a simple life.

A Real-Life Winter Wonderland

After having spent spring, summer, and autumn with watching windjammer and marching bands in Hamburg, visiting museums and exotic food stands in Frankfurt, wearing *Lederhosen* or *Dirndl* in Munich, and time-travelling with a horn of mead and some meat on a stick to the Dark Ages, the time will then finally have come when the clocks are set back one hour from summer- to wintertime, (each last weekend of October), when the days will suddenly become shorter and when the frosty, dark and grey-white German winter will make its unsolicited entrance.

At which point Germans will surely start habitually to rush home after work and curl up into a ball in their cosy flats and houses where they will eat sausages and drink „*Glühwein*“, (“mulled red wine”), read up on the upcoming tax-law changes, tinker with the engine of their VW™ Beetle or Porsche™ 911™, and won’t set foot outside until spring. Right?

Well, no.

First, at least in urban areas German winters are by far not as cold as they used to be forty or fifty years ago. Even in those parts of the country where you can still expect heavy snowfall, (while Austria and Switzerland can almost guarantee you a white winter), there are days or even weeks of permanently icy-blue sky and bright winter-sunshine. In other words, the perfect weather for a walk in the wintry forest, a day of ice-skating or cross-country skiing, a game of football, or a shopping-spree in the city centre.

Secondly, from the beginning of November until December 24 – „*Weihnachtsabend*“, i.e. “Christmas Evening”, when Germans traditionally celebrate X-mas with dinner and the exchange of presents – German pre-Christmas season is anything but “silent night, holy night”.

Aside from the annual run on inner-city shops and stores, Germans are in an overall festive mood during the weeks leading up to Christmas, helped along by the famous Christmas markets in every town and city, bustling with animated shoppers, tourists, office workers, families, and people from all over the world, communally savouring their hot *Glühwein* and enjoying that nice warming buzz after a long workday, all united under the sparkling lights of the market’s huge Christmas tree.

At the latest after you’ve had your third cup of Christmas market *Glühwein*, (optionally with „*Schuss*“ [~shou’ss], i.e. with a shot of Schnaps,

Whisky, Cognac, Rum, or Vodka), you too will feel this special German Christmas atmosphere, usually accompanied by the mouthwatering scents of grilled *Bratwurst*, „*Schaschlik am Spieß*“ (shashlik skewer), „*geräuchertem Lachs*“ (smoked salmon), „*Kartoffelpuffern mit Apfelmus*“ (fried potato-patties with apple puree), „*gebrannten Mandeln*“ (roasted almonds), „*kandierte Äpfel*“ (sugar-coated apples), „*heißen Maronen*“ (hot roasted chestnuts) and other traditional winter delicacies available at the many market-stands.

As long as you're not prone to horrible hangovers, you can also round up your *Weihnachtsmarkt*-experience with a few cups of savoury-sweet but "loaded" „*Feuerzangenbowle*“, a hot red wine-punch with spices prepared with a flaming cone of sugar dripping melted sweetness into the punch bowl from above.



Then suddenly a hush falls over the market, and everyone looks up to the balustrades of the snow-covered church tower, where musicians and a choir start performing classical German Christmas songs,

echoing across the nightly market, from „*In dulci iubilo*“ to „*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*“ and „*Oh Tannenbaum*“. And just like that, any lingering trace of the winter-blues melts away like snowflakes on a winter night's campfire.

But of course, you can also sit week after week in the same old Irish pub, American sports-bar, Indian restaurant, or Turkish *Döner*-joint with the same old circle of fellow expats and lament about how boring Germany is and how Germans make it almost impossible to befriend them and how everything is so much better at home anyway. Sure.

Level C2 – Colleagues, Culture, and German Comedy

But for the sake of the argument, let's say that you do in fact keep up with your language studies and diligently immerse yourself in the German language for roughly 18 to 24 months. Then, one nice morning you wake up, only to realise that the German policeman in last night's dream actually spoke German to you while arresting you for trying to steal an original 15th century knight's armour from the historical museum – and that you understood every single word of him making fun of you after you got your legs tangled up in the broadsword and tumbled down the grand museum staircase, banging and clattering all the way down. Oddly enough, you were still able to understand the copper's jokes and laughter even though your stubborn head was stuck in that darn dented knight's helmet.

Congratulations, you've officially reached the C2.2-level in German.

Cheerfully, you will then get up and stroll into the kitchen to switch on your laptop and watch the *ARD*¹ news while preparing breakfast. Listening to the German news-anchor reporting on the latest record

number of *Oktoberfest*-visitors, you will pick up the *Frankfurter Rundschau*² newspaper and read an article about the *Sternenklang Mittelalterfestival*³ in Thuringia, before you'll write some quick e-mails to your German clients. Then it's off to the shower where you'll sing along to „*Tau mich auf*“⁴ by rap-singer *Zartmann* on the radio.

Leaving the house, you'll have a quick chat with your neighbour regarding the next visit of the *Heizungsableser*⁵. Then you will get into your Audi™ A6™ and on the way to the office you'll listen to the latest podcast episode of *Die Wa(h)re Kunst*⁶. At the office you get a coffee in the office-kitchen while chatting with a colleague about last night's football game of *Bayern München* against *Eintracht Frankfurt* or the latest episode of the satirical *ZDF*⁷ *heute show* before attending the first meeting of the day where you'll present your latest ideas to your Swiss business partners.

During lunch break you join your colleagues at the near-by restaurant of the German fast-food chain *Kochlöffel*⁸, where you order *Grillhähnchen*⁹ and joke about the stupid antics of the candidates in their Australian jungle-camp in the newest episode of '*Ich bin ein Star – Holt mich hier raus!*'¹⁰ on *RTL*¹¹. Finally, it's *Feierabend*¹² and you'll drive home, change, and go out with some friends. You're meeting in the trendy *FurchtBar*¹³, and exchange jokes about the apparent German obsession with *Nacktsein*¹⁴ in saunas, and later you flirt with an interesting German at the counter and make them laugh at your witty jokes, which you have recently picked up at a Berlin comedy club. And the rest, as they say, is *Geschichte*¹⁵.

1. *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands* – Public Broadcasting TV & Radio

2. *Frankfurter 'Round-View'* – National newspaper with HQ in Frankfurt

3. The Sound of Stars Music Festival

4. "Thaw me" ('De-frost my heart')

5. Heating metre reader

6. Wordplay: *Kunst* = Art; *Ware* = Merchandise; *wahr(e)* = true, genuine

7. ZDF – Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (2nd German Television) – Public Broadcasting TV

8. Cooking Spoon – Also the name of a German restaurant-chain

9. Barbequed chicken

10. "I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!" (Reality TV-Show)

11. Radio Télévision Luxembourg - A German private television channel

12. See Part 3, Chapter "Sorry, Come Again? What Germans mean when they say ..."

13. Wordplay: *furchtbar* (adjective) = terrible, horrible; *Furcht* = fear; *Bar* = place to drink

14. Nudity

15. History (as well as "story")

Well, to be more precise, it is the (hi)story of a C2.2-level German-speaker who has obtained the means to conquer the last bastion of that "hellishly" hard German language, the stronghold of wordplays and innuendos, and perhaps the best-kept secret of German culture, (since the rest of the world doesn't even believe this secret exists at all). Yes, that's ight, you are now ready to conquer the realm of: ... German comedy!

... Alright, alright, now. Get a grip on yourself. No need to snort quite so derisively. Geez ...

Fine, admittedly it seems as if in the English-speaking world everyone's aunt and their pet platypus have long since been convinced that all Germans are born with a natural black void where other people store their sense of humour. And furthermore, that this deficiency symptom only gets worse with age.

Heck, there's even a rumour going around in Anglo-Saxon circles that in a particularly drastic case an expat British nurse mentioned the German word „Humor“ [~who'more] in a retirement home in Dresden, which was enough for the scowling German octogenarians to freeze the entire community-room to minus -2°C (28.4°F) purely with the coldness of their icy glares at the hapless nurse.

Some say, this stereotype started as early as in the 1800s with British Queen Victoria, herself of German descent, who had been famously known for being "not amused". At the very latest, however, the world started laughing about the unlaughing Germans when the famous episode 'The Germans' of the classic British comedy-series 'Fawlty Towers' first aired on the BBC in October 1975. In this episode, Basil Fawlty, played by John Cleese, tells his staff to be mindful around their German hotel guests and repeatedly warns his employees: "Don't mention the war!" Predictably, Basil himself then constantly "hints" at WW II and, equally predictable, the German guests react to Basil's antics anything but amused.

But no matter when and how the image of the unfunny Teutonic originated in the end, nowadays it has spread to every nook and cranny on the globe. Except perhaps for the uncontacted Sentinelese tribe on North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean. But better don't bet on it.

Fun Fact about Germany: No Fun in Germany. Go back to Work!



Logically, believing that Germans lack a sense of humour also implies a disbelief in the existence of German comedy. After all, why would a nation without humour have a national comedy scene, right?

Well, hold your platypuses for a moment, Auntie Melinda, and withhold your judgement at least until you've read what Australian journalist and travel writer Amy McPherson had to say about the topic after visiting the city in 2017 in her article: "*Why people think Germans aren't funny*", published on the BBC Travel site on August 4, 2017. In here, McPherson writes:

"Tears of laughter trickled down my face, and I clapped so hard my hands turned red. But I was surprised at my reaction, for I was being hilariously entertained by a German comedian at Quatsch Comedy Club in Berlin, in a situation that could be considered oxymoronic by many."

The Germans obviously appreciate a show of good humour, a fact made evident with the soaring popularity of these comedy venues in Berlin. In fact, comedy has deep roots in German culture, with a strong appreciation of political satire as well as physical slapstick. Yet the Germans were voted in a 2011 survey by Badoo.com to be the least funny nationality, reinforcing a well-known stereotype of Germans having no humour." [...]

However, a decade and a half after the *Baddo.com* survey was published, and despite millions of foreigners having visited Germany since then, the international perception of the “unfunny Germans” has barely moved by the breadth of a silly moustache’s single hair.

And this even though Amy McPherson and dozens of other journalists, travel guide-authors, and expat-YouTubers talked and wrote their backsides off, telling the rest of the world that humour is indeed a laughing matter in Germany.

In fact, if you visit Germany and keep your eyes and ears open, you'll quickly notice that there is an almost ridiculous number of comedy festivals, comedians live-on-tour, comedy clubs, TV comedy shows, comedy podcasts, comedy bestsellers, stand-up comedy events, political cabaret theatres and TV-shows, satire magazines, meme websites, and satire festivals in most medium-sized German towns and cities.

This trend was already in full swing when Amy McPherson visited Berlin in 2017, and it has gained even more momentum since then. German comedians and satirists are increasingly taking on the role of society’s “court jesters”, satirically and sarcastically holding up a mirror to the rich and powerful, and highlighting uncomfortable truths in often shockingly funny ways.

Although this may seem like a relatively new development at first glance, the tradition of speaking truth to power in the guise of humour in Germany actually began in the Middle Ages. Various satirical art forms, such as



witty proverbs, animal fables, and public stage plays performed during carnival festivities were used to criticise the medieval estate system, the Catholic Church, and the nobility’s abuse of privileges; even though those who dared to speak out often faced severe punishments.

The modern era of German satire, (what we would recognise as comedy and satire today), began its rise in the Weimar Republic (1919 – 1933) thanks to a new breed of satirists and authors like *Kurt Tucholsky*, (who escaped from the Nazis to Sweden), or *Erich Kästner*, (who remained in Germany against all odds until 1945), as well as legendary comedian, theatre-director, author, and actor *Karl Valentin* (1882 – 1948), who loved to publicly thumb his nose at the Nazis until 1941, when the regime forced him with a gag-order to fall silent.

After a period of particularly light-hearted and shallow humour in the 1950s, when comedians like *Heinz Erhard* deliberately avoided offending anyone with their feel-good movies, TV- and stage programs, the 1960s finally dawned and with them a new type of satirists, collectively called the “New Frankfurt School”, who set out to replace the feel-good comedy-style of the ‘50s with an acidic bite of stinging ridicule aimed at „*die da oben*“, (“those up there at the top”).

This new satirical stance immediately garnered millions of fans and became the bedrock on which many successful German and Austrian comedians have built their careers to this day.

Thanks to the works of living, retired, and deceased comedians alike, (e.g. the dearly missed and unforgettable godfather of laconic satire *Loriot*, retired comedic grandmaster *Hape Kerkeling*, or current comedy-star *Thorsten Sträter*), German satire and irony today have reached astonishing heights of clever innuendo, biting wit, soul-searching insight and laugh-out-loud humour formerly exclusively reserved for British audiences.

The proof is in the pudding, of course, so just go and see for yourself. For instance on YouTube™, where you can easily find solo stand-up programmes of comedy-stars like *Thorsten Sträter*, *Olaf Schubert*, or *Johann König* as well as TV-shows like ‘*Die heute show*’ with *Oliver Welke*, ‘*ZDF Magazin Royale*’ with *Jan Böhmermann*, ‘*Extra 3*’ with *Christian Ehring*, or ‘*Die Anstalt*’ with *Max Uthoff* and *Claus von Wagner*, none of whom hold back when taking politicians and VIPs as well as any other societal group and development regularly for a ride.

However, while poking fun at those in positions of power makes up a good part of German comedy, another major element of Teutonic humour consists of self-deprecation, i.e., of either ridiculing one’s own shortcomings or that of one’s peer-group or of Germans in general.

Perhaps surprisingly, German humour doesn’t rely much on taking the piss out of other nationalities by generalising certain of their traits but instead typically focusses on its own people’s quirks and oddities, like in this little joke:

*Wie viele Deutsche braucht man, um eine Glühbirne zu wechseln?
Einen. Wir sind effizient und haben keinen Humor.*

How many Germans does it take to change a light bulb?
One. We are efficient and have no sense of humour.

In everyday life, on the other hand, German humour often takes the form of wittily (or not so wittily) “insulting” each other. Such personal jokes and jabs, regarded by Germans as light banter and fair play, however, can appear to non-Germans as rather “direct” and “harsh” and can easily lead to flustered consternation, particularly with nationals from the United Kingdom or the United States, who are traditionally less confrontational in their banter as well as in their daily lives.

Interlude: “Start a Fight or Stay Polite?” – The German Stare



Incidentally, such directness has its roots in the same German penchant for openness and honesty as the (in)famous “German stare”, i.e. the habit of many Germans to look you straight in the eye and to not avert their gaze when you encounter them in public spaces.

Countless visitors to Germany have commented on this seemingly rude and apparently provocative German habit and on the uncomfortable feeling that it

can induce in unsuspecting foreigners. But what you might interpret as “aggressive staring” and lets you wonder if every other German is out for a fight with you is merely a socially accepted and even expected sign of non-duplicity and of having no bad intentions towards you.

You see, we might not often think about it, if at all, but eye-contact norms, when compared in cross-cultural psychology, vary quite a lot between different societies. For instance, in most Anglo-Saxon cultures (UK, Canada, U.S., etc.), prolonged eye contact with strangers is often interpreted as somewhat intrusive, socially inappropriate or even confrontational. In Germany, on the other hand, sustained eye contact is generally regarded as a sign of attentiveness, straightforwardness and, above all, honesty. Breaking eye-contact “too early” – or worse, avoiding it altogether – can therefore also quickly label you as shifty, duplicitous or dishonest.

Now you might think that this “stare” wouldn’t be so bad after all, if only Germans would at least smile at you while hypnotically capturing your eyes with their gaze – but no, instead they’re usually glaring at you with what some may politely call a “resting bitch face”.

However, once again this impression originates from a cultural misunderstanding. Studies on “emotional display rules” have shown that individual cultures differ quite drastically in the appropriate level of positive emotion that is displayed in public. Famous in this regard are the United States with their proverbial “service friendliness” as well as the almost automatic smiling at strangers and a general overt expressiveness, including the American penchant for small talk.

By contrast, Germans have it the other way around: They value authenticity over performative friendliness – to put it mildly. In reality, anyone trying to act “American” in Germany by smiling seemingly meaninglessly at Germans can generally expect to sooner or later come across a German who will be aggressively triggered by such “fake” behaviour and may well confront the innocent foreigner with a rude: „*Was grinst du so blöd!?*“ (“Why are you grinning so stupidly!?”) or: „*Hab’ ich was Lustiges gesagt!?*“ („Did I say something funny!?”). What some may perceive as a “resting bitch face” is, for Germans, therefore merely a neutral facial expression – a way of withholding judgement until a verdict based on your actions and words can be safely passed.

As you will learn throughout this book, one fundamental principle of the German language is to transmit information as precise as possible with the least necessary effort or “detours”. This directness in their language also almost seamlessly carries over into the social behaviour of most German-speakers, as has been determined by sociological models like *Geert Hofstede’s ‘Cultural Dimensions’*, a framework to classify and understand cultural differences across countries.

According to such studies, Germany scores relatively high on “directness in communication” and as is typical in such cultures overall, Germans therefore also put a specific emphasise on maintaining steady eye contact during interactions. Conversely, such “direct” cultures tend to find it rather strange to avert their gaze in order to defuse unpleasant conversations, while “indirect” cultures often use gaze aversion to reduce tension.

This predilection for directness also ties in with the next underlying reason for the “German stare” – the high value placed on curiosity in Germany. Now, you might remember from your own childhood that your mother or father admonished you not to stare openly at someone who was e.g. disabled, morbidly obese, dressed as a Goth girl or in any other way “outside the norm”.

While German parents tend to do the same with their children when they’re too obviously gawking at such a person, they usually don’t discourage such behaviour all too strongly. After all, they themselves often have no problem openly looking at an “unusual” contemporary for a prolonged period.

In short, in Germany, looking out of curiosity is often less socially taboo, which is why people tend to simply observe longer and more openly. Furthermore, it is generally understood – also by the looked-at person – that this usually happens without intending any judgement or hostility.

(However, there is a clear line between looking and “pointing fingers”, the latter of which is considered almost inexcusably impolite and is often met with the old adage, “One finger points at them, but three fingers point back at you”.)

So, in the end – as is so often the case – it all comes down to cultural differences. While Americans aren’t “duplicitous” just because they’re smiling at you by default, Germans aren’t “aggressive” just because they’re looking you straight in the eye with a neutral expression.

Once you realise that the underlying guiding principle of the “German stare” lies in the Germans’ appreciation of reservedness, honesty, directness and curiosity, the formerly as “hostile” perceived gaze will quickly lose its confrontational appearance. And if you can avoid the cognitive bias-trap of suddenly noticing the “stare” everywhere after you’ve heard about it, then you can stroll through Germany completely relaxed and without any annoying second thoughts.

However, should you encounter a “German stare” in the wild, the correct reply is to simply look back with a neutral expression. Don’t deliberately try to “out-stare” the other person but also don’t avert your gaze or try to smile at them to make them comply with your baseless grin. Just hold eye contact for a couple of seconds and then let your gaze wander. Gaze closed.

Now, this appreciation that Germans attach to honest and open directness is reflected not only in the “German stare”, but also in their humorous banter, where they like to go straight for your proverbial jugular by relentlessly targeting your weak spots and quirks.

Personal piss-taking that may be offensive and even insulting to your average Liverpudlian, Sydneysider, Miamian, or Torontonion is usually taken in stride by the average German, while taking umbrage at a joke at your expense is quickly regarded as being overly sensitive and lacking humour and self-confidence. Should you become the target of such a humorous German “trial by fire” (which represents a kind of ‘badge of honour’), your best reaction will always be to return the favour in kind and not to shy away from replying to ambiguous “compliments”, sideways jabs

or ribald teasing with an even wittier low return-blow – or, even better, to hit them next time with a pre-emptive strike.

Interlude: German Killer Jokes

As much as Germans, particularly the “younger” generations led by Gen X, like to test each other's “pain” thresholds in jest, they usually consider jokes about other nationalities to be in poor taste unless delivered with

a heavy dose of irony. However, no such constraints exist when targeting a sub-group of their own compatriots. In fact, there exists an entire category of jokes targeting a specific ethnic German people.

These are the so-called *Ostfriesenwitze*, aimed at the German ethnic group of East Frisians, who live in the region of *Ostfriesland* at the German North Sea coastline. These jokes usually make (unwarranted) fun of the alleged stupidity and simple-mindedness of East Frisians, who nonetheless have taken this trend in stride and even cash in on it by embracing the stereotype and selling all sorts of merchandise and souvenirs related to the *Ostfriesenwitze*. A typical East Frisian joke, for example, goes like this:

A man comes into a bar and says: "Hey guys, I know the latest East Frisian joke." The barman says: "Dude, before you tell it, maybe I should tell you that I'm East Frisian, the bum over there is East Frisian, the couple over there are East Frisian, the two cops over there are East Frisian and the three punks over there are East Frisian. So, do you still want to tell that joke?" - "Nah, never mind. Before I have to explain it nine times, I'd rather not bother."

However, far more relevant than the now increasingly out of fashion going classical joke-categories like *Ostfriesenwitze*, *Beamtenwitze* (jokes about civil servants), or *Fritzchenwitze*, (jokes about little Fritz as the stereotypical cheeky little schoolboy), is the rise of a different type of humour that nowadays dominates the German comedy scene as well as personal banter between German friends and colleagues.

Unfortunately, though, this type of humour is exactly the type that gets stripped of all its funniness when translated into another language, since it consists predominantly of drily expressed German wordplays, innuendos and double entendres.

To illustrate this dilemma, here is a basic German joke that will be robbed of all its wit when told in any other language:

Treffen sich zwei Jäger. – Beide tot.

If you type these two sentences into an online translator you will get the outwardly correct English translation of, "*Two hunters meet. – Both*



dead." In fact, on an American internet-forum, some user once only saw this English translation as an example for a typical German joke and sarcastically declared that this must be "the peak of German humour".

And it's not hard to see why. While the sheer absurdity of these two lines may perhaps elicit a light chuckle, the joke itself simply makes no sense at all in English.

Now you may ask: "*So, what's the trick?*", only to demand: "*Make it make sense. Make it funny!*"

Alright, fine.

So, the first thing you need to know here concerns the German verb „*treffen*“, which has two distinctly different meanings: 1). "to meet", and 2). "to hit a target".

In the meaning of "to meet", „*treffen*“ is a reflexive verb formed with the reflexive pronoun „*sich*“, which is to say, in German people 'make themselves' meet someone, as in, „*Sie treffen sich mit Einstein.*“, = "They [make themselves] meet with Albert."

In the second meaning of the verb „*treffen*“, i.e., "to hit a target", however, the reflexive pronoun of „*sich*“ instead takes on the meaning of "each other". A distinction that only becomes clear through the textual context.

Now, when you initially read the first sentence of the joke, you'd normally assume that this line simply tells you that two hunters [make themselves] meet each other. So far, so boring. Only when you read the second sentence, informing you that the two hunters are both dead, will you realise that the verb „*treffen*“ here doesn't take on the meaning of "to meet" but instead the meaning of "to hit a target (with a projectile)", since you learn that the two hunters are dead now and therefore must have hit "each other".

At the end, it comes down to a typical double-take joke, where first-time listeners usually stare at the joke-teller in bewilderment for a second before the penny drops. "*Two hunters meet, both dead? Huh? ... Ah, no, two hunters hit each other. Both dead. Got it. Haha. Ha.*"

Contrary to popular belief, this type of humour already had been cultivated long before and even during the Nazi era, which began with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor in January 1933, followed by the Nazi Party's victory in the Reichstag election in March 1933. One of the popular jokes at the time demonstrates the double entendre of many German jokes – as well as the widespread resignation in large parts of the German population at the time, of whom 56.1% had not voted for Hitler's NSDAP in the last democratic elections of the Weimar Republic.

April 1933, das Telefon klingelt in Herrn Schmidts Wohnung. Schmidt nimmt den Hörer ab und hört einen Mann sagen: „Hallo, ist dort Herr Müller?“ Schmidt: „Nein, hier spricht Schmidt.“ – Der Mann: „Oh, entschuldigen Sie,



dann hab' ich mich verwählt. "Woraufhin Schmidt resigniert antwortet: „Ach, haben wir das nicht alle ...“.

April 1933, the phone rings in Herrn Schmidt's apartment. Schmidt picks up the receiver and hears a man saying: "Hello, is this Herr Müller?" Schmidt: „No, this is Schmidt speaking.“ – The man: "Oh, sorry, then I've misdialled!" To which Schmidt replies resignedly: "Oh well, haven't we all ...".

Again, this joke only works when you know that the German verb „wählen“ has two distinctly different relevant meanings here: a). "to vote" and b). "to dial a telephone number". Adding the prefix-syllable „ver-“ to the front of the verb indicates in this case that the person who is doing the action (described by the verb) has made a mistake, similar to the English prefix-syllable "mis-".



In the case of „verwählen“, (infinitive verb-form), this results in the double meaning of either a). to have misdialled a phone number, or b). to have mistakenly cast your ballot for the wrong party. A sentiment that in the 2020s might have become quite familiar to some *Brexit*-voters in the UK as well as to a few U.S.-Americans, while in this old joke it refers to the parliamentary election in January of 1933 and the success of the Nazi party and Adolf Hitler.

Okay, granted, even in original German, none of these jokes come close to the funniest German joke ever told. Unfortunately, only *Monty Python* could tell you how that one goes. Nevertheless, these jokes serve as good examples for the fact that German humour is often almost untranslatable.

Unfortunately, for students of the German language this means that German humour will not meet you half-way to accommodate your unfamiliarity with its peculiarities but will immovably wait for you until you reach a level of German proficiency that will allow you to groan loudly and with confidence at such lame jokes.

43.2% of Germans only Understand Train Station

But of course, the funny business of German humour isn't everybody's cup of tea, which is fair enough. It may therefore well be that you don't have the slightest interest in "LOL"-ing at German wordplays and instead have vowed to proudly keep the flag of the English language flying high while stationed in "enemy territory".

Well, in that case, at least let us find you a temporary home away from home in Germany where your chances as a monolingual English speaker are slightly improved by a population with a good percentage of bilingual Germans. As luck and the experts at Statista.com®, a German

online platform for statistics, would have it, they published a nationwide survey in September of 2023 titled, *“Population in Germany based on the estimation of their English language skills from 2019 to 2023”*, for which 23,524 Germans had been asked to self-evaluate their English skills.

Extrapolating from the survey results, the statisticians concluded that in 2023 approximately 12.3 million Germans, (14.2%), considered themselves to have “very good” English language skills. On the other side, the same survey conducted in 2019 revealed that 36.3 million Germans (43.2%) rated their knowledge of English as “poor or very poor”.

Now, let’s regard these results rather as a “glass 14.2% full”-win instead of a “glass 43.2% empty”-depressant. So, you can head out into German city centres and pedestrian zones with monolingual confidence and the certainty that, on average, every seventh German you address in English will not only understand your question of: *“Excuse me, could you please elaborate on the location of the nearest public urinal?”*, but who will also reply in kind with: *“Certainly, good sir/fair lady! Just take a hike down this boulevard for approximately one kilometre, subsequently turn left into the chestnut tree-lined road, carry on for another eight hundred metres and you will see a little houselet with a toilet-sign on top.”*

(Sidenote: It’s unfortunately true; public toilets are notoriously hard to find in German cities. So, best pee before you go out – or resign yourself to paying for a cup of coffee or a glass of water each time you need to use some café’s or restaurant’s restroom).

Anyway, having to ask six uncomprehending Germans before finally getting an informative answer from lucky number seven may still seem a bit disheartening – let alone a strain on your bladder.

Nonetheless, this will most likely be your lot in Germany as a proud “No-German!” advocate, so it is only prudent to familiarise yourself not only with a map of widely scattered public toilets in your town but also with the most common German replies of incomprehension you will indubitably encounter.



One of the most iconic and confusing German expressions you will certainly come across in this regard is the sentence: *„Ich versteh’ nur Bahnhof!“*. A classical German statement that has already confused many

a tourist for obvious reasons.

See, while most visitors of Germany are familiar with *„Bahnhof“* as the German word for “train station”, only few will understand the term’s derived meaning in the above phrase as a seemingly somewhat rude answer to their question for the nearest public toilet, bus stop, Architecture museum, ice cream shop, or *Schnitzel*-restaurant where they finally want to try an authentic German *Schnitzel* with Ketchup.

Hearing the word „*Bahnhof*“ in the reply to their inquiry, the near-monolingual traveller would naturally assume that the nearest toilet, museum, or *Schnitzel*-joint must be situated at the local train station.

Alternatively, however, they could of course also remind themselves that their basic knowledge of German vocabulary doesn't reach the linguistic level where words can take on different connotations, quite apart from the basic meaning that is taught by a language-learning app or in a language course.

Which is also why the term „*Bahnhof*“ in the sentence, „*Ich versteh' nur Bahnhof*“ has as much to do with a train station as the word „*Spanisch*“ in the sentence „*Ich versteh' nur Spanisch*“ would mean that the speaker is from Spain. Instead, the literal, “I only understand train station” as well as “I only understand Spanish” are equivalent to the English expression of, “It's all Greek to me” – or to the more succinct British reaction of: “Wha'?”.



So, let's not sugarcoat it, encountering your first 'only-train-station-understanding' German native will probably be a frustrating experience. But on the bright side, you can now at least tick off the first of your averagely seven necessary attempts before finding a German who won't react with a pained smile of incomprehension– or in some cases with a deftly uttered „*Verpiss dich!*“ (“Piss off!”) – when you ask for a restaurant serving authentic German *Schnitzel* with Ketchup.

(But then, should you really attempt to order such a culinary abomination in a German restaurant, you should probably know that there are easier ways to leave a lasting impression in Germany than getting dramatically chucked out on your ear by a German waiter.)

But now back to your search for the best places in Germany with English as the sole arrow in your language-quiver. The massive annual survey of ‘*The EF English Proficiency Index from EF Education First*’ gauged in 2022 the English proficiency-level of 2.1 million non-native English-speakers in 111 countries and found amongst other results that Singapore and the Netherlands lead the field as the best English-speakers in non-English speaking countries, while Germany ranks in 10th place worldwide in English proficiency.

Even more interestingly, the ‘*Education First*’ survey also details the results for individual cities globally, with the results showing that German cities present a rather mixed bag when it comes to the English skills of their respective inhabitants.

In *Leipzig*, the second largest city in former East-Germany, you will find for instance that around 35% of the roughly 600,000 citizens profess good English skills, while of the 3.8 million people living in Germany's largest city of *Berlin*, already 45% claim to speak ‘fluent’ English. This in turn is five per cent less than in the city of *Köln*, (Cologne), where half, i.e., 50%, of the roughly one million citizens say that they speak good or very good English.

Further down south in *Stuttgart*, 55% of the city's 630,000 people announce the same high level of proficiency, while in Bavaria's capital of *München* (Munich), English fluency rises to 60% among the city's 1.5 million people, and way up north in the city-state of *Hamburg*, 65% of its 1.8 million citizens can converse unproblematically in English with you.

Finally, *Frankfurt am Main* takes the crown as the German city with the highest rate of fluent English-speakers. Here, 70% of the city's 770,000 residents (and its 1.3 million strong daytime-population), have little to no problem talking to you in English about more than just the weather, German beer, or the slightly infuriating sympathy many Germans have shown for the waiter after you've told them the story about being chucked out of the *Schnitzel* restaurant "for no apparent reason".

Meanwhile, charming towns and smaller city-gems like Heilbronn, Aschaffenburg, Oldenburg, Stralsund, Erfurt, Nürnberg, Kiel, Lübeck, Heidelberg, or Freiburg might play harder to get when being exclusively approached in English but are certainly no less worthwhile to consider if you're looking for a welcoming place to live in Germany. (Needless to say, only as long as you don't ask for Ketchup with your *Schnitzel*, of course).

A Second Operating System for your Brain



Having now successfully narrowed down your choice of German target-locations and *Schnitzel*-condiments, (ideally just the juice of two lemon slices), it is finally time to focus on the 1.4 kilograms of flesh that is

often overlooked when thinking about learning a new language. In other words, it's time to talk about your brain. More precisely, let's shine a light on your higher mental faculties and on what will happen to your mind when you install the German language as an additional operating system in your brain.

To do so, we need to start at the very beginning. As you will certainly not remember but will probably have heard about, very soon after you came into this world, your brain began to hardwire its speech-centre according to the 'noises' coming from the lips of your parents as well as other relatives and family-friends. And a short time later, all the talking dogs, dinosaurs, transforming robots, superheroes and other characters regularly appearing in the magic box in your living room did their own part to ingrain your mother tongue into the synapses of your brain, which connected every new input inseparably with your other cognitive processes.

Soon, your kindergarten teacher, the children from the neighbourhood, the nice lady in the corner shop, and the sports reporter covering the games of your favourite team each added their own bits to the specific operating system (OS) which your brain establishes to connect processes in the external world with the specific linguistic sounds and symbols that are assigned to them in your language.

In a nutshell, the language you grew up with inevitably determined the specific way in which you perceive and analyse the world around you. Science-author Uwe Hentschel from the *University of Luxembourg* provides an excellent example for this direct connection between language and world-perception in his article, *„Wie unsere Sprache die Wahrnehmung beeinflusst“*, (“How our language influences our perception”), published in February of 2018 on www.science.lu, where he writes:

“In Russian, for example, there is no such thing as the colour blue. There, two different words are used to distinguish between light blue (goluboi) and dark blue (siniy). And as experiments have shown, native Russian speakers are able to recognise differences between a rather light and a rather dark shade of blue more quickly than English speakers. [...]”

And author Heinrich Matis reports in his article from August 2017 on www.medienportal.univie.ac.at, titled, *„Was macht Sprache mit unserer Wahrnehmung?“*, (“What does language do to our perception?”), on the research of cognitive psychologist Ulrich Ansorge and psycholinguist Sonja Choi from the *Universität Wien*, (University of Vienna):

“A Korean woman and an Austrian woman witness a marriage proposal. Unfortunately, the engagement ring does not fit – it is slightly too small for the ring finger. At home, they tell their families about the experience.

However, the story is told differently in Korean than in German: The Korean language uses the verb "kkita" alone to describe whether the ring is flush with the finger or not. In German, adverbial paraphrases consisting of several words are used, such as "zu eng" (too tight).

Korean speakers emphasise the spatial enclosure of objects through their language, but they do not distinguish in their language whether the ring is placed on the finger, or the finger is placed in the ring. The movement fades into the background linguistically. In contrast, German uses prepositions such as "auf" or "in" to differentiate precisely these cases, which do not exist in Korean: The ring is put on the finger (ring moves) or the finger is put into the ring (finger moves).

"Korean and German-speakers describe the same situation in different ways, with [either] more focus on movement or on spatial distances. [...]"

In other words, German-speakers appear to be subconsciously wired to pay particular attention to movements and their subsequent end points as well as to the ‘empty’ spaces in-between different objects or separate points in time. This provides them with a natural heightened awareness for details occurring in-between as well as with a heightened focus on the end-results of actions, ultimately “forcing” German-speakers to take into consideration also aspects which lie beneath, in-between, and beyond the confinements of the proverbial thinking-box.

In practice this means for you that your fluency in German will enable you to effortlessly switch between your original operating system,

i.e., running your brain on your Mother Tongue-OS, and your alternative German-OS – allowing you to almost magically flip from your customary fashion of analysing problems and approaching solutions to the ‘German perspective’ which might reveal previously hidden pathways to the solution of a problem.



Now, sure, “*cliché alert!*”, but it is undeniable that many people have wondered why it is that the Germans are on the one hand so well known for churning out top-notch engineers, physicists, mathematicians, and innovators who came up with crazy-ingenuous inventions like the combustion engine, the coffee filter, or the general theory of relativity, while on the other hand having produced some of the greatest philosophers, musicians, and authors in modern history.

“Aren't art and science normally diametrically opposed?”, you might ask. “So, how come then that Germans seem to excel on both sides of the spectrum?”

Well, here's a little clue: The curious amalgamation of tinkerers and thinkers, of philosophers and physicists is in no small measure also due to the German language's unique grammar, unusual sentence structure, and word creation system, all of which have their roots in an underpinning linguistic philosophy that is ultimately based on the premise of German as “a communication system that offers the greatest possible clarity with the least possible unnecessary effort”.

As an example, take for instance the separable verbs which are so ubiquitous in the German language, like the randomly chosen „wegfahren“, (to drive away, to leave). Now, German grammar dictates that whenever you use this verb in any other than its infinitive form in a main clause, (i.e., as soon as you need to conjugate the verb), you will need to unplug the first syllable of the verb (here: „weg-“) and take it along with you all the way to the end, where you drop it as the very last word in your sentence. Meanwhile, the root-verb (here: „-fahren“) will take its determined 2nd position in a German main clause. Following this rule, you will then end up with sentences like this:

„Ich **fahre** morgen am späten Nachmittag nach einem kurzen Spaziergang mit Susi und Sabine in meinem neuen Mercedes **weg**.“

(“I leave tomorrow late afternoon in my new Mercedes after a short walk with Susy and Sabine.”)

As you can see, you need to carry the prefix „weg-“ along in your mind until the very end of your sentence and remember to place it in its grammar-ordained last position.

Now, sure, in the above sentence chances are that the listeners will surmise the prefix „weg-“ as the final word before the sentence is completely finished simply due to it being the most logical option. However, other sentences containing the root-verb „-fahren“ in second

position won't make it that easy, since the verb „fahren“, (to drive, to move, to travel) comes with over 20 different possible prefixes to turn it into a separate and separable verb, each with a new word-meaning, from „festfahren“, (to get bogged down), to „überfahren“, (to drive over), to „abfahren“, (to depart), „rüberfahren“, (to drive across), to „fortfahren“, (to continue), and so on.

This seemingly insane grammatical quirk is just one of the reasons why German-speakers basically need to become mental word-acrobats with inbuilt planning skills, since the separable verb-rule demands from them to pre-plan their entire and often lengthy sentences before even opening their mouths while being damned to subconsciously carry their chosen prefix along in their mind and to remember placing it as the last word in their sentence.

“What?! And that’s what you call ‘the least possible necessary effort’?”, you may understandably interject at this point. And sure, on the surface your critique appears legitimate. However, if we do a cost-benefit calculation, then we have only talked about the ‘cost’ until now, i.e. the admittedly existing effort demanded by this construct. So, what about the ‘benefit’ of opting for this seemingly odd word-type of the separable verb?

Well, if you follow the premise of “*most clarity with least possible excess effort*”, then it clearly makes more sense to harness the same horse (i.e. root-verb) to different carts (i.e. prefixes/word-meanings), instead of buying (creating) a new horse (verb) for each new cart (word-meaning), doesn’t it? And the old and white-bearded grammar-sages in their Germanic forest-caves obviously didn’t consider it as all-too-difficult to place the prefix at the end of a main clause to make the separation clearly noticeable. After all, if you can’t even remember a syllable until the end of your sentence, you probably shouldn’t be allowed to participate in discussions at the nightly campfire anyway.

The fact that the wise tribesmen of old, (or rather, the common people throughout the generations), trusted their fellow Germans to handle this mental challenge ultimately led to a *Cerebrum Germanicum* that developed into a natural problem-solving apparatus, primed for planning ahead and remembering details – and even for “thinking backwards”, i.e., the ability to precociously predict an outcome and follow its logical links back to the initial situation in order to suss out potentially weak or faulty links in the process. A nice-to-have OS-feature, especially if you use your head at work for more than just for nodding at everything the boss says.

The ...the ... uhm ... “English Stutter” Eliminated

The final nice-to-have bonus of a brain in German-mode is that the need to plan your sentence all the way through to the end before you start speaking considerably reduces the number of “ums”, “uhs”



and “ers”, (or rather the German equivalents „äh“ [like in ~fäiɐ̯] or „ähm“) as well as the annoying single-word repetitions that many English speakers, even TV professionals, are prone to. This, this “English Stutter” is, is, uh, is hardly to be found in German conversations, since here all the brainwork needs to be done before the “mouthwork”, in comparison to English which allows you to ‘think on your feet’ and to ‘change directions’ while you speak, which frequently leads to “thought breaks” and linguistic idling or stuttering.

If you don't believe it, just prick your ears the next time you hear some German-speakers talking. You will notice that, compared to English speakers, German-speakers make far fewer “thinking pauses” within spoken sentences and thus use far fewer filler words/interjections.

In fact, any German-speaker who audibly reveals that his or her brain is idling by repeating the same word several times, or who uses „äh“ with the same frequency as the average American talk show host uses “um” and “er”, would quickly be metaphorically relegated to the mental ‘pool area’ reserved for ‘swimming wings-wearers’.

This still widespread notion/prejudice of the “stupid” Äh-sayer in German society once had its most prominent victim in German three-times Wimbledon winner and Tennis-legend *Boris Becker*, who in his younger years was known for his high-frequency use of „Ääähs“, which (unbeknownst to most at the time) resulted from a suppressed stutter Becker had developed after a traumatic car accident in his childhood.

“Bobbele”, as Germans affectionately call Becker, worked hard to successfully get rid of this ‘mannerism’, not least because sections of the German media had a field day ridiculing Becker whenever he spoke publicly after his first Wimbledon victory in 1985. And although today's social climate in Germany is very different from that of the 1980s and early 90s when jokes about „Boris ‘Äääh’ Becker“ were two a penny or a dime a dozen, anyone who attracts attention today by uttering too many „Ähs“ is still quickly categorised as one of those intellectual ‘non-swimmers’ who couldn't plot a course from one end of the swimming pool to the other, let alone from the beginning of a sentence to its end without getting lost somewhere along the way. Or in short, “Äh” is *äh* simply not *äh* done in *äh* German.

“Do or Do Not. There is No ‘Try’!”

And with that we have reached the end of this teensy-weensy, super-short answer to the question on every future expat's mind: “Can I or can I not get by with speaking only English in Germany?”.
Well, now you



know. And that's really all there is to say about that. Except, perhaps, one final tip: Should you still decide to remain monolingual, at least make sure to have a few good ‘German-bashing’ quotes in your mental cupboard, to pull out whenever people ask you why you haven't learnt any German despite living there.

For instance, how about this quote from good ol' *Mark Twain*, whose love-hate relationship with German brought him to speculate that, *"In early times some sufferer must have been sitting up with a toothache and put in the time inventing the German language."*

Or what about the one from Twain's oeuvre *'That Awful German Language'* where he writes: *"It's awful undermining to the intellect, German is; you want to take it in small doses, or first you know your brains all run together, and you feel them flapping around in your head same as so much drawn butter."*

And if you have a strong memory and an even stronger aversion to the German language, you might even want to memorise Twain's detailed rant about German separable verbs found in *'Mark Twain's Speeches, Disappearance of Literature'*: *The Germans have an inhuman way of cutting up their verbs. Now a verb has a hard time enough of it in this world when it's all together. It's downright inhuman to split it up. But that's just what those Germans do. They take part of a verb and put it down here, like a stake, and they take the other part of it and put it away over yonder like another stake, and between these two limits they just shovel in German."* Which admittedly is fair enough.

But not to do good old *Samuel Longhorn* an injustice, in the end even he was taken in by the "awful language", as proves his letter to *William Dean Howells* from May 4, 1878, in which Longhorn, known to the world as Mark Twain, admitted: *"How charmed I am when I overhear a German word which I understand!"*

So, why not take a leaf out of Twain's book and grudgingly say to yourself, *"Ah, fuck it, let's give it a go!"*, and start your delicate dance with the wild German language beast after all. And if a love-hate relationship is the best the two of you can establish during the initial 'sniffing out'-phase in your A1-course, then that's still great. After all, even *Michael J. Fox* and *Tracy Pollan* started their relationship with serious beef on the set of *'Family Ties'* in 1985 – and they're now married for over 35 years.

However, as anyone knows, (or at least should know), such a relationship takes effort and commitment, even and especially in challenging times. Unfortunately, and in exact contrast to a love relationship with a person, when engaging with a language, these tough times usually mark the beginning of the relationship rather than the end. Fortunately, on the other hand, the more time you two spend together, the more harmonious and exciting your partnership will become.



No doubt, there will be times when you want nothing more than to break up on the spot with German and curse each and every declined article in all four grammatical cases individually to hell. During such dark moments, keep in mind that the day will inevitably come when you and your German will go out together and have your first fluent chat with your German

neighbour, discuss your favourite hobby with your *Verein*-mates, laugh your backside off at a German comedy club, break the ice with a German quip or joke at a business meeting, and flirt with the good-looking barista or flower shop sales-assistant whom you've had your eye on for a while but didn't dare to speak to before. And all of this without even being aware of your invisible partner German in the background, who will have your back from then on, come rain or shine – or your German healthcare insurance application.

But the best part is, that your intimate knowledge of German will further broaden your mind, enable you to approach challenges from new angles, hand you the keys to a rich and diverse culture, and allow you to see the world with a whole new set of eyes. Or as the legendary Italian film director *Federico Fellini* once said: "*A different language is a different vision of life.*"



Who speaks German anyway!?

"Learning a foreign language means taking your hat off to another nation."

Martin Louis Hermann Kessel (1901–1990), German author and poet

Let's run through a simple scenario together. So, let's say you're going home one day and tell your friends and family about your plans to learn German. Well, you don't need to be the Oracle of Delphi to predict that someone like your football-playing buddy Chad or your wine-loving Aunt Melinda will merely sneer in response before mockingly asking no one in particular, *"Bah, who speaks German, anyway!?"*

And although this is presumably meant as a disparaging remark, in fact that's a very good question.



If your hypothetical Aunt Melinda would know of such things, she could of course then continue her attack by bragging about her own English language, for instance by quoting the survey-portal Statista's finding that in 2023 there were no fewer than 373 million native English speakers worldwide, and a total of 1.5 billion people who speak English either as a first or second language.

Presumably, this eloquent and knowledgeable version of Melinda then would have taken a sip from her glass of boxed wine, smacked her lips gleefully and mockingly added, *"There! Compare that to your measly 95 to 100 million native German-speakers on the European continent, nerd!"* After that, and with little to lose at that point, you might have turned next to the intelligent version of your beer-guzzling buddy Chad, who was standing in the kitchen-corner grinning, and would've asked him, *"Hey, Chad, got anything useful to add?"*

To which your miraculously brain-boosted pal would have nodded wisely and replied, *"Sure. You can divide those 95-100 million German-speakers into 84.3 million citizens of Germany, 7.4 million Austrians and 65% of the 4.6 million Swiss citizens in Switzerland who speak German as their first language. Together they make up about 13.4% of the total of 742 million Europeans"*.

The DACH-Countries – Most German-Speakers under One Roof

Well, you've got to hand it to hypothetical Chad, he does know his numbers. Presumably, this smarty-pants version of your childhood friend would also know that these 13.4% make German the second largest language group in Europe, with the only language spoken by more Europeans being Russian with 144 million native speakers. In third place comes French, with 68 million speakers in France, Belgium and Switzerland, followed closely by English, with 63 million native speakers in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

But if you actually know someone resembling the non-enhanced, rudimentary versions of Aunt Melinda or chummy Chad in real life, you will probably agree that neither of them would even think of Austria or Switzerland when talking about German-speaking countries. And it is equally likely that neither of them will have heard of the term "DACH countries", an acronym comprised of the official country-codes for *Deutschland* (D), *Austria* (A), (incidentally the Latin name for *Österreich*), and the Latin name *Confoederatio Helvetica* (CH) for Switzerland, together representing the *Deutsche Sprachraum*, (German linguistic area), in Europe.

And it would be extremely surprising if Aunt Melinda, let alone Chad, would know that the letter-combination DACH is a rather serendipitous acronym, since „Dach“ is actually the German word for the English term “roof” and the DACH-area unites almost all native German-speakers in Europe „unter einem Dach“, (“under one roof”).



"Wait a minute, that's not quite right, is it?", the imaginary IQ-boosted Chad 'The Lad' would interject here. And he would be right. Apart from the three official "Roof" countries, there are a few other nations and regions in Europe with a German-speaking majority. You've also got the Principality of Liechtenstein, with 30,000 native German-speakers, as well as the Italian autonomous region of South Tyrol, where 500,000 Italians keep the German language alive in northern Italy, and finally the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, where 78% (499,200) of its 640,000 citizens are native German-speakers.

And because the peoples of the DACH-countries love to do things by the book, in 2004 the heads of state of four German-speaking countries established an annual informal summit of German-speaking countries and called it imaginatively: „*Treffen der Staatsoberhäupter der deutschsprachigen Länder*“, (Meeting of the heads of state of the German-speaking countries).

A decade later, in 2014, the four founding-members Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein invited Belgium with its small German-speaking community as well as the Grand Dutchy of Luxembourg to join these annual get-togethers. However, all participating nations attach particular importance to the fact that these meetings do not constitute any formalised language organisation, like for instance the *Francophonie*, but rather informal free-and-easy meetings at the rotational invitation of a head of state, i.e. either the respective *Bundespräsident* (Federal President) of Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, or the Prince of Liechtenstein, the King of Belgium, or the Grand Duke of Luxembourg.

From Namibia to North Dakota to Neumayer III

"Ha!", Aunt Melinda would now interject, "so what? A measly one hundred million German-speakers worldwide. That's less than a third of the world's native English speakers!"

And, of course, Auntie M would be wrong again. In fact, in addition to the seven European countries that are home to German-speakers, there are numerous German-speaking exclaves around the world, some of them in the strangest of places. In general, however, German-speaking minorities can be found in almost every country and on all six inhabited continents.



And if you are planning a summer holiday in one of the last tourist-free places on earth, you can even find 50 German-speaking scientists at the German *Neumayer Station III* in Antarctica, making it officially seven out of seven continents.

Nations that can claim a significant percentage of the total 7.5 million native speakers of German outside Europe famously include the former German colony of present-day Namibia, which borders South Africa to the north-west and where some 20,000 Namibians still speak German as their mother tongue.

South America's largest country, Brazil, is also home to no less than 1.1 million German-speaking Brazilians from Sao Paulo to the Amazon delta, while in Canada, the largest country in North America, 500,000 Canucks still *parlent allemande*. And perhaps surprisingly, in the Caribbean island state of the Dominican Republic, 30,000 Dominicans will perfectly understand your question, „So, wo ist denn jetzt der nächste Strand?“, but will probably stare at you in disbelief, as the nearest beach on this tropical island is usually less than a stone's throw away. Which may well be one of the reasons why so many Germans choose to make the “Dom-Rep” their permanent home, while the 80 to 90 per cent possible tax savings are of course entirely irrelevant.

15.4 million Students Worldwide Said „Ja!“

All in all, there exist identifiable German-speaking minorities in no fewer than 42 countries around the world, including, of course, the United States of America. Today, more than fifty million Americans claim German ancestry, making them the largest single ethnic group in the United States by 2024.

Of course, many of these descendants of German immigrants now know little more than the standard 'Prost', 'Nein' and 'Gesundheit', but there are still 1.1 million Americans in the U.S. who speak German fluently. And the state of North Dakota, for some undisclosed and rather intriguing reason, even claims German as its second most spoken language after English, while another 16 U.S.-states list German as the most spoken language after English and Spanish.

When linguists tallied up all these numbers worldwide and added them to the one hundred million native German-speakers in Europe, they

found that around 289 million people around the globe can converse with each other in fluent German. Admittedly, that's not a mind-blowing figure, but still big enough for you to bump into a German-speaker in places as remote as Brazil's Amazon rainforest, North Dakota's Red River Valley, Italy's mountainous Tyrol, and even some parts of Berlin.

Based on the survey "*German as a Foreign Language Worldwide*", experts who professionally estimate such things have estimated that in 2020 there have been 15.4 million people learning German as a foreign language worldwide, with Germany's neighbours Denmark, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and France leading the way with steadily increasing numbers of German learners.

However, it is Poland, Germany's neighbour to the north-east, that remains the country with the most German learners globally, although the number of Polish German-students has steadily fallen and now sits, compared to 2015, by -15%, leaving an average of two million Polish German learners per year in the first half of the 2020s.

To end this section on a rather low note, the general interest in learning German in post-Brexit Britain has even gone down by a staggering 25%, for a number of reasons. One of them being the UK's decision not to stay in the *European Erasmus™ student exchange programme* after Brexit, also influenced by the fact that only 4% of A-level entries in the UK are in modern languages (and only 0.6% in German).

In addition, since 2004, languages have no longer been compulsory at GCSE level in England, which naturally has led to a decline in language uptake, with the latest figures showing a drop to 47% of 16-year-olds studying any language at all. And then, of course, there's also the fact that English is a global *lingua franca*, which reduces the perceived need to learn other languages, as many Britons simply assume that English alone is sufficient for communication in other countries.

Well, one can only take the European Union's post-Brexit position on this loss and laconically remind oneself that, "*you win some, you lose some*".

Of Fairy Tales, Films, and a Free Press

But here's the good news: There are now roughly 300 million people worldwide who can understand your complaint that, "*Das Bier ist nicht kalt genug!*" and answer with, "*Dann tu' Eis rein!*", instantly starting a mini culture war, because telling a German to put ice in his or her beer, even if it isn't cold enough, is about the same sacrilege as telling an Italian to put ketchup on their pasta. And yet, having 300 million opportunities to argue about beer is just one of the advantages of speaking German.

After all, German may only be the 11th most-spoken language in the world and native speakers may make up just over 1.4% of the world's population, but you will find that an impressive 10% of all publications globally are in fact written in German. This goes from groundbreaking scientific papers to novelistic cookbooks, from horizon-broadening essays to overindulging travel guides, from top-notch comic series to deep-diving historical analyses and from world-famous literary masterpieces by Goethe, Schiller and their peers all the way to surprisingly popular Science-

Fiction magazines like *Perry Rhodan*, the world's largest Sci-Fi book-series that has been uninterruptedly published weekly since 1961, (and probably is the largest and most faceted fictional universe in all of science fiction, currently covering a timespan of over 3,000 years from 1971 to 5400 AD in circa 3,200 issues).

Eager German-learners have access to an entire universe of German publications and literature, spearheaded by thirteen German-speaking winners of the Nobel Prize in literature – including Thomas Mann (*Buddenbrooks*, 1929), Hermann Hesse (*Das Glasperlenspiel*, 1946), and Günter Grass (*Die Blechtrommel*, 1999). And don't forget the certified masterpieces of classic German literature, penned by such larger-than-life writers as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, (*Faust*, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, *Götz von Berlichingen*, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*), Friedrich Schiller, (*Kabale und Liebe*, *Wilhelm Tell*, *Maria Stuart*, *Die Räuber*), or Else Lasker-Schüler, (*Styx*, *Der siebente Tag*, *Mein blaues Klavier*).

And if you feel more at home in the realm of non-fiction, you can always have a go at the works of influential German philosophers like Immanuel Kant, (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*), Friedrich Nietzsche, (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*), Martin Heidegger, (*Sein und Zeit*), Hannah Arendt, (*Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*), Theodor W. Adorno, (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, *Negative Dialektik*), and Arthur Schopenhauer, (*Über die Freiheit des menschlichen Willens*, *Parerga und Paralipomena*).

Interlude: Terrifically Terrifying Fairy Tales for Toddlers

For horror-fans who prefer their tales to be a bit darker, bloodier, and nightmare-inducing, German offers, apart from many recent publications, also the granddaddy of all horror stories with the collection of the original



German fairy tales and „*Gute Nacht Geschichten*“ (“good night stories”), handed down orally by wizened old crones in remote German villages and collected and published in the 19th century by Jacob (1785–1863) und Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm under the title ‘*Grimms Märchen*’, (‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales’).

Some of those tales, painstakingly gathered in the field by Jacob and Wilhelm, have become world-famous through the sanitised and very loose film adaptations by the Walt Disney™ Company, such as ‘*Schneewittchen*’ (‘Snow White’), ‘*Rapunzel*’, or ‘*Aschenputtel*’ (‘Cinderella’). But if you think you know these stories, then you're sadly mistaken, I'm afraid. For the genuine experience of German folk lore, you will need to feed your soul with the original German versions of the Brothers Grimm's cautionary tales, all of which take a much darker turn than the modern, child-friendly Disney™ versions and leading you deep into the realm of horror, carnage, and creative cruelty.

Let's take the story of *'Der Froschkönig'* ('The Frog King'), also known as 'The Princess and the Frog', for example. In the Disney™ version, the titular princess, Tiana, is praying to the evening star for enough money to bid for an old mill that she wants to turn into a restaurant, when suddenly a frog appears next to her. The frog is an enchanted prince called Naveen who begs Tiana to kiss him and break the curse. Tiana agrees, in exchange for the money she needs to outbid the other restaurant-bidders. However, it is not Naveen who is turned back into a man, but Tiana who is turned into a frog. Some shenanigans ensue, and in the end Tiana and Naveen get married, and when they kiss, they turn back into humans.

Well, the Grimm version has a rather different tale to tell. And although this story also has a happy ending, it is much harder earned.

Here, the nameless princess, youngest daughter of the king, *"was so beautiful that the sun itself, which had seen so many things, was astonished whenever it shone in her face"*. Near the King's castle was a large dark wood, and in the wood under an old lime-tree was a well, and here the princess sat and played with her beloved golden ball – when suddenly the ball dropped into the well. But then a frog appeared on the rim of the well and volunteered to fetch her the ball – for a price. The princess offered gold and jewels, but the frog only demanded from her to take him with her to the palace and to treat him as her companion. Finally, she promised to do so – but when the frog returned the golden ball to the young woman, she simply left, not without insulting the frog first.

Later that day, there was a knock on the palace doors and the frog demanded to be let in. The princess refused, but her father, the king, admonished her that she must keep her promises. Grudgingly, the girl took the frog to her chambers, where he asked her to allow him to sleep as peacefully as she does and to pick him up and place him next to her in her bed. Upon hearing this request, the princess became bitterly angry. In her wrath, she picked the frog up and hurled him against the wall with all her might while yelling: *"Now you'll have peace, you horrid frog!"*, (doing so, one might assume, in order to drown out the loud splatting sound when the frog hit the wall).

But lo and behold, when the frog fell from the wall, he suddenly wasn't a frog anymore, but a king's son *"with beautiful and kind eyes"*. In the blink of an eye, the prince was the princess's favourite companion – and (somehow also) her husband, according to the king's will (sic!). Then the prince came clean and divulged to the princess that he had been cursed by a wicked witch and that no one could have rescued him from the well but she alone. Next, he let the girl know that tomorrow they would go to his kingdom together – and that was that. After this revelation, the two young nobles fell asleep, and when they woke up the next morning, *"a carriage came driving up, drawn by eight white horses with white ostrich feathers on their heads and walking in golden chains"*. The couple stepped into the carriage and took off to the prince's kingdom. (Thus, ending a rapid sequence of events, whose speed likely left the princess behind with severe whip-lash.). The End and „Gute Nacht“, ("good night").



If one would now dissect this little tale, one couldn't help but recognise the obvious narcissism, falsehood and entitlement displayed by the princess throughout the entire story. Apart from that, the girl is apparently also prone to unbridled outbursts of rage and even doesn't shy away from animal murder. Bluntly put, it could be argued that these are not the best prerequisites for a blissful marriage. Furthermore, take note that the tale neither loses any word about "love" nor does it mention that the couple "lived happily ever after". For children in the 1700s and 1800s, the moral of the story was therefore not some Disney™-esque candyfloss-teaching like, "love conquers all obstacles", but rather the life-lesson that you must keep your promises, no matter what. And perhaps also that attempted murder can sometimes lead to a forced speed-marriage.

But 'Der Froschkönig' is far from being an isolated case of hard-hitting real-life lessons in the Brothers Grimm's canon. Proving this point, just take the far more famous tale of 'Aschenputtel' ('Cinderella'). Only not in the well-known Disney™-version but in the unabridged original story as told by the Brothers Grimm.

In the first two-thirds of the tale things progress more or less similar to the Disney™ story. The first remarkable deviation you'll notice comes when the two nasty step-sisters both mutilate their own feet, (i.e., they amputate their own toes), in order to fit into the prince's proffered glass slipper. True to form, the clueless prince doesn't even notice this telltale clue, prompting the ghost of *Aschenputtel's* dead mother to send two doves who vehemently alert the shallow-brained future king to the copious amounts of gory blood left in the glass slipper. Later on, when *Aschenputtel* has been identified as the true owner of the slipper and the royal wedding is about to commence, the same two remotely controlled birdies return once more, only to commit a final horrific act of violence.

„Als die Hochzeit mit dem Königssohn sollte gehalten werden, kamen die falschen Schwestern, wollten sich einschmeicheln und teil an seinem Glück nehmen. Als die Brautleute nun zur Kirche gingen, war die älteste zur rechten, die jüngste zur linken Seite: da pickten die Tauben einer jeden das eine Auge aus.

Hernach, als sie herausgingen, war die älteste zur linken und die jüngste zur rechten: da pickten die Tauben einer jeden das andere Auge aus. Und waren sie also für ihre Bosheit und Falschheit mit Blindheit auf ihr Lebtage bestraft.“

[“When the wedding with the king's son was to take place, the false sisters came and wanted to ingratiate themselves and share in his happiness. When the bride and groom went to the church, the eldest was on the right and the youngest on the left, and the doves pecked out one eye of each.

Afterwards, when they went out, the eldest was on the left and the youngest on the right, and the doves pecked out the other eye of each. Thus, they were punished for their

wickedness and deceitfulness with blindness for the rest of their lives.”] The end, good night, sleep tight.

The memorable moral of the story: Greed, vanity, and deceit will literally destroy you and cruelty will leave you with permanent scars, while ultimately, you’ll be rewarded for your inner goodness.

And if you’d now think that at least some of the brothers’ tales must surely be less violent and more suited for the young audience that nightly waits for a wholesome bedtime story, well, think again. Even such beloved and seemingly benign tales like ‘Snow White’ take a decidedly gruesome turn in their original version. When it comes to the young princess and her seven vertically challenged companions, the horror rears its head at *Schneewittchen*’s wedding. Here, the evil Queen meets her demise in a truly horrific way.

„Als aber die Hochzeit sollte gehalten werden, ward die alte Königin auch eingeladen, und als sie sich in ihren schönen Kleidern betrachtete, dachte sie: ‚Ich will doch hingehen und sehen.‘

Als sie aber eintrat und die junge Königin sah, erschrak sie und war so voller Angst, dass sie sich nicht rühren konnte.

Da wurden ihr aber eiserne Pantoffeln gebracht und im Feuer glühend gemacht; dann musste sie die roten, glühenden Schuhe anziehen und darin tanzen, bis sie tot zur Erde fiel.“

[“But when the wedding was to be held, the old queen was also invited, and when she looked at herself in her beautiful clothes, she thought, ‘Well, I will go and see.’

But when she entered and saw the young queen, she was so frightened that she could not move.

Then iron slippers were brought to her and heated in the fire; she had to put on the red, glowing shoes and dance in them until she fell dead to the ground.”]

As you may know, in Disney’s™ *‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’* (1937), the Evil Queen is defeated when Snow White is revived by the prince’s true love’s kiss and awakened from the poisoned apple’s spell. The Queen flees into the mountains during a storm, where she falls from a cliff and is crushed by a boulder, ending her threat off-screen. Snow White then leaves with the prince to his castle, and the film closes on a romantic, hopeful note, giving girls and boys the message on the way that “love triumphs over evil” and that “true love will revoke any evil machinations”.

Well, the Brothers Grimm would probably turn in their graves if they had to see this saccharine version of their German fairy tale. In the original tale, the true moral of the story is conveyed to its young readers and listeners in a far more drastic way. Here, the not so good-natured *Schneewittchen* shows absolutely no mercy to her former foe. Instead, she orchestrates a public punishment that culminates in the Queen’s agonising death by forced self-mutilation, mirroring the older women’s hyperbolic obsession with beauty.

For children in the 18th and 19th century, whether they were horrified, amused, or elated by the coal-black, burning lumps of flesh that had once been the Queen's feet, the moral was intuitively clear: Jealousy and obsession with beauty will ultimately consume your soul and turn you evil. Furthermore, such Evil will eventually punish itself – publicly and painfully.

The Arts – A Kaleidoscopic Gateway to German

With the prospect of such cheerful bedtime stories like the original 'Schneewittchen' waiting for you (and your German-learning toddlers), you will now doubtlessly be planning to start your own substantial collection of German literature, right? Great! To help you get started, here is a short list of some of the most widely read German authors and poets in history, roughly sorted from the past to the present, to help you build your library.

Novalis, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Theodor Fontane, Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Kurt Tucholsky, Erich Maria Remarque, Berthold Brecht, Erich Kästner, Max Frisch, Günter Grass, Michael Ende, Patrick Süskind, Juli Zeh, Ulla Hahn, Thea Dorn, Walter Kempowski, Sebastian Fitzek, Bernhard Schlink, Christian Kracht, Nele Neuhaus, Daniel Kehlmann, Stephan Thome, Florian Illies, Walter Moers, Marc-Uwe Kling, Cornelia Funke.

Too many names at once? Well, then let's narrow it down a little:

30 German Books You Should Read before You're Too Old

1. **Der Untertan** (*The Loyal Subject*) by Heinrich Mann (1914)
2. **Die Verwandlung** (*Metamorphosis*) by Franz Kafka (1915)
3. **Siddhartha** by Hermann Hesse (1923)
4. **Der Prozess** (*The Trial*) by Franz Kafka (1925)
5. **Der Steppenwolf** by Hermann Hesse (1927)
6. **Berlin Alexanderplatz** by Alfred Döblin (1929)
7. **Im Westen nichts Neues** (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) by Erich Maria Remarque (1929)
8. **Homo faber** by Max Frisch (1957)
9. **Die Blechtrommel** (*The Tin Drum*) by Günter Grass (1959)
10. **Momo** by Michael Ende (1973)
11. **Die unendliche Geschichte** (*The Neverending Story*) by Michael Ende (1979)
12. **Das Parfum** (*The Perfume*) by Patrick Süskind (1985)
13. **Der Vorleser** (*The Reader*), by Bernhard Schlink (1995)
14. **Die Haarteppichknüpfer** (*The Carpet Makers*) by Andreas Eschbach (1995)
15. **Ein Billion Dollar** (*One Trillion Dollar*) by Andreas Eschbach (2001)
16. **Tintenherz-Trilogie** (*Inkheart Trilogy*) by Cornelia Funke (2003-2007)
17. **Rumo & Die Wunder im Dunkeln** (*Rumo & The Miracles in the Dark*) by Walter Moers (2003)
18. **Die Stadt der träumenden Bücher** (*The City of Dreaming Books*) by Walter Moers (2004)
19. **Der Schwarm** (*The Swarm*) by Frank Schätzing (2004)
20. **Das Cusanus-Spiel** (*The Cusanus Game*) by Wolfgang Jeschke (2005)
21. **Die Vermessung der Welt** (*The Measurement of the World*) by Daniel Kehlmann (2005)



22. **Corpus Delicti – Ein Prozess** (*Corpus Delicti – A Trial*) by Juli Zeh (2009)
23. **Limit** by Frank Schätzing (2009)
24. **Die Känguru Chroniken** (*The Kangaroo Chronicles*) by Marc-Uwe Kling (2009)
25. **Ruhm** (*Glory*) by Daniel Kehlmann (2009)
26. **Grenzgang** (*Crossing the border*) by Stephan Thome (2010)
27. **Imperium** (*Imperium: A Fiction of the South Seas*) by Christian Kracht (2012)
28. **Er ist wieder da** (*He's back*) by Timur Vermes (2012)
29. **Qube / Drohnenland** (*Qube / Droneland*) by Tom Hillenbrand (2014/2020)
30. **QualityLand** by Marc-Uwe Kling (2017 / 2020)

Sorry, what was that? Oh, you are more of a movie-buff? Well, don't fret, German films have you covered:

15 Genuine German Blockbuster Movies

1. **Metropolis** (1927) – The First Science-Fiction movie, a silent masterpiece.
2. **Die Brücke** (1959) – Tragedy about a Group of German Schoolboys defending an unimportant Bridge against the Allies in the last Days of WW II, b/w.
3. **Das Boot** (1981) – The Adventures of a German Submarine Crew in WW II.
4. **Der Name der Rose** (1986) – A Monk (*Sean Connery*) and his Apprentice solve a String of Murders in a medieval German Monastery.
5. **Lola rennt!** (1998) – A Close-up Berlin-Thriller.
6. **Bang Boom Bang** (1999) – A Drugs- & Crime-Comedy in Berlin.
7. **Der Schuh des Manitu** (2001) – A Pants-Wetting Parody of Western-movies.
8. **Nirgendwo in Afrika** (2001) – A Jewish Family flees the Nazis to 1938's Kenya.
9. **Das Wunder von Bern** (2003) – Germany 1954: And suddenly World-Champion.
10. **Der Untergang** (2004) – Hitler's Last Days in the Bunker.
11. **Goodbye, Lenin!** (2004) – Being a Teenager during East-Germany's Collapse.
12. **Das Leben der Anderen** (2006) – Citizens spy on each other in East-Germany.
13. **Das Parfum** (2006) – A Boy with the perfect Nose for Smells becomes the Creator of an irresistible Perfume in 18th century Paris.
14. **Die Welle** (2008) – A Modern School Class is converted to fascism.
15. **Toni Erdmann** (2016) – Dramedy about a rather Disturbed Elderly Man.

And if you've got music in your blood, you might also want to lend these twenty German bands and artists your ear:

20 "Sound" German Bands, Rapper, and Singer-Songwriters

1. **Rammstein** (Hard Rock/Alt.-Metal)
2. **Kraftwerk** (Electropop)
3. **Nena** (Pop)
4. **Falco** (Austrian Pop)
5. **Die Fantastischen Vier** (Hip-Hop/Rap)
6. **Mia** (Pop)
7. **Sportfreunde Stiller** ("Lads"-Music; Pop)
8. **Reinhard May** (Singer/Songwriter; Chansonnier)
9. **Herbert Grönemeyer** (Pop/Ballads/Anthems)
10. **Marius Müller-Westernhagen** (Singer/Songwriter; Anthems)
11. **Andreas Bourani** (Pop, Ballads)
12. **Mark Foster** (Pop; Ballads)
13. **Jan Delay** (Northern-German Rap)
14. **Fettes Brot** ("Lads"-Music, Rap, Pop)
15. **Die Ärzte** (Punk-Rock)
16. **Peter Fox** (Pop; Rap; Ballads)
17. **AnnenMayKantereit** (Pop/Rock)

- 18. **Samy Deluxe** (Rap)
- 19. **Sido** (Rap, Ballads)
- 20. **Deichkind** (Hamburg Hip-Hop/Electropunk)

German News Media –Subjectively Objective



The output of German authors and writers is by no means limited to the arts and sciences, of course. For all the political animals and news-junkies out there, German journalists provide a broad and varied

selection of contemporary newspapers, magazines, online-publications, radio- and TV-stations, catering to all sides of the political spectrum – with the added advantage that most German media still feel a professional obligation to provide balanced and neutral reporting, especially the public broadcasters such as **Deutsche Welle (DW)**, **ARD**, **ZDF**, **arte** and **Phoenix**.

The same also applies to most of the major German print and online magazines, such as **Der Spiegel**, **Focus**, and **Stern**, as well as a number of daily and weekly newspapers and their online publications, such as **DIE ZEIT**, **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)**, **Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)**, **Frankfurter Rundschau (FR)**, **die tageszeitung (taz)**, **DIE WELT**, or **Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)**,

The biggest tabloid newspaper in Europe, the German **BILD**, deserves a special mention here. Roughly comparable to the infamous tabloid **THE SUN** in England, the **BILD** newspaper still reaches more Germans than any other news medium. In its long history, **BILD** has accumulated numerous scandals, and yet (or precisely because of this) it is still the only newspaper that is considered capable of deciding elections. Generally categorised as belonging to the right-wing political spectrum, **BILD** likes to target individual public figures and to campaign for or against them, not shying away from proven false allegations. Whether you like it or not, you can hardly avoid **BILD** in Germany if you are interested in politics and social issues. However, you should always take what's written in the **BILD** newspaper or **BILD Online** with a considerably large grain of salt.

While the respectable daily and weekly newspapers and their online-publications do tend to lean either to the political centre-left/liberal (*taz*, *FR*, *DIE ZEIT*, *SZ*), or liberal/centre-right (*NZZ*, *FAZ*, *WELT*) side of the aisle, these publications still report mostly in an objective and balanced manner and regularly offer detailed background-reporting on current events, making the German population one of the better-informed people in the European Union.

In fact, according to the 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report': "Media Usage Trends in Germany 2024", the demand for reliable news remains unabatedly high in Germany where "89 per cent of respondents read, listen to, or watch the news several times a week, as in the previous year (2023: 89%). [And] 42 per cent of respondents are extremely or very interested in politics."

When it comes to the preferred sources for political and other news, *"67 per cent of respondents [in Germany] use digital news services from websites, apps, or social media on a weekly basis. At the same time, 60 per cent watch traditional news programmes on television [...]. 45 per cent of respondents regularly consume content from established news providers on the internet, with this proportion rising to 47 per cent among 18 to 24-year-olds."*

In other words, the chances of landing in a captivating political discussion with a well-informed German are more than twice as good as stumbling across a German who voted for the extreme far right in the 2025 federal election (20.8%) – unless you are travelling to eastern Germany, the stronghold of the right-wing radicals, in which case all bets are off, of course.

547 Days between Flabbergasted and Fluent

But now let's pop back in on Aunt Melinda and see what she has to say about all the information presented so far and whether she might have changed her mind regarding your decision to learn the language of Luther, Mozart, Einstein, Goethe, or Herbert Grönemeyer.

Here she is now, sitting at the kitchen table, laughing at you as she finishes her fifth glass of wine: *"So what if there are 289 million German speakers?*

Or that they have all this literature and other nerdy BS! Let me tell you something, you fool. You will never learn that language! But you know what? Here's a deal: If you learn German, I'll learn Mongolian throat-singing. That's much easier. Haha!"



Fine, deal accepted, Aunt M. So, first of all, let's find out where the German language actually ranks in the official language-ranking list comprised by no less an institution than the U.S.-American *Foreign Service Institute* (FSI), i.e. the professional folks responsible for training all U.S.-diplomats.

Drawing from decades of first-hand experience, the FSI-experts have compiled a learning-difficulty ranking from the native English-speaker perspective that includes most languages spoken somewhere in the world today, starting with Category 0, (English for native English speakers) and proceeding to Category I, II, III, and IV, finally ending with the hellishly difficult Category V.

To determine the category of each language, the diplomat-drillers assigned to each language the duration in weeks of uninterrupted study-time that would be necessary to reach *General Professional Proficiency in Speaking* (S3) and *General Professional Proficiency in Reading* (R3). Hence, it comes as no surprise that you'll find the usual suspects of Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Japanese and Arabic in the "blood, sweat and tears" Category V, since they all require at least 88 weeks or 2,200 hours of uninterrupted (!) study-time before students reach S-3/R-3 proficiency.

And what about German? Surely German finds itself at least in Category III or even Category IV, right? Well, if you have been paying attention, naturally the FSI-ranking is based on the perspective of native English speakers – and the ancient and deep-rooted family ties between English and German are even acknowledged and found to be acceptable by all these nationalist “uncles” who will rant about “foreigners” at every Christmas family-dinner on both sides of the Germanic languages-family.

However, the ties are not so close as to allow German to effortlessly slide into Category I, requiring only 23–24 weeks (575–600 hours) of uninterrupted study. This privilege is reserved for the languages most closely related to English, such as Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch and Afrikaans, as well as the Latin-derived languages of Romanian, Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese.

Thus, German has been taken by the scruff of the neck by the FSI linguists, cold-heartedly excluding the unruly lingo from this “It”-group of English’s BFFs, (supposedly due to its highfalutin grammar, unique sentence structure and odd word creation methods), and relegating the linguistic beast instead to Category II, which contains, according to the FSI, all *“languages that are similar to English”*. Curiously, however, this criterion applies to only one language in the world: Yes, German, of course. Hence, the beast can be found all alone in Category II.

But while German may be blatantly shunned by English and its inner circle of buddy-languages, for most aspiring German-students this relegation to “merely” Category II turns out to be an unexpectedly pleasant surprise.

After all, when you look merely one step up at the Category III languages of Malay, Indonesian or Swahili, you would already need 36 weeks or 900 hours of pure study-time to speak one of these languages with confidence. Not to mention tackling one of the Category IV heavyweights of Czech, Finnish, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Icelandic, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Xhosa, or Zulu, each demanding at least 44 weeks or 1,100 hours of unadulterated study time. And if you look at any of the linguistic behemoths in Category V, (see above), then German actually comes across as rather docile and approachable in comparison, innit?

So, cheer up and rejoice. After a mere 30 weeks, or less than seven months, of 24/7 immersion into the German language, you could become a fluent German-speaker – provided you study, listen to, and speak German consistently for 210 consecutive days.

Okay, fair enough, that may be asking a bit too much from anyone. Realistically, therefore, you are more likely to take a regular German course at a language school and attend two 90-minute evening classes a week. On top of that, you might spend another hour a day on homework and vocabulary study, plus a few hours listening to German podcasts, radio, or audiobooks or watching German TV. And you might even take part in, or at least eavesdrop on, a couple of German conversations a week. This programme should be reasonably feasible without taking up too much of your valuable free time and allow you to reach the highest (C2) level of proficiency in German.

Which means in practice, according to the *Goethe Institute* – i.e., the German non-profit organisation responsible for taking your official C2-exam – that you will then have achieved “[...] the highest level on the six-

level competence scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It means that you have a command of the language in all situations, can communicate fluently, differentiated and practically error-free, and can understand and reproduce all information from various media and conversations."

Sounds great, right? Which leaves us with the most important question of all: *"How long will it realistically take you until you can finally hold your C2 certificate in your hands?"*

Well, let's do the math. Assuming you have a regular 9-5 job and still want to have enough time for your hobbies, friends and social activities, the realistic time span of your German studies from A1 to C2 will be ... 18 months – or precisely 574 days.

This means that on day 575, you will strut into your kitchen at home with a big grin on your face and leisurely take a seat across from Aunt Melinda, who is sitting in her usual place at the kitchen table, sipping her sixth glass of supermarket *Merlot* of the day.

"Whatcha grinning at!?", she snaps irritated, after glaring at you over the rim of her wine glass for a while, her painted eyebrows furrowed. Instead of answering her, you simply pull a glossy flyer out of your back pocket and place it on the table in front of her. Perplexed, Auntie M looks at the flyer, then at you, then back at the flyer. Finally, her slightly trembling hands pick up the brochure, and a scowling Melinda croakily reads out loud what is written on the cover. *"Learn Mongolian Throat-Singing from the masters in Mongolia! Application Form, Fees, and Flight Schedules inside."*



In an instant, Melinda's cheeks flush with the colour of her cheap *Merlot*. For once, she is utterly speechless. You nonchalantly rise from your chair and head towards the kitchen door. Only to suddenly turn around under the door frame and quip with a smile in your voice and in perfect German: *"Ich freu' mich schon auf Deinen 'kehligen' Auftritt, wenn du wieder zurück bist, Tantchen. Gute Reise!"*

And solely for Auntie Melinda's sake, you add: "Which means that I'm already looking forward to your 'throaty' performance when you get back, Auntie. Have a good trip!" – Wave, then *Abgang links* (exit left).



A Rendez-Vous with German's Roots

"The mother tongue can say to everything else: Without me you can do nothing! He who spurns me will be spurned in return by his own era and quickly forgotten by posterity."

Gottfried August Bürger, (1747 - 1794), German poet

Can you remember that one time when your friends introduced you to this particular guy or girl, but then they warned you that he or she might perhaps be *"quite difficult"* and *"rather complicated"*?

However, when you finally met this person, you found her or him to your surprise actually quite nice and interesting. But of course, weren't born yesterday and remembered your friends' warnings. So, you told yourself: *"Better safe than sorry,"* donned your private-eye hat and began to investigate his or her background a bit more thoroughly. Nothing dramatic, of course. Just a little check up on their online presence, merely to see what makes them tick, where they come from, what their likes and dislikes are, and in what kind of circles they move. Just what everyone would do, right?



Well, whether you actually see yourself reflected in this "pre-emptive stalking"-scenario or not, the truth is that many people roaming the dating market today won't think twice before eagerly firing up their laptop or mobile phone and start snooping on a potential partner.

This may start innocently enough with checking the target-individual's LinkedIn™- and Xing™-profiles and continue with scrolling through their postings on Instagram™, Facebook™, TikTok™, and Twitter/X™. This is then followed by a deep dive into the person's earlier postings and comments on Reddit™, 4Chan™, 9Gag™, YouTube™, or Twitch™, and from here, it's only a small step to downloading an app that allows you to surreptitiously clone the person-of-interest's phone during a first noncommittal date at a downtown Starbucks™.

Now, of course you may (hopefully), not go this far, but enough people have a hard time keeping their curiosity in check and invest a great deal of time into gathering intel about a person with whom they will spend on average a mere 2 years and 9 months together before breaking up again – that is, if you believe the British newspaper *Daily Mail*, which published this statistic. (So, "grain of salt" and all that.)

This said and considering the enormous effort people sometimes invest in such elaborate "spying", it seems all the more astonishing and inexplicable, how little effort people put in comparison into researching a different kind of partner with whom they also intend to spend a copious amount of time on regular dates, plan to continuously deepen the relationship with, and ultimately want to spend the rest of their lives with.

The identity of this mysterious partner? Well, the foreign language they choose as their new linguistic companion, of course. An intellectual partner with whom they are going to have regular dates in a language school, who will accompany them on extended journeys or even on a permanent move to another country, and who will, to all intents and purposes, become an inseparable part of their life.



Despite such a possibly serious relationship, many language-novices are nonetheless fully content with second-hand bits and pieces of information about their potential lifelong linguistic partner that often derive from friends and family-members who “have it on good authority”, (aka the internet), that for instance German is definitely “*quite difficult*” to speak and “*rather complicated*” to learn. And once you’ve heard these kinds of rumours often enough, it is quite understandable to prematurely break up with your fancied target-language without ever giving it a chance to reveal its (often hidden) best sides to you.

Okay, that’s probably about as far as this partnership-analogy can be stretched. After all, foreign languages are rarely known for cheating on you with a work-colleague, or for leaving you on the spot for a “better match”. Furthermore, so far there haven’t been any reports about any foreign language incessantly complaining about your beer belly or your “good-for-nothing” group of friends or about your “shoe fetish” or your sacred hour of watching ‘*Grey’s Anatomy*’.

On the other hand, there are certainly some similarities between a steady partner and a foreign language, at least when it comes to their respective backgrounds. Take for example their origins, i.e., their place of birth and upbringing or the period of their formative years. Indubitably, you would like to know more about your love interest’s history – and the same should just as much go for the language that you’re about to invest a lot of time and effort in. After all, such background intel can provide you with invaluable clues and signs when it comes to the often colourfully mixed bag of good and bad character traits of your potentially lifelong partner.

Finally, there is also the extended family and their roots, which may reach back into the annals of history, entailing all the positive and negative ramifications of such an extensive ancestry. Certainly, only the most starry-eyed lover would ignore these basic facts and enter into a serious partnership blindly.

Obviously, this book cannot provide you with dating tips or advice on finding your perfect partner (except not to give up). However, it’s an entirely different kettle of “Babel Fish”, (look it up in “*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*” by Douglas Adams), if you should be interested in the secret corners, the dark and bright history and the peculiar characteristics of the German language as your potential lifelong partner.

Fortunately, in this case, you are in exactly the right place to find out all about German’s adventurous history, shadowy ancestors and

flippant offspring, as well as its apparently inexplicable character quirks and unique traits.

So, sit back and prepare for a wild journey through the adventurous beginnings, pubertal trials and tribulations, and the mature adulthood of this enigmatic language and meet along the way the extraordinary and ordinary people who have helped to shape German into the complex, colourful and creative language it is today.

The Early Years – A Carefree Childhood in the Woods

Proto-Germanic & Old High German

We begin our journey with an old adage that you have presumably heard mentioned once or twice before: that the German and English languages are closely related.

In fact, even most linguists reluctantly agree that German can be considered something of a “grandfather” to the English language (probably on the paternal side), since the two ancient tribes that lent their names to the term 'Anglo-Saxon', the Angles (*Angeln*) and the Saxons (*Sachsen*), originated from the northern parts of a territory that you know today as Germany.

Incidentally, for any modern-day English speaker about to learn German, this at times bloody Anglo-Saxon invasion of the British Isles has turned out to be a veritable stroke of luck. After all, many “down-to-earth” English terms like *house* („Haus”), *mouse* („Maus”), *fish* („Fisch”), *table* („Tisch”), *hand* („Hand”), *finger* („Finger”), *nose* („Nase”), *glass* („Glas”), etc., can claim German ancestry and have changed only marginally, if at all, throughout the millennia. Making many “basic” German words easy for English-speaking German students to understand and memorise.

All the highfalutin English terms on the other hand, like *vermillion*, *cucumber*, *bureaucracy*, *gastronomy*, or *surrender*, derive instead from the French language, thanks to William the Conqueror and his Norman knights, who were more than eager to acquire some prime real estate in England’s fledgling housing market in 1066 AD.

Already roughly a thousand years before William had spearheaded this early foreign run on London real estate, however, the far less up-market Angles, Saxons and the often-forgotten Jutes had successfully claimed their stake in Britain. Around the year 450 AD, these three tribes landed on the shores of Albion and brought with them, (among other things), the Anglo-Frisian language, which only just recently, (in historic terms), had evolved from the **Proto-Germanic** language and which soon became what is known today as *Old English*, aka the first “proper” English language with a fixed position in the West Germanic language family.

Sadly, the fabled Proto-Germanic language itself disappeared around the same time silently into the mists of history. In fact, we still know very little about this forefather of many Northern European languages,



since this old veteran was already on his deathbed when the *Angeln*, *Jüten*, and *Sachsen* first took to their wooden boats in their quest to find out what lies beyond the distant foggy coastline in the middle of the North Sea.

Hence, when Frisian fisherman *Berowelf* and his wife *Bodil* together with their close and distant northern Germanic relatives first set foot on Britain's green shores to begin slowly but tenaciously pushing the native Celtic Britons ever further towards the Scottish Highlands, the Proto-Germanic language already had all but completed its transition into the three Germanic language-branches of *North Germanic*, *West Germanic*, and *East Germanic*. And thus, Proto-Germanic became no more than a distant memory for the descendants of *Berowelf* and *Bodil*, left behind on the mist-covered plains of their ancestral North German lowlands.

As for the transformation period, linguists theorise that the transition from Proto-Germanic to the three new Germanic language-branches must have been a rather drawn-out weaning process over roughly 1,000 years, beginning circa in the 5th century BC and finalising in the 5th century AD. It is further presumed that the entire forking out process must have been anything but straightforward and that much toing and froing was involved until the three language-branches of *North*, *West*, and *East Germanic* had finally crystallised.

The little we know of Proto-Germanic today comes therefore from only a handful of runic inscriptions, for instance from a carving on a Germanic soldier's helmet that has been forged in the second century AD, as well as from a few individual words penned down by Roman senator, historian, and author *Publius Cornelius Tacitus* in his famous literary work '*Germania*', the first edition of which hit the shelves at Waterstones™, Thalia™, and Barnes and Nobles™ in the year 98 AD.

Not giving to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Incidentally, historians have found that Tacitus, the acknowledged expert on all things *Germania* in his time, had built his fame as a travel author and guide to the Germanic mysteries exclusively on stories and reports passed on to him second-hand by travellers and Roman legionnaires, while he was taking notes with a chilled cup of wine at his side, lounging in the pleasant Roman sunshine.

In this regard, good old Publius Cornelius could not have been more different from another certain Roman, who had made the way across the Alps in person around 150 years before old couch potato Tacitus had even picked up a quill for the first time. As a young and ambitious general in the Roman army, this man, called *Gaius Julius Caesar*, had early on set his stubborn mind on expanding the Roman Empire, preferably by conquering and annexing certain fertile regions in north-western Europe that seemed ideal for growing and producing wine, truffles, bread, and cheese.

These specific regions, nowadays famous for French wine, Belgian



truffles, German bread, and Swiss cheese, were grouped together by the Roman Empire under the name of *Gaul*. A veritable land of milk and honey, with the only drawback being that other people already inhabited it.

With the succulent flavours of fine red wine, aromatic cheeses, delicate truffles and crusty bread already on his tongue (and the ringing of coins from future tax revenues in his ears), Caesar was hell-bent on conquering these lands and subjugating the Gallic, Germanic and Brittonic tribes, who not only inhabited these lands but also had the audacity to resist his legions and ambitions.

In a rather predictable next move, Caesar's legions then invaded *Gaul* and waged a war of aggression against the local tribes between 58 and 51 BC in what became known in Roman history as the *Gallic War*. (There's no record of what the defeated tribes called this conflict, but it was probably something like, "That bloody Roman invasion").

While the general slaughter was going on to Caesar's satisfaction, the young general took particular notice of several Germanic tribes who had crossed the Rhine to join their *chers amis* on the western bank in return for a small mercenary fee and the tantalising prospect of denting a few Roman helmets themselves.

But while the future emperor duly acknowledged the extraordinary skill and courage of these formidable wildlings, there was only one realistic outcome to the clash between this fierce but disorganised rabble and the disciplined legions of Caesar's army. The battle for *Gaul* finally culminated in 52 BC, when Prince *Vercingetorix* (c. 82 BC - 46 BC) of the Gallic-Celtic *Arvernes* tribe led a united force of almost all Gallic tribes into a final confrontation with Caesar's army. A last desperate attempt to defend Gallic independence. Alas, one that was doomed to failure.

Soon after, young Julius returned triumphantly to Rome with the defeated and captive Vercingetorix in tow, where the *Arvinian* prince was imprisoned for six years before being paraded through Rome during another of Caesar's triumphal processions in 46 BC and subsequently executed by strangulation. Meanwhile, back home, the conquered people of the kidnapped prince had come to a grudging agreement with the occupying forces and were even beginning to enjoy the more pleasant aspects of Roman life, from aqueducts to indoor plumbing and from sophisticated viticulture to the fine art of cheese-making.

But what of the Gallic tribes' former Germanic allies across the Rhine, that river which, in the minds of many contemporary Romans, was merely a temporary border of the Roman Empire? Well, these wild and untamed forest dwellers had quietly disappeared into the fog of the final battles of the Gallic War and returned to their mystical forests, where they continued to live, for the time being, free from Roman oppression, but also free from indoor plumbing, running water, communal toilets, paved roads or lavish orgies.

This isn't to say, of course, that Germanic tribes didn't have any contact with the Romans stationed along the Rhine. For one thing, there were those tribes who had settled on the western bank of the river and who had indeed succumbed to Roman rule and adopted the Roman way of life, some willingly and some not so much, while paying the taxes that Rome

imposed on them, some willingly and some not so much.

For another, several Germanic tribes living across the Rhine in free *Germania Magna* sometimes also emerged cautiously from their dense forests to trade with the Roman settlements along the river. But these brief encounters shed little light on their enigmatic culture, and their incomprehensible language remained a mystery to the toga-wearing occupiers on the other riverside.

In the years that followed, the local Roman authorities focused increasingly on portraying these evasive tree-huggers as "inferior in all things" to the Roman subjects in the provinces of the Empire, in a calculated attempt to discredit the unbending Germanic tribes in the eyes of their Romanised former brethren. Although, some historians also think it possible that this was the genuine belief of the Romans at the time. (No, it was almost certainly propaganda. Come on, it's the Roman Empire we're talking about here.)

Of course, this was not the only cunning plan the Romans devised to weaken the Germanic resistance across the Rhine. General *Agrippa*, appointed governor of the new Gallic provinces by Emperor *Augustus*, soon began to build a network of military roads and legionary camps along the river, cunningly supporting the pro-Roman Germanic tribe of the *Ubians* against their anti-Roman brethren by settling them on the western ('left') bank of the river. As part of this settlement policy, Agrippa founded some of the oldest surviving German cities, including Bonn (*Bonna*), Trier (*Augusta Treverorum*) and the settlement of *Oppidum Ubiorum* (38 BC), which later became the city of *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium* and today is known as Cologne (*Köln*).

Eavesdropping on two Roman Officials

In such a tense military, political and social atmosphere, it could well have been that one sunny summer afternoon in the year 19 BC, during Agrippa's second term as governor of *Gallia Comata* (20-18 BC), one of Agrippa's sycophants and minor dignitaries, let's call him Quintus, was lounging on the terrace of his villa in picturesque *Bonna*, sipping chilled wine from his private vineyard with his guest and fellow dignitary Fabius.



After popping a sautéed otter tongue into his mouth from the gem-encrusted otter tongue bowl, Quintus chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, then looked at his guest and remarked: "No, seriously, Fabius, something must be done about these wildlings, I say. And very soon. Otherwise, one day they'll overrun us here from out of their sinister forests, I tell you."

"Ita vero, Quintus. Totally with you there", Fabius nodded while munching on some grapes. "You know, I've heard rumours that Agrippa will return to Rome next year and that they'll send young Marcus Lollius as his successor. And to be frank, that can only be good news for the barbarians."

"Lollius!?" Quintus spat. "By Minerva, we are doomed."

"Well, he does have some experience, you know. But he is certainly no Ceasar", said Fabius.

"No one is Ceasar but Ceasar!", Quintus replied with fervour. "They just don't make men like that anymore, by Jupiter!"

"Indeed, my friend, indeed. If only Ceasar would have finished what he began with his Rhine-bridges and his deep sorties into the wildings' territory back during Gallia's conquest." Fabius sighed exaggeratedly while grabbing a handful of Andalusian olives from a silver bowl.

"I don't know, Fabius", mused a calmer Quintus. "I do not think even Caesar himself would have been able to civilise these uncouth wildlings in their dark forests. They are simply too stubborn and stupid to embrace Roman civilisation and pay their due share of taxes."

"Well, at least we could have used them as slaves, eh?" Fabius pulled a face and spat out an olive pit. "Instead, they're even openly taunting us now, proclaiming that they're out to capture the Eagle of one of our legions."

"What? Never!", Quintus barked, knocking over the bowl of otter tongues in his excitement. "By Mars, these gods-less animals wouldn't dare!"

"Your word in Bellona's ear", Fabius replied while refilling his wine goblet. "But according to Ceasar himself they do actually have some gods on their side, you know."

"Bah!", spat Quintus. "Ridiculous superstitions, nothing more. Just let them come, I say! Young Lollius or not, our legions will deal with the bastards and their puny gods in no time, mark my words. And then the full might of the Empire will come crashing down on them and in a few years from now we will be feasting in our new villas deep in the new province of Germania Magna!"

"Amen to that", said Fabius.

"What?", said Quintus.

"What?", said Fabius.

"What what!?", said Quintus.

"Uh, nothing", said Fabius. "No idea where that came from"

Interestingly, already Ceasar himself had been extremely irritated by the fact that the uncivilised Germans he had encountered during his two crossings of the Rhine in 55 and 53 BC had been completely indifferent to the idea of a Pantheon of Gods. Even worse, in consequence these *Alemanni* also had shown no interest in the sacred Roman tradition of ritually killing livestock and at times people as religious sacrifices.

In fact, Ceasar was so pissed off about this savage and blasphemous attitude that he himself took up the quill to let the world and posterity know about it: *"They have no Druids to regulate divine worship, no zeal for sacrifices. They reckon among the gods those only whom they see and by whose offices they are openly assisted – to wit, the Sun, the Fire-god, and the Moon."*

But did Quintus's words and his new villa deep in *Germania Magna* territory come true in the end? Well, let's take a little time jump to four years after the last meeting of the two minor dignitaries and find out. The setting: A run-down tavern in the poorest part of *Bonna* on a late summer evening.

Fabius, now wearing the shiny breastplate and helmet of the

legionaries, enters the dimly lit but noisy tavern with a few soldiers in tow and bellows: *"Alright, scumbags! Enough cervisia for today. Time to piss off and scuttle back into your rat-infested holes for the night!"*

Amid muttering and hissing curses, the poorly dressed men and few women rise from their tables and stagger towards the tavern door.

"Hey, hang on! Yes, you there!", shouts Fabius suddenly, pointing at a particularly shabby man shuffling towards the hole in the wall. The man stops, raises his head, and looks at Fabius out of sunken eyes.

"Quintus is that you!?", Fabius asks perplexed.

"Yeah ... Salve, Fabius", mumbles Quintus in reply.

"By Juno! What happened to you, man?", asks Fabius in astonishment, before adding, *"You must have lost at least fifteen librā, man."* Then he takes Quintus, who mumbles, *"Seventeen"*, by the arm and says, *"Come here, sit down, sit down. Hey, publican! Two beers. And none of that watered-down piss, you hear!"*

Once Fabius and Quintus settled at a table with their mugs of cervisia and Fabius has once again urged his former colleague to tell his story, Quintus finally comes clean. *"Well, the 'Clades Loliana' [Latin: 'Defeat of Lollius'] happened, of course! What else, Fabius? After those filthy Sugambrians, Tenkterians and Usipetes came across the river to invade us, stupid Marcus Lollius had nothing better to do than march against them, as you know. And before our legion went out to meet those Germanic monsters just outside of Bonna, I was responsible for organising our priests for the appropriate invocation of Bellona and Mars. Now, I may have had one or two cups of my juicy nectar too many that day... oh, how I miss my wine... Anyway, was it my fault that those idiot priests ended up in the nearest tavern instead of the temple, I ask you? No, of course not!"*

"Uhm, well ...", mumbles Fabius.

But Quintus ignores him and continues: *"And then... And then, after that cursed Sugambrian warlord Maelo - may Faunus pierce his heart with a twig - had not only slaughtered and defeated Lollius' troops but also captured the Eagle of the Fifth Legion - the sheer audacity, by Jupiter! - well, this of course brought Emperor Augustus himself to Gaul last year, as you know. And Augustus wasn't in town for a full septimana when those traitorous rotten priests had the nerve to denounce me to the emperor, just to save their own scrawny necks! Augustus stripped me of my title, my villa, my vineyards ... even my rebate on sautéed otter tongues! I have lost everything, Fabius! Everything!"*



"Shame", mutters Fabius unconvincingly into his beer mug.

"Yeah, well ... But hey! You, my friend Fabius", Quintus then continues, now looking at his former colleague with a calculating gleam in his eye, *"you seem to have done well for yourself, I see. You are in the XIX. Legion now. And as a centurion, no less. Congratulations!"*

"Well, you know how it is", Fabius replies dismissively, *"Emperor Augustus plans a large-scale attack on the wildlings east of the river in the near future under general Nero Claudius Drusus and allegedly there is good*

plunder to be made in those forest villages. I wouldn't mind one or two of those blonde wenches they have over there for myself, you know", Fabius grins.

"I wouldn't mind one on my lap right now!", Quintus laughs a bit too loud and slaps Fabius exaggeratedly jovially on the shoulder. Then his face becomes serious again. "Well, Fabius, old friend, you must have some influence in the XIX. Legion, no? What do you say, can't you put in a good word for me and get me one of those shiny breastplates and a place in one of your cohorts, even as an ordinary legionnaire, hm?"

Fabius turns his head and musters the nowadays leaner Quintus. Finally, he says: *"Hmm, maybe. Come to the castrum of the Nineteenth Legion tomorrow, I'll see what I can do. But wash up first. You stink, man."*

Quintus grins broadly. *"Will do! Thanks, Fabius. You will see, we will yet civilise these cursed savages and make their women, their crops and their future ours!"*

"God willing", says Fabius.

"What?", asks Quintus.

"What?" says Fabius, before suddenly mumbling, "Good night, Quintus". Getting up quickly, Fabius shakes his head while muttering under his breath: "Jesus! What the hell am I saying again, for Christ's sake!? ... Uh, what!? ... Aargh!"

After this chance meeting between Quintus and Fabius on that mild summer evening in Bonna, it still took another three years before Emperor Augustus finally had had it up to his eyeballs with the Germanic tribes on the right riverbank and their incessant sorties into *Gaul*.

Determined to put a definite end to the insurgents, Augustus ordered his stepson Nero Claudius Drusus in 12 BC to cross the Rhine with his troops to make a clean slate once and for all. The ensuing *Drusus campaigns* lasted for four years until 8 BC and ended quite successfully with the subjugation of numerous Germanic tribes between the rivers Rhine and Elbe, in their course kicking off the *Augustan Germanic Wars*, officially dated between 12 BC and 16 AD.

And who knows, perhaps the German and the Italian and French people would speak very similar languages today, if this large-scale Roman invasion and the attempted incorporation of *Germania Magna* into the Roman Empire wouldn't have experienced a dramatic turning point on one chilly day in the year 9 AD.

"Varus, give me back my Legions!"

On this foggy day in the autumn of 9 AD, Roman proconsul *Publius Quinctilius Varus* rode ahead of his XVII., XVIII., and XIX. Legions as well as three cavalry units and six cohorts, in total 15,000 – 20,000 soldiers, to move the entire force from its summer- to its winter-quarters. During this lengthy trek, Varus led the kilometres-long column also onto a small path running in a narrow hollow right through the large, dense, and dark *Teutoburger Wald* (Forest), stretching across today's federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony.

Well, to cut a very long story short, (which is heartbreakingly told in the book *'Annals'* by the aforementioned senator, author and jack-of-all-trades *Publius Cornelius Tacitus*), the Roman legions were marching almost

single file through the semi-darkness beneath the mighty and autumnally colourful treetops, when, out of nowhere, a horde of allied Germanic tribes, led by the *Cheruscan* prince *Arminius* (or *Hermann* in German), suddenly appeared between the closely spaced trees on either side of the hollow and fiercely attacked individual sections of the long column of Roman legionaries before retreating into the darkness of the forest just as quickly, only to spring the next attack further up or down the column shortly after.

This chaotic battle lasted for three nights and days, during which Varus's legions had no chance to line up tactically and were forced into brutal and bloody hand-to-hand combat, only to be virtually slaughtered, suffering the devastating annihilation of unit after unit, legion after legion.

When the carnage was finally over, Varus had taken his own life on the battlefield, and with him a full tenth of the entire armed forces of the mighty Roman Empire lay dead or dying on the forest floor, soaking the tree roots with their blood. According to the contemporary Roman historian *Suetonius*,

upon receiving the news of the crushing defeat, *Emperor Augustus* was so shaken that he began repeatedly butting his head against the palace walls while continuously screaming, "*Quintili Vare, legiones redde!*", ("Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!")

And what happened to Fabius and Quintus, both by then soldiers in the *Legio XIX*? Well, according to historic texts, the entire Nineteenth Legion "*met its demise*" in the Battle of the Teutoburger Forest. Which makes it quite likely that their bones, together with the earthly remains of thousands of their fellow legionnaires, would've finally been buried by General Germanicus' legion, who found the battlefield six years later in 15 AD, and would thus still be resting under a thick layer of forest floor somewhere in Northern Germany.



Most historians agree that the crushing Roman defeat in the *Teutoburger Wald* subsequently heralded the ultimate end of all Roman attempts to turn the Germanic territories on the right bank of the Rhine into yet another province of the Roman Empire, even though the stubborn Romans kept the Germanic Wars going for another seven years, albeit without notable successes.

At the same time, the Roman abandonment of their plans for conquest also meant that any chance of Latinising the German language disappeared forever into the speculative spheres of alternative history. From here on out, the Germanic tribes were left to their own devices and free to continue speaking their own Proto-Germanic language, while merrily continuing to beat each other over the head.

Fade Out

Linguists hypothesize that with the absence of any further meddling by the Latin-speaking city slickers from across the Alps after 16 AD, the Proto-Germanic language continued to thrive in a homogenous manner across all Germanic tribes from the North Sea to the Alps still for quite some time.

In fact, it is estimated that this "pre-Babel linguistic unity" lasted until the sixth century, or 500 AD. However, for reasons as yet unknown, it was during this century that several distinctly different dialects suddenly began to appear across the vast area settled by the Germanic tribes, including the next variant on the evolutionary German language ladder, **Old High German**.

We now know that this very early version of German was not so much a single language as a whole group of dialects with no standard literary language to speak of. Nevertheless, this hodgepodge of dialects established itself as the common language of the Germanic tribes who settled in the mountainous regions of what are now Bavaria, Austria, Switzerland and northern Italy.

Incidentally, this location is also the reason for the language's name, since the term "high" („hoch“) is not derived from the absence of a dialect in the language (as in the modern term „Hochdeutsch“), but rather from the fact that Old High German was predominantly spoken by communities living literally at the higher altitudes of the Alps.

For the next six hundred years, Old High German fulfilled its role as a localised *lingua franca* that lasted well into the early Middle Ages, around 1100 AD, when its winning streak finally came to an end - and with it the innocent childhood of the German language.

Adolescence – A Time for Romance, Love, and Slaughter

Middle High German

Today, we can thank Hollywood for believing that we know almost everything there is to know about the following period beginning in the 10th century. After all, this is the "real" Middle Ages, with brave knights in

shining armour, mighty castles, witty minstrels, evil kings and queens, countless wars and skirmishes, and beautiful princesses in constant need of rescuing from a sinister robber baron or ill-tempered dragon.

Well, Hollywood got at least some things right about the High Middle Ages, especially in more recent films and series. Sadly, though, archaeologists have never unearthed any dragon bones, while medieval princesses were often far from being meek and helpless maidens, but rather tough women who did not suffer fools lightly.

And the image of the magnificent knight in shining armour?



Unfortunately (or perhaps rather fortunately), only the wealthiest of nobles could afford such a “shining armour” that made them a true knight.



As a point of reference, a healthy cow in those days cost around 100 silver coins, a luxury only the richest peasants and landowners could afford, while a prospective knight had to spend the same amount on a spear and shield, the bare minimum for military service. For a knight's helmet, a young squire would have to shell out another 300 silver coins, and the same amount again for a pair of greaves. A decent sword and scabbard

would set the ambitious young man back another 350 silvers, and the armourer would charge a whopping 850 silvers for a proper coat of mail and a year's worth of his work.

Of course, all this is just a rough estimate, although the ratios remained broadly the same throughout the medieval period. In fact, even modern experts on medieval financial systems admit that it is difficult to disentangle the various currencies of the Dark Ages, since most kingdoms, duchies, earldoms and other national territories had their own currency, and the purchasing power of their silver coins, shillings, pennies or any of the countless other coins was heavily dependent on external circumstances such as frequent wars, famines caused by devastating crop failures, insidious pandemics or the occasional crusade to reclaim Jerusalem for Christendom.

However, once our young knight had spent the necessary 1,900 silver coins (equivalent to nineteen healthy cows) for his full armour in the 1100s, he would've finally been adequately equipped to answer his king's call and ride into battle. (That is, of course, if first he had acquired a suitable stallion for a mere 350 silvers more).

Fortunately for the freshly-baked knight, (now desperate to replenish his purse), there was no shortage of warfare in Europe during the 12th century. This period alone saw, among other things, the Anglo-Norman Civil War (1135 to 1153), the Byzantine-Norman Wars (1040 to 1186), the Capet-Plantagenet Feud (1159 to 1259), the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland (1169 to 1175) and not only the Second but also the Third Great Crusade, between 1147 and 1192. And these were only the most promising opportunities for an honour- and plunder-hungry junior knight to wet his sword with the blood of his lord's real and perceived enemies.

Away from the many battlefields, however, the 1100s also witnessed another important event that had a far more profound historical impact than many of the military victories of the time: The rise of **Middle High German** in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

Compared to its linguistic predecessor, this new version of German was a more standardised language, based on the Upper German dialects of Alemannic and Bavarian, and above all the first language to be used extensively in what was to become the vast ocean of German literature.

And so, we turn our gaze away from the knights in their expensive armour who so often take centre stage and instead focus on those peculiar men in tights who wandered carefree through the countryside to visit

medieval towns, castles and cities with a lute on their back and a song on their lips.

Walther von der Vogelweide – The Master of Minnesong

Just as there is no shortage today of ambitious young rap musicians, country singers and pop stars who want to make it big in America, Europe or even the world, there was similarly no shortage of young bards and minstrels in the 12th century who hoped to impress the odd baron, duke or king well enough to win them over as their patrons and perhaps even invite them to their court.

And just like today, when only a select few like *Eminem*, *Garth Brooks* or *Michael Jackson* eventually reach the pinnacle of fame and adulation, the High Middle Ages produced only a few true superstars among the many bards of the Holy Roman Empire.

One of these early fan-favourites in the fledging minnesinger-scene was the bard *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, born around 1170 in the Franconian region of Germany and today still best known for his epic works, particularly his verse romance '*Parzival*', which tells in length of the quest for the Holy Grail.

However, if Wolfram von Eschenbach was a sort of Garth Brooks of his time, catering to a more conservative crowd with a penchant for traditional stories and values, then his contemporary rival and arguably the greatest bard of all time would probably be best represented by 21st century rapper extraordinaire Eminem.

This first superstar on German soil was named *Walther von der Vogelweide*, ([~Vall'ter fonn dair Fo'gel'vaide], ca. 1170 – ca. 1230 AD), a bard who used the Middle High German language not only as a tool of his trade, but also in an unprecedented style, characterised by directness and beauty.. Perhaps the first singer-

songwriter ever to have a nationwide following, Walther's fame was unsurpassed in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, and knights and knaves, royal court maidens and farm maids alike were enchanted not only by Walther's melodies, but even more by his lyrics, which for the first time seemed to speak to people in their own everyday language of beauty, love and desire, but also of politics, religion and nature.

Indeed, Walther von der Vogelweide's lyrical talent was so outstanding that he has often been called the greatest German lyric poet before the rise of German literary giant Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). It is no surprise, then, that Walther's more than one hundred surviving romantic songs today are not only considered a treasure of German literary history, but also the pinnacle of „*Minnesang*“, or "German love poetry in song".

In fact, in large parts it was Walther von der Vogelweide (whose



name translates as, "Walther of the Bird Meadow") who shaped the enduring image of the medieval travelling bard as a witty singer and jester, a *bon vivant* who made men want to be like him and women to be with him. More importantly, Walther's appearance on the medieval musical stage revolutionised the entire bards' guild of his day, (i.e., the "music industry" of his time).

His unprecedented rhymes, his (at the time considered daring) political and religious lyrics, his unsurpassed sense of all things love and emotion, and perhaps most of all his cunning trick of simply writing and singing in the language of the common people, made Walther a true trailblazer, without whom the likes of *Eminem*, *Jay-Z* or *Tupac* might never have become reality. With tracks such as his most famous love song, '*Under der Linden*', or his more sombre work '*Elegy*', Walther earned his living performing for commoners as well as blue-blooded music *aficionados* in the noble houses of the Holy Roman Empire, in this way becoming almost naturally an integral part of the courts of several important counts, landgraves, and kings, frequently spending several years at a court.

A further step towards immortality for the bard came almost a century after the demise of the first "King of Pop", when the stories of the so-called '*Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg*', ('The Singers' War on Wartburg Castle') a collection of Middle High German chant poems (think medieval poetry slams) from the 13th century, appeared, whose portrayal of the late Walther as a witty genius with a golden tongue further increased his fame throughout the first German Empire.

The most influential of these chants was '*Fürstenlob*' ('Accolade for the Monarch'), written in the second half of the 13th century. In it, the six singers *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, *Heinrich von*



Offerdingen, *Reinmar von Zweter*, the *Virtuous Scribe*, (a nom de plume, like today e.g. *Brotha Lynch Hung*, *C-Murder*, *Silkk the Shocker*, or *Thug Life* – only a smidgen less drastic perhaps), as well as *Biterolf* and finally *Walther von der Vogelweide* argue before the Landgrave *Hermann I of Thuringia* and Landgravine *Sophia of Wittelsbach* on the Wartburg about who can praise the best prince in the best fashion.

No winner of the contest was ever announced (which sucks, to be honest), but several centuries later, both the '*Sängerkrieg*' and Walther's prowess underwent another unforeseen German renaissance when German author *E.T.A. Hoffmann's* story '*Der Kampf der Sänger*' (1818) and later *Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's* play '*Der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg*' (1828) were published.

Walther's crowning entry into the hall of fame of German history, however, was thanks to none other than the German composer *Richard Wagner*, who included "The Bard" – (no, not Shakespeare this time, who actually wasn't a bard at all, come to think of it) – in his opera '*Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg*' (1854), Wagner's own version of the '*Battle of the Bards*' on the Wartburg. And since its premiere in the

„Königlichen Hoftheater zu Dresden“, (The “Royal Court Theatre in Dresden”, now the Dresden State Theatre) ‘*Tannhäuser*’ has reintroduced “Witty Walther” to a part of every new German generation.

Sadly, not much is known of Walther von der Vogelweide's later years, except that he was a knight by birth, albeit a knight without land, and was therefore granted a small fief by the Holy Roman Emperor *Frederick II* in recognition of his work, where he hopefully lived happily ever after.

Wagner’s “Ring Cycle” – A National Treasure & Hitler’s Pleasure

Speaking of *Richard Wagner* (1813-1883); now, here's a German composer who certainly had a knack for using, (some might even say “exploiting”), the great stories of medieval German culture.

Apart from appropriating the ‘*Wartburg Singers’ War*’, Wagner also took the most epic Germanic saga of all time and, together with parts of the Norse myth collection ‘*Edda*’, turned it into a set of no less than four operas, playing for a total of 16 hours over three days.



Old Richard called his magnum opus ‘*Der Ring der Nibelungen*’, often simply referred to as ‘*Der Ring*’, named after the original historical source material of the fabled ‘*Nibelungenlied*’. This epic saga was written (down) in Middle High German by an unknown author or authors sometime around the beginning of the 13th century, i.e., the 1200s, although many of the characters and stories that appear in the ‘*Nibelungenlied*’ are believed to be much older. Sadly, alas, the true origins of this epic German tale will probably remain a mystery forever.

Although the ‘*Nibelungenlied*’ had already been regarded as a treasure of German literature by a select few for centuries, it was opera composer Richard Wagner who finally brought the saga out of general obscurity and into the limelight with the premiere of his ‘*Ring Cycle*’ on 13-17 August 1876 at the *Bayreuth Festspielhaus*, an opera house built specifically for Wagner's works in the town of Bayreuth. The year of the premiere also marks the beginning of the annual Bayreuth Festival, which Richard Wagner initiated to create an all-encompassing work of art that would harmoniously combine music, set design and staging of his operas, including the three days of the ‘*Ring*’, comprising the four operas ‘*Das Rheingold*’, ‘*Die Walküre*’ (‘Valkyrie’), ‘*Siegfried*’ and ‘*Götterdämmerung*’ (‘Dawn of the Gods’).

To this day, the annual event, held between 25 July and 28 August, attracts Wagner lovers, classical music fans, the rich and famous, and those who desperately want to belong to the VIP-crowd, and lets them make a pilgrimage to the „*Hügel*“ (“the hill”, as insiders call the location), on which the Bayreuth Festival Theatre thrones. All of them eager to watch and critique the latest interpretation of the ‘*Ring*’ by that year's festival director. A spectacle that regularly brings extensive coverage with it, in both the

serious German media as well as in the various tabloids and “celebrity-watch” TV-programmes, since „*die Festspiele*” (“the Festivals”) are widely regarded as one of the absolute highlights of the German Cultural Calendar.

However, all this notwithstanding, it is worth noting that many modern Germans also profess a rather ambivalent relationship with Richard Wagner, since he is often associated with very unsavoury historical circles, even though the Leipzig-born composer had kicked the bucket in Venice in 1883 – and thus half a century before a certain Adolf Hitler declared himself the greatest Wagner fan of all time.

Predictably, evil genius and Nazi propaganda-minister Joseph Goebbels didn’t hesitate to exploit Hitler’s fetish and the international reputation of Wagner and his music as an ideal artistic figurehead for Nazi ideology. Not only by using Richard Wagner’s powerful musical language to underscore Nazi military campaigns in mass parades, radio broadcasts, newsreels, and propaganda films, but also by appropriating the tragic ‘*Nibelungen*’ hero Siegfried as the perfect German „*Übermensch*“, presented to the German public as the perfect personification of the “superior Aryan race”.

Consequently, many modern Germans, especially in the younger generations, still cannot and will not ignore the role that Wagner’s music played in the “Third Reich”. Not to mention the abysmal demeanour of Richard Wagner’s English-born daughter-in-law and wife of Richard’s son Siegfried, Winifred Marjorie Wagner, a contemporary of Hitler and one of the „*Führer’s*” closest friends and confidants, who ran the Bayreuth Festival after her husband’s death in 1930 until the end of World War II in 1945.

Winifred never renounced her open admiration and support for Hitler and the Nazi-ideology after WW II. In fact, for decades after the war, she maintained a close circle of like-minded friends and Nazi-apologists, including English fascist Oswald Mosley and Ilse Hess, wife of Hitler’s first deputy Rudolf Hess.

Having escaped the hangman in the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, Rudolf Hess had been serving a life sentence in the Berlin-Spandau War Criminals Prison, (from 1966 on as the only remaining prisoner), before allegedly committing suicide in Spandau in 1987. Ilse Hess, who had always campaigned for her husband’s release until his self-deletion, maintained her friendship with Winifred Wagner, based on mutual loyalty and a shared ideological foundation, until the ardent Hitler-admirer Winifred joined her idol in Hell in 1980, followed by Ilse Hess fifteen years later.

Already soon after the war, on the other hand, the German mainstream world of classical music had distanced itself unambiguously from the “Wagner Nazi-camp”, and today Wagner-lovers and critics alike draw a very clear distinction between the Nazi-abuse of Wagner’s works, (and the disgusting attitudes of his daughter-in-law), on the one side and the undeniable cultural value and beauty of Wagner’s operas on the other.

Yet, fierce critics would say that music lovers are making things a little bit too easy for themselves when they reduce Wagner exclusively to his powerful compositions and impressive theatrical productions.

After all, it is no coincidence that Hitler was so taken with Wagner and his music, which certainly wasn’t solely due to the almost hypnotic

power that old Richard exerted on his audience through his music.

Interlude: Composer Richard Wagner – A Tragic Villain Story



Few would believe it today, but in his youth, Wagner had in fact been a political revolutionary, a radical left-winger who was opposed to princely rule. He had even taken part in the Dresden May Uprising in 1849, a republican revolt against the monarchy, and subsequently had been forced into exile.

However, after his time in exile Wagner's thinking changed drastically, for reasons that began to cement themselves during his miserable time in his exile in Zürich, Switzerland. There, Wagner had lived in poverty and social isolation, which fuelled a bitterness, self-pity, and frustration that had already begun to fester soon after the failed German revolution of 1848/49.

Having lost faith in any revolutionary advancements, Wagner turned away from any hopes for a radical political change and instead began to seek salvation in the art and in the new spiritual idea of a "redemption" of the German people.

An idea that was heavily influenced by his intensive studies of *Arthur Schopenhauer's* pessimistic philosophy and the concept of "redemption through compassion and renunciation". A premise that further solidified Wagner's rapid inner transition from a hopeful revolutionary to a believer in inner personal and outer national salvation through "German art".

It was during this period that he also wrote his infamous treatise '*Judaism in Music*', published anonymously in 1850 and republished under his own name in 1869. In this essay, Wagner openly polemicised against Jews, whom he accused of artistic and moral inferiority. Music historians today see this as an effort to assign blame for the perceived "decline of art" and as a rather transparent projection of Wagner's growing grievances and disappointments onto the most defenceless and easiest scapegoat: Judaism and the Jews, whom he accused of "superficial materialism" and a "lack of true feeling".

As a supposed counterpart to this "decline", Wagner developed the concept of "German art" – in his mind a "pure, deep and true art", in contrast to everything that he now perceived as "foreign". This ethnic-romantic self-aggrandisement became the ideological core of Wagner's late work (e.g. '*Die Meistersinger*', '*Parsifal*'). in which he glorified an "originally German essence". Already in the 1850s, Wagner had succumbed to the belief that German culture was superior, and art (especially his own) was a moral and religious force for the "purity" of the nation. A conviction that Wagner, (posthumously diagnosed by some as a veritable narcissist), also adopted for himself, regarding himself as the trailblazing pioneer of a "national cleansing".

Now, it is easy to demonise Wagner after learning all this. But one could argue that Richard was more than anything also a typical victim of his

time – and that he was by far not the only one.

Without this being understood as an excuse: many Germans at that time were after all constrained by a narrow social corset of absolutist rule and deeply disappointed by failed attempts at liberation. In search for a valve to release this pressure, the downtrodden and disappointed turned to an excessive German nationalism that took the earlier ideas of a “united nation” of wordsmith *Philipp von Zesen* and of the revolutionaries of 1848/49 to extremely questionable extremes.

In this way, also the young revolutionary Richard, who had fervently believed in social freedom, had morphed into the old prophet and hyper-nationalist Wagner, who propagated a “redemption of the Germans” through his art. And as any talented propagandist knows, the best way to disseminate your ideology is via a shared external enemy. To unite the German people in hatred, “the trailblazing pioneer” Wagner therefore didn’t have to look far before finding the perfect scapegoat in the Jews, and with them also in everything “foreign” and “un-German”.

At the same time, Wagner’s narcissistic self-image as a “chosen artistic prophet” was even further reinforced by the admiration he received in Bavaria from none other than *King Ludwig II*, (yes, the dude who built *Neuschwanstein* Castle), who supported Wagner also financially.

In light of all this, one might be tempted to ask how Wagner, who was already narcissistically prejudiced, could have possibly doubted that he was indeed the artistic spearhead of a new nationalistic movement for the “salvation of the German people”.

In his final years, Wagner spent most of his time in Venice, for health reasons. Here, he wrote parts of his last opera ‘*Parsifal*’ as well as several articles on political matters, often characterised by a deeply reactionary tone. Among them were treatises like ‘*Heroism and Christianity*’ (1881), ‘*Religion and Art*’ (1880), and ‘*What is German?*’ (1878), in which he once again repeated his antisemitic preconceptions.

Richard Wagner died of a heart attack on 13 February 1883 at the age of 69 in his Venetian residence. A funerary gondola ferried Wagner's remains across the *Canal Grande* before his body was taken to Bayreuth and to his final resting place in the garden of his *Villa Wahnfried*, to which ardent Wagnerians still make pilgrimages to this day.

Wagner's only seemingly exceptional transformation from liberal revolutionary to reactionary nationalist is exemplary of a general mood in Germany at the end of the 19th century. Even though Wagner may have been an outstanding personality with regard to music, his crude anti-Semitic and „*völkisch*“-German ideas were anything but unique or new in his time. Rather, they were a product of an era when an anticipation of fundamental change hung heavily in the air, while no one could yet say where the journey would take the German people.

This uncertainty, (that was only partially resolved with the inception of the second German *Reich* in 1871), mixed together with the learned and ingrained attitudes in a time when children were systematically beaten in school and at home, led to an ominous concoction of looming violence and extremism. In today’s age and in today’s democratic states, it is hard to imagine how utterly helpless and unfree ordinary people will have felt, when their absolutist rulers could crush any dissent with devastating

brutality and impunity. At the same time, the ubiquitous child abuse, rampant neglect of the most vulnerable members of society and mindless cruelty that permeated society was hiding not only behind the lopsided wooden doors of ramshackle houses in the poor city-quarters and villages but also behind beautifully decorated upper-class façades and the fake smiles of their immaculately dressed occupants.

This instilled belief in a rigid class system, with the working class and the poor as a mere exploitable commodity, was only the logical consequence in a state ruled by a ruthless and insensitive aristocratic elite. Children who grew up in this system, where physical punishment and emotional neglect was the norm, became almost inevitably insensitive and cruel themselves.

No wonder that this toxic atmosphere soon became the perfect breeding ground for the idea of “Social Darwinism”, which arose out of the mud in the 1860s. This so-called “philosophy” applied Darwin's brand-new theory of evolution directly to society, politics and ethics, by (probably deliberately) misunderstanding the idea of “survival of the fittest”. An extremely callous school of thought that was nevertheless popularised by several German authors, such as *Ernst Haeckel*, *Ludwig Woltmann*, and *Alfred Ploetz*, who heralded the notion that “compassion for the weak hinders natural selection and weakens society”.

In such a complex and grim political and social landscape, Wagner's own works served for many as a “moral guide” – most of all for those confused, angry and aimless souls who longed for fundamental changes in the many states of the Holy Roman Empire, that had been ruled by absolutist monarchs for centuries.

And since the nobility had only just recently made it abundantly clear during the ultimately failed revolution of 1848/49 that they still sat firmly in the saddles of power, nationalists like Wagner



had realised that „*Freiheit ohne Macht ist machtlos*“, (“Freedom without power is powerless”). However, this did by no means mean that the former revolutionaries and free thinkers now dutifully went home to their cosy little houses to drink tea. Quite the contrary, Wagner and his cohorts sought out the nearest outlet to vent their anger and frustration and found it in the Jews. Here they had easily identifiable “outsiders” who offered a broad target for attack, from their religion to their customs, attire, mannerisms and vernacular.

Soon, other and even more radical authors like *Paul de Lagarde*, *Julius Langbehn* and *Arthur Moeller van den Bruck* would take up and continue this well-trodden path of “scapegoating minorities” by extending their “righteous wrath” to everything and anything they perceived as “liberal”.

As historian *Fritz Stern* writes in his book ‘*Cultural Pessimism as a*

Political Danger, first published in 1953: "Above all, these men [Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck] hated liberalism:

Lagarde and Moeller saw it as the cause and embodiment of all evil [...] Everything they feared seemed to have its roots in it: the bourgeoisie, Manchesterism, materialism, parliamentarianism and party politics, the lack of political leadership. Indeed, they blamed liberalism for everything that caused them inner suffering. Their resentment stemmed from their isolation; all their longing was directed towards a new faith, a new community of belief, a world with firm values and without doubt, a new national religion that would unite all Germans."

To put it bluntly: The rotten roots of 20th century German antisemitism, anti-liberalism and hateful nationalism go far deeper than just to the 1920s and '30s and to Hitler's Nazis. Instead, the German cultural nationalism of the late 19th-century, of which Richard Wagner was indubitably a key figure, already laid the foundations for an intellectual movement that later became the firm ideological basis of Hitler's so-called National Socialism and its concocted justification for the persecution of the Jewish community.

A Really Short Synopsis of the Nibelungen Song

In light of all this, it is probably fair to say that it certainly wasn't only Wagner's bombastic music that led Hitler to hold the composer in such high esteem and prompted Goebbels to choose none other than Wagner's Siegfried as the embodiment of the Aryan superhero, thereby further tarnishing and perverting the epic '*Nibelungenlied*', once innocently written (down) around 1200 AD by an unknown poet or poets at the court of *Wolfgang von Erla, Bishop of Passau*.

Wagner, and even more so Hitler and the Nazis, may have permanently damaged the reputation and public perception of the '*Nibelungenlied*', and above all, of the character of Siegfried the Dragon

Slayer. Yet, anyone who will read the original 13th-century '*Nibelungenlied*' in a modern adaptation will quickly realise that *Siegfried, Lord of the Netherlands, Norway and Niebelungland* may perhaps have had a rather tattered territory of government that partially extended even into the realms of fantasy – but he was certainly anything but the one-dimensional mythical "superhero" of the Wagnerian '*Ring Cycle*' and Nazi propaganda.

On the contrary, in the original '*Niebelungenlied*', Siegfried is a rather troubled and multifaceted character with some impressive flaws. And while presumably this didn't include a love for Turkish fast food, it isn't hard to imagine that Siggie would have been a typically open-minded German in a decidedly non-"Arian" fashion and would've certainly enjoyed for instance a tasty „*Döner mit Pommes*“, ("kebab with chips/fries") as much as the next German. Unfortunately, however, his good-natured trust



in the good-will of other tribes (in his case, the Burgundians) would ultimately lead to his tragic demise.

Mind you, none of the other main characters in *'The Song of the Nibelungs'* are far behind *Siegfried* when it comes to XXL Döner-sized character flaws. Take, for example, *Princess Kriemhild of Burgundy*, Siegfried's loving wife, who goes on a bloody rampage after her husband meets a brutal and untimely end at the Burgundian court. Then there's *Brünhild, Queen of Iceland* – yes, that's a thing here – a conniving virgin with supernatural powers who is up to some shenanigans and in a calculated move leaves her betrothed, *Gunther, King of Burgundy*, deliberately hanging at the altar. And last but not least there is *Hagen of Tronje*, the King of Burgundy's chief vassal, a hero-murderer and all-round tragic figure.

To compress the drama of the *'Nibelungenlied'* into the smallest of nutshells, (and spoilers ahead!): The epic *'Song'* tells of the hero Siegfried, who wins the treasure of the Nibelungs and marries Kriemhild, sister of the Burgundian king Gunther. Before the main story begins, Siegfried is said to have slain a dragon and bathed in its blood, which makes his skin invulnerable – except for one small spot on his back, where a linden leaf fell and kept the blood from touching his skin.

Siegfried then helps Gunther win the warrior queen Brünhild, but jealousy and deceit arise, and she plays her games with Gunther. Gunther becomes increasingly wary of the Dragon Slayer, until his vassal Hagen finally murders Siegfried by throwing a spear into the vulnerable spot on his back. This leads Kriemhild to vow bitter revenge. But she bides her time and years later marries Etzel (Attila the Hun), only to lure the Burgundians to her new husband's court, where a bloody massacre ensues – ending with nearly everyone dead, including Kriemhild herself.

Now, if all this tickles your inner bookworm, you probably won't regret checking out the saga for yourself. It's truly epic and as far removed from Wagner's opera production as the Nazis were from the open-minded spirit of Walther von der Vogelweide and his fellow travelling bards in the 1200s.

Fade Out

Thanks to great sagas such as the *'Nibelungenlied'*, a story that was likely passed down orally for generations before it was finally written down, as well as thanks to the travelling bards and their revolutionary approach to the German language, (the incomparable Walther had of course many imitators), and not least thanks to the not yet mentioned blue-blooded *Hohenstaufen* family, who used their considerable influence to support an empire-wide dissemination of the first literary German language (the so-called *Mittelhochdeutsche Dichtersprache*, (Middle High German Poets' Language) – thanks to all that, it could certainly be said that Middle High German had an excellent run in the High Middle Ages for around 300 years, from 1050 – 1350.

But all good things must come to an end when the work is finally done. And by the mid-1300s, the pronunciation features of Middle High German were thoroughly ingrained in everyday German and were clearly here to stay.

For example, German-speakers would now weaken the unstressed vowels in all words, transforming for example the previously as „*Taga*“ pronounced word for “days”, (where the second “a” was stressed), into today’s pronunciation and spelling of „*Tage*“, where the “e” is an unstressed [ə]-*Schwundlaut*, (shrinking sound), which is in fact the same [ə]-sound you hear at the end of many German words today.

So, with the question of stressed and unstressed vowels answered, with a spoken and written German poetry language out of the starting blocks and with the nascent German literary culture well on its way, it was now high time for something new, something different, something exciting.

Young Adulthood – High Time for some Chaos and the Bible

New High German

Well, be careful what you wish for, as they say. For the 14th century had only just begun when it already shook the foundations of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the entirety of Europe so thoroughly, that it turned the continent singlehandedly upside down, kicked it straight in the balls with a running start and then jumped up and down on its crotch with spurred riding boots until the whimpering subsided and faded away into the darkness.



This is the century from which the 'Dark Ages' take their name, with the carnage beginning as early as 1315–1317 AD. During this period an unprecedentedly severe and widespread famine swept across the land, going down in history as „*Der große Hunger*“ (“the Great Hunger”).

Alas, from the perspective of the 14th century, this was merely the prelude. In fact, it only took a quick breath and dove headlong into the next act of the drama. Not even twenty years had passed since the worst effects of the failed harvests had passed and the tens of thousands who had died of starvation had been buried, when the Grim Reaper returned in 1348 with a new weapon at the ready: “The Black Death”, or „*die Pest*“, which ravaged the *Reich* and decimated its population on a scale never before seen in recorded history.

Almost simultaneously, with far-reaching consequences of a different kind, the Peruzzi and Bardi banks — the two largest money houses in the world at the time — collapsed in Italy in 1345, shattering the entire European financial market in the wake of this financial earthquake. The two mighty banking houses had overplayed their cards by overextending credit to sovereign rulers such as the Dukes of Milan and Savoy (who spent their money on wars and other pastimes just as fast as modern teenagers spend their pocket money on in-game microtransactions). The result was severe disruption to trade, credit and economic stability across Europe, leaving the remaining peasants and commoners with yet another crushing blow to an already twice-broken neck.

Little wonder, then, that the peasants, craftsmen, tanners, bakers and other workers decided that the noose around that broken neck was now more than tight enough. Consequentially, they took things into their own hands – in particular things like pitchforks, scythes, flails and hammers. The next point on their agenda was to march as a mob to the manor houses and politely present their petition for better living conditions or, alternatively, for a resupply of fresh torches to ensure that the manor house would not burn down irregularly.

Sadly, however, while these first noteworthy peasant revolts were flaming up throughout the Holy Roman Empire in the 1300s, the lords of the manor (i.e., the nobility) were still firmly holding the reins of their private little armies in hand and quickly quelled one outbreak after another with little effort and much brutality.

Hence, it would still take another two hundred years before the landowning aristocracy would finally overstretch their crossbows and crack the whips once too often, thus sparking the Great German Peasants' War, also known as the "Revolution of the Common Man", in 1524 AD, in which large parts of Thuringia, Saxony and southern Germany, and here especially Franconia, Tyrol and Switzerland, would see violent mass uprisings of peasants, miners, workers and ordinary townspeople.

Back in the 14th century, however, the peasants and small townsfolk could only dream of such a concerted revolt. That is, if they even got any shut-eye at all in the face of all the life-shattering catastrophes piling up in Europe during the 1300s.

Pestilence tore gaping holes in local societies and entire regions, megalomaniacal monarchs and greedy bankers forced the continent's trade to a screeching hold, and famines eliminated entire towns and scattered the few survivors in the wind like the oily ashes rising from the smouldering piles of corpses.

Against this backdrop, it isn't hard to fathom why the German language chose that time to go just as much topsy-turvy as the social, political, cultural, and economical status quo in most parts of the Holy Roman Empire. With the result that the "old" Middle High German of *Walther von der Vogelweide* and *Wolfram von Eschenbach* was shaken wildly back and forth until, after some considerable labour pains, New High German finally emerged, and with it a number of changes that can still be found in present-day German.

Of particular note here are the shifts towards the standard vowel combinations that are still a feature of Standard High German today. For example, the former Middle High German „*Liute*“ became the New (and Standard) High German „*Leute*“ (“people”), and the Middle High German term „*hût*“ became the modern „*Haut*“ (“skin”). These shifts began as early as the 12th century in Upper Bavaria, but did not reach other parts of the empire, such as neighbouring Franconia, until the 1500s.

However, the by far more significant linguistic development in the late 1300s and well into the 1400s was the unprecedented fragmentation of the German language into a large number of distinct dialects.

As any modern-day explorer with more than one German region

ticked off on their map of Germany will agree, the emergence of these German dialects was a massive deal for the language and its people.

Even six hundred years later, one of the first things that experienced visitors to Germany will often tell you is, that chatting to a Hamburg fishmonger and having a jovial conversation with a Munich sausage vendor have about as much in common as a tangy Hamburg pilsner and a smooth Munich wheat beer. The hops may be the same, but the flavour is completely different.

Not only will the Hamburg „*Fischkopp*“, („fish-head“, as the rest of Germany affectionately refers to northerners), have a distinctly different pronunciation from his Bavarian counterpart, but he'll also use completely different names for all sorts of things compared to the „*Bazi*“, (a Bavarian term for a “scallywag”), many of which don't even come close to the “proper” German names you learned in (language) school.

Unfortunately, linguists and historians today have few original sources to work from and can only hypothesise that this “great dialectal diversification” in the German language began at a time when New High German was still in its infancy. Experts therefore have had to come to terms with the fact that very little has either been recorded or has survived that would allow to drawn conclusions about the exact chronology of these fundamental linguistic changes during the darkest period of the Dark Ages.

However, considering the constant upheavals that affected even the most remote monastic scholars in the 1300s, the reasons for this lack of contemporary documentation appear to be rather obvious.

In the face of regular peasant uprisings combined with the collapse of continental trade, the raging plague and the preceding famine, it was assumedly quite difficult to find even one monk who would have felt obliged to remain at his desk to diligently annotate pronunciation changes and document new German terms while the world outside of his scriptorium literally went up in flames and the smoke of the burning funeral pyres wafted through the window holes and burned in his rheumy eyes.

A typical conversation between an abbot and his monks on a Monday morning in thirteen hundred-something in some monastery somewhere in the Holy Roman Empire could therefore easily have played out like the following.

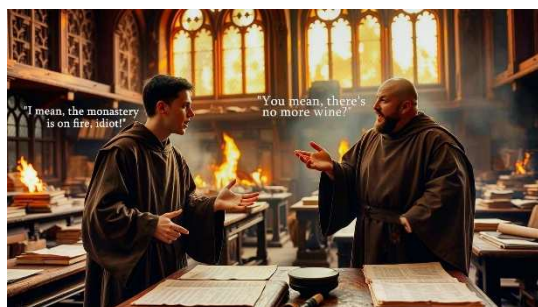
“Brother Anselm, did you finish the chapter on the new south-western dialect?”

“No, Abbot, I was too busy burying the last batch of plague victims from last night. You know, that plague we’re having!”

“Ah, yes, right, right. Very inconvenient. But you, Brother Gernot, did you at least make any progress on the newest vowel shifts, pray tell?”

“Sorry, Abbot. As you may remember, the peasants killed the rest of our livestock during the revolt and when I tried to stop them, they hacked off my writing hand.”

“Ah, I see, I see. Well, can’t be helped. But you, Martin, my good



boy, you at least won't disappoint me, no? ... Martin? Brother Anselm, where's Martin? Where's my dear Martin ... oh. Hmpf!"

"Novice Martin died years ago, Abbot! He starved to death during the Great Hunger. Jesus H. Christ, man, what the hell is going on in your fat noggin, you old f-- ... Uhm, Abbot?! Oi, Abbot, get up! Hey, what the hell is wrong with him?!"

"He is dead, Anselm, that's what's wrong with him. Our Lord has stricken him with the plague and taken him straight to Heaven. May his eternal soul rest with our Lord. Amen."

"Oh, goddamn it, Gernot! Amen my arse! That leaves just the two of us now! And you're bloody useless at digging graves. Fuuuck! And on top of it all, this dead old fool has hidden the key to the wine cellar! Well, you know what? That's it! I quit and apply for a position as a male concubine at the court of that Queen of Iceland. Brünhild or something. God bless, Gernot. Bye."

"Wait, Queen of Iceland? That's a thing!? ... Hey, wait for me, Anselm! You bloody twat!"

With Brothers Anselm and Gernot off and about to begin a very different chapter in their lives and with the Abbot having hidden not only the key to the wine cellar but also the manuscripts on the developing New High German language under the floorboards of Novice Martin's cell, much academic knowledge of this fledgling new version of German will inevitably have been lost forever in the 1300s.

But fortunately for us, and especially for Anselm's and Gernot's many descendants, the following century saw Europe and the Empire emerge from the darkest period of the Dark Ages into the first light of the blossoming Enlightenment, an entirely new era that brought with it some pretty nifty inventions.

Genius Gutenberg and His Unprecedented Press

It is now the 15th century, aka the 1400s, and thus the time for one notable man to boldly step out of obscurity and into the pantheon of mankind's greatest inventors.

Seriously, it is no exaggeration to say that this man, together with his rapidly growing band of imitators and colleagues, single-handedly paved the way for the impending explosion of knowledge that would soon engulf the entire Occident in the sunbeams of a dawning Enlightenment. What is often forgotten, however, is that this good man also had a significant influence on the development of the German language itself.

But before we get to that, let's first introduce the man of the hour himself, who, of course, is none other than *Johannes Gensfleisch zum Laden zum Gutenberg*, or *Johann Gutenberg* [Yo'han Goo'ten'berk] for short; born as the son of a wealthy patrician around 1400 AD in Mainz, a prosperous medieval town on the Rhine near Cologne.

After an educated childhood which, according to surviving documents, included time at a Latin grammar school and probably even at university, the young Gutenberg began his working life as a goldsmith "polishing precious stones". This sunny youth, however, soon became overshadowed by the ongoing dispute over privileges between the

patricians and the guilds of Mainz. A power struggle that would haunt Johann, himself being a patrician, for several decades of his life and even lead to his temporary relocation to another city. Court and tax records of the time show that the enterprising (and probably guilds foul-mouthing) young Gutenberg left his hometown in a hurry in 1434 and moved to Strasbourg at least until 1444.

It was in this bustling Alsatian city that he and his partners set up their first business and called it "*Aventur und Kunst*", in the vernacular of the time meaning "art and craftsmanship" – a first tentative clue to the future direction of Gutenberg's ideas.

Johann had signed a contract for this company with three companions, and the surviving transcripts of testimony taken during a subsequent legal dispute between Gutenberg and his former company co-owners contain some interesting statements about "buying lead" and "building a press". Most historians would bet their handcrafted ebony pipes that these statements refer to Gutenberg's first steps in the construction of his later revolutionary inventions of *Mobilletterdruck*, i.e., movable type – where movable and reusable metal letters were assembled in a type-case to form a printing plate – as well as to the *Druckerpresse*, the fabulous printing press.

With the worst of the power struggle between the guilds (a kind of pre-industrial trade union) and the patricians (a kind of pre-industrial moneybags) having finally subsided, Gutenberg returned to Mainz in 1448 and continued to work on his ideas.

Two years of further experimentation led to 1450, when the inventor finally set and printed his first professional broadsheets and books, marking the birth of movable type printing in the western world. These early Gutenberg prints consisted partly of small prints such as letters of indulgence, dictionaries, calendars and small grammars, and partly of the famous *Gutenberg Bible* in Latin.

It was this latter project that was of particular interest to a certain pious and wealthy merchant from Mainz named *Johannes Fust*, who had granted Gutenberg already an interest-free loan of 800 guilders in 1449 AD, using the printing press which Gutenberg had subsequently assembled as collateral. In 1452, Fust granted Gutenberg a further loan of 800 guilders to complete his „*Werck der Bücher*“, ("Work of the Books"), which was probably the publication of the Gutenberg Bible, also known as the „*B42 Bibel*“ because of its 42 lines per page.

Together with his right-hand man *Peter Schöffer* and with the help of about twenty other employees and the money of his financier Fust, Johannes produced a total of 180 copies of his Bible (150 on paper and 30 on parchment), making it the first book printed with movable type in the western world. However, unfortunately for Gutenberg, who had a lifelong talent for getting into (often self-inflicted) legal battles, his pious creditor Fust soon found out that Johann had used his equipment to also print other texts and not just the B42 Bible, as agreed with Fust.



In the ensuing legal dispute, the court ordered Gutenberg to hand over the B42-workshop and his stock of Gutenberg Bibles to the investor Fust, who skilfully kept the business running in conjunction with Peter Schöffer, while Gutenberg packed up his remaining belongings and moved back to his parents' home, the *Hof zum Gutenberg*, where he soon set up a new print shop. (Johann may have been a shady wheeler-

dealer at times, but you've got to hand it to the man, he had an impressive ability to bounce back).

After an eventful life, to put it mildly, the western inventor of the printing press reached the ripe old age of sixty before he printed his last print in his home in Mainz. Unfortunately, there are no concrete clues as to when exactly Johann died, as all we have to go on today is the notarised confirmation of a certain *Konrad Humery*, who claims to have received a printing press from Gutenberg's estate some time before 26 February 1468.

Worse still, the location of Gutenberg's final resting place has been lost in the mists of history. It is believed that he was buried in the former Franciscan church in Mainz, but if so, his presumed tomb would have been demolished along with the entire church in the 18th century.

Sadly, therefore, Gutenberg fans today have no proper place to pay homage to their idol by laying down flowers, bibles, books or *Elle* and *Playboy* magazines in memory of the floodgate-opener, who was almost single-handedly responsible for the wave of knowledge that swept across Europe in his wake. Yet, the appreciation of Gutenberg continues unabated, and his legacy, from the first printed Bible to countless printed works to even the Internet, remains with all of humanity to this day.

The Printers Press for a New Language

Back in the mid-15th century, though, the invention of the printing press and movable type printing rivalled or even surpassed the advent of the internet in our time. And if Johann Gutenberg was a combination of the "Fathers of the Internet", the inventors *Vinton Cerf* and *Bob Kahn*, of his day, and if the financier Fust was a slimmed-down version of the first Silicon Valley investors, then Gutenberg's former right-hand man, Peter Schöffer, was an amalgamation of Apple's™ *Steve Jobs* and Google™ founders *Larry Page* and *Sergey Brin*.

Schöffer, who had testified in the trial of Fust against Gutenberg in 1455, took over the original Gutenberg printing business in its entirety after his partner Fust had died (presumably of the plague) during a sales-trip to Paris in 1466, around four years after Schöffer had become his son-in-law.

But "Practical Pete" was by no means a lazy beneficiary or sneaky freeloader. Already during his time under Gutenberg, Schöffer had made numerous technical and aesthetic improvements to the print-letters and developed his own printing types, leading many to regard him as superior to even his mentor in these matters. Soon after Fust's demise, Schöffer then truly took off and over the next years rose to become one of the

world's first major booksellers and publishers, and today is rightfully credited as one of the best printers, publishers, and booksellers in Europe who had pushed artistic boundaries and opened the international book market to intellectual debate and mass communication.

However, Schöffer wasn't the only one with a keen business acumen and a sharp eye for the possibilities that the revolutionary Gutenberg-invention offered to anyone who was ready to grab onto its coattails. Greedy and gentle souls alike realised that the method of rapidly assembling single metal letters into ever new words, slotting them into a frame, slathering them with ink and pressing the frame upside-down onto a sheet of paper provided them with truly unprecedented means to strike it rich. Whereas previously, wood carvers needed weeks or even months to finish just one wooden block of carved words in order to print a very limited number of extremely expensive books, Gutenberg's new method allowed the production of any number of pages in mere hours or even minutes and for a fraction of the former costs.



In other words, Gutenberg's letterpress became almost literally a license to print money.

Of course, not everyone was out to get rich quick with the new printing press. Its immense potential for disseminating knowledge, and the influence it would bring, was certainly not overlooked by the major interest groups of the day, from the Church to the ruling houses, from critical political agitators to innocent philosophers, from war-mongers to apocalyptic preachers, from prolific storytellers to the most unassuming of poets.

Nevertheless, the successful dissemination of ideas and, almost as a by-product, the promotion of the German language was ultimately largely due to the prospect of earning a good sackful of guilders. Sure, some members of the soon-to-be influential guild of printers in the Holy Roman Empire may have laboured selflessly to mass publish new philosophical ideas, uplifting stories and political concepts, but there can be little doubt that most printers were businessmen first and foremost, and therefore out to line their pockets.

With return on investment (ROI) at the forefront of their minds, printers soon realised that their incomes would actually increase dramatically if only more ordinary people could read and understand their printed products – be they pamphlets, leaflets or books, or the weekly ALDI™, TESCO™, or WALMART™ sales brochures hawking the latest boar meat specials and longbow super-sale promotions.

Barely had the ink dried on their plan, when printers across the Empire began to set out in an unprecedentedly bold move to radically disassemble their narrowly defined local dialects and to replace them with their own "new languages" that consisted of a supraregional mishmash of their respective wider local dialects.

At the same time, the ruling classes and their administrations must have either turned a blind eye to this silent linguistic revolution or been otherwise occupied by one or the other regional revolt, religious unrest, border-dispute, or war on foreign soil. In any case, the printers were free to act as they pleased and quickly succeeded in establishing their newly constructed supraregional languages as the generally accepted standard in their wider regions. As a result, it is to the credit of the moneyed printers that a new and uniform type of German became canonical in certain larger German-speaking regions.

The term „*Druckersprachen*“ (“printer's languages”) soon became established for these new “languages” now used by their respective larger regional readership, with the unintended result that these printer's languages suddenly and for the first time also divided the Empire into distinct linguistic regions.

Within a few years, *West Middle German* was spoken and read in Frankfurt am Main, Mainz, Worms, and Cologne, while *East Middle German* took root in Wittenberg, Erfurt and Leipzig. *East Franconian* was spoken in Nuremberg, Bamberg and Würzburg, *Austro-Bavarian* in Ingolstadt, Vienna, Ulm, Tübingen and Swabian Augsburg, while *Alemannic* became popular in and Zurich, both in today's Switzerland, as well as in Strasbourg in what is now France.

Before the advent of printing, each of these regions had written words differently. For example, the modern German personal pronoun „*ich*“ (“I”- first person singular, Nominative), had been written either „*ich*“ or „*ick*“ or „*ech*“ or „*ih*“, depending on where you were when you were writing about yourself in the Holy Roman Empire.

However, shortly after they had overcome the initial labour pains and taken their first baby steps, the printers began to develop spelling standardisations, particularly based on Central German models used e.g. in Leipzig, Wittenberg or Nuremberg. Soon, therefore „*ich*“ prevailed over „*ick*“ (Low German) and „*ih*“ (High German).

Furthermore, the languages used in printing also smoothed out or simplified many regional grammatical variants, for instance by standardising the German plural forms. Instead of the hitherto numerous regional endings (-*en*, -*er*, -*e*, -*n*), the printers established a form system that is still commonly used today (e.g. „*Tage*“, „*Frauen*“, „*Kinder*“).

But perhaps one of the most significant changes introduced by the printers that has shaped the German language to this day was the consolidation of sound-letter assignments.

By using more uniform spellings for spoken sounds, they made spelling clearer and more reproducible, so that the same word was now written in the same way and pronounced in the same manner beyond former local and regional linguistic boundaries. Not only were the spellings of words with the initial letters „*V*“ and „*F*“ now hammered down – although, to be fair, most words written with „*V*“ retained the „*F*“-sound pronunciation, for instance „*Vater*“ [~fah'ta]; (“father”), or „*viel*“ [~fēel]; (“many”, “much”, “a lot”) or the prefix-syllable „*ver-*“ [~ferr-], like in „*verboten*“ [~ferrbohten], (“forbidden”; “prohibited”).

But also, the ubiquitous *j*-sound, (in English [“*sh-*“], like in “*sharp*”), was now written consistently with the letter-combination [„*sch*“] instead of

[„fch“] or [„sc“]. Which is why today e.g. „Schule“, [shoe'le] (“school”), is written this way. And the “ts”-sound was once and for all assigned the letter-combination [„tz“] instead of [„cz“], hence why a cat is nowadays a „Katze“ and not a „Kacze“.

Last but certainly not least, the dissemination of printed (i.e., reproduceable and reproduced) texts throughout the German states of the Empire contributed considerably to the establishment of one specific term that gradually replaced alternative terms. The most famous example here is the word „Fenster“, (“window”, from Latin “fenestra”), which prevailed over many dialect words, such as „Windauge“, literally: “wind-eye”, a term that can today still be found in the English “window”.

The Chanceries Take a Chance on Changes

But the linguistic upheavals of the 15th century and their impact on the German language didn't stop at the printing press. The winds of change even blew through the windows and into the dusty offices of those usually complacent „Sesselfurzer“, (literally “armchair farters”, i.e., office sitters), who represented the administrative bureaucracy of the day.



In particular, two great chanceries, („Kanzleien“, the administrative offices of their respective rulers), at the heart of two of the most dominant political powers in the Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries took note of the tectonic shifts in the „deutsche Sprache“ (German language) that were taking place right outside their stained glass windows – albeit largely thanks to their respective principals, who were interested in the further development of the German language for quite different reasons.

On the one hand, and as the clear leader in this field, there was the chancellery of *Emperor Maximilian I* (1459 – 1519 AD), based in *Prag* (Prague) and *Wien* ([-ˈviːn]; Vienna). On the other hand, and as the presumed underdog, there was the chancery of the *Kurfürstentum Sachsen* (Electorate of Saxony) in *Meissen* and *Dresden*. The heads of these two ruling houses could not have been more different in their views of the world and were therefore driven by very different motives when they commissioned their respective chanceries to enter the game and actively participate in the development of the German language.

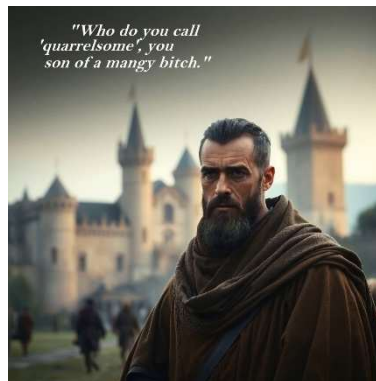
For the highly educated Emperor Maximilian I, who had a profound interest in science, literature and the arts throughout his life, the active improvement of the German language seemed a natural continuation of his lifelong promotion of humanism and the ideas of the Renaissance. Moreover, Maximilian was an almost hopeless romantic, who had chosen as his motto “*Per tot discrimina rerum*” (“Through so many dangers”), and who had earned himself the nickname “The Last Knight” for consistently portraying himself as the embodiment of the (fading) ideal of Burgundian chivalry.

But that didn't mean Max was a starry-eyed simpleton. The Emperor

of the Holy Roman Empire knew full well that ordering his chancery clerks to draft and implement their own new version of spoken and written “official” German would strengthen the bond between his court and his various subjects throughout the Empire. In the end, however, Maximilian's ambitions in this regard will still have stemmed first and foremost from his scholarly and humanistic disposition, and only secondarily from cold power-political calculations.

By contrast, the Saxon electors and margraves of the *Wettin*, *Ernestine* and *Albertine* dynasties who ruled within the shifting borders of the medieval Electorate of Saxony were a more pragmatic lot. Concerned primarily with the development of an efficient administration, the Saxon rulers were able to claim certain successes for these efforts, in particular a diversified economy and in turn an unprecedented level of Saxon prosperity.

However, there was a downside to this success, for neither the aptly nicknamed Duke/Elector/Count-Palatine of Saxony, *Frederick IV ‘the Quarrelsome’* (1370 – 1428 AD), nor any of his successors in the 15th and 16th centuries seemed to have made much effort to modernise the social structures in their electorate. Instead, the Saxon rulers were content to consolidate the traditional role of the nobility and its subordinate administration, long after other states in the empire had begun to change their attitude in the 15th century. What the clever Saxons understood very well, however, was the axiom that “language is power”, which is why they showed at least as much interest in influencing the development of the German language as their more romantically inclined neighbours in Prague and Vienna.



Both chanceries were thus instructed by their respective rulers to take the reins of the linguistic horse back into the hands of the government and to create a new and unified version of bureaucratic German.

In the case of the initially dominant *Maximilianische Kanzleisprache*, this new writing style of the emperor's officials was clearly based on Upper German linguistic habits, (spoken in the higher altitudes of the mountainous south), in places even displaying a Southern Bavarian character, which soon spread via the route of the diverse correspondence of the imperial court chancery to most Southern German regions, especially to Bavaria, Swabia and the Habsburg region of the Austrian foothills, to quickly become the writing standard in the administrative offices of these areas.

What's more, the timing of the *Kanzleisprachen* initiative could not have been better. In the second half of the 14th century, the empire had already witnessed decades of a gradual decline of the once-popular “chivalrous” poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide and his compatriots, which, with the support of the blue-blooded *Staufer* family, had blossomed into the empire's unifying Middle High German Poets' Language

(*Dichtersprache*).

The disappearance of this unifying language brought a temporary end to all common language efforts, leaving the vast empire with only partially standardised regional language variants for trade, legal matters, and general cross-border speech, apart from the supra-regional printer's languages that were just beginning to emerge.

In this situation, a newly regulated version of official German by the chanceries would, it was believed, rise above all these “dialects” and provide a universal means of official communication.

After some time of diligent work on new bureaucratic, legal, financial, and administrative terms as well as on new spelling and grammatical rules, Emperor Maximilian's clerks in Prague and Vienna finally came up with what became known as the “Maximilian Chancery Language”, as well as “Prague Chancery German” and “Viennese Chancery German”.

As one example, Maximilian's Chancery scribes, (and sometime later also the Saxon and Bohemian chanceries), began applying consistent orthographic and grammatical conventions in official documents, for instance by systematically using the syllables „ei“ and „ie“, thus consistently writing e.g. „*Stein*“, ([~shtayn]; “stone”), instead of „*Stain*“, and by fixing (parallel to the printer languages) the plural endings, particularly „-en“ and „-e“. Together with the printers, (who advanced their changes for more prosaic reasons), the chanceries thus already laid the groundwork for Early New High German.

Now, except for some monasteries and the courts of powerful rulers, there was presumably hardly any other place in the 15th and 16th century in the vast German-speaking world where people from different parts of the empire lived and worked so closely together as in the chanceries.

Since they often employed clerks from different regions, who had to make themselves understood across dialect boundaries, it came almost naturally to the chanceries to therefore develop “compromise” spelling-, grammatical- and word-forms that blended features from East and South German dialects, (while the North and West German dialects, being geographically more distant to the trailblazer-chanceries, tended to lead a rather stepmotherly existence in this context).

In this way, for example, both Upper Saxon and East Central German influenced the „*Sächsische Kanzleisprache*“ (“Saxon chancery language”, also called „*Meißner Kanzleisprache*“), which in turn became the supraregional norm for written German in the Saxon dominion.

Quite deliberate, the dominant chanceries also began to avoid any highly regional idioms, spellings, and words such as „*Hüet*“ for „*Hut*“, ([~hoot]; “hat”), or the term „*Vogt*“, which was replaced by „*Amtmann*“, (“magistrate”; “bailiff”), one of many examples for variants that were equally intelligible in multiple territories, thus transcending regional dialects and establishing an early administrative standard lexicon.

The Dawn of the Beastly Bureaucratic Language

Students of the German language as well as any individuals who have had to deal with German bureaucratic correspondence will be delighted to

learn that they can now also point their finger exactly at who is responsible for the long, hypotactic sentence structures with multiple subordinate clauses that are so characteristic of written German, particularly in bureaucratic and legal contexts.

Yes, it was of course the chanceries that were the first to adopt what are the now so well-known syntactic patterns at the base of the complex German administrative and legal writing style.

And while the fact that these patterns were modelled on Latin may not be an entirely unexpected revelation, it is nevertheless still rather surprising that the other loan language for modern-day “Bureaucratic German” was none other than Czech, of all things. (Although, back then it made entirely sense, of course.)



One of the hallmarks of this new style, apart from the dreaded “nested sentences”, represents the well-known German language-feature of “nominalisation”, i.e. the transformation of a verb (or an adjective) into a

noun, for instance „die Erteilung“ (“granting”) from the verb „erteilen“ (“to grant”), or „die Genehmigung“ (“authorisation”) from the verb „genehmigen“ (“to authorise”), often combined with the enticing German language-feature of compound word-formation. The wild excesses of this peculiarity can be seen in the following examples from modern German bureaucracy:

- **Die Nichtinanspruchnahmeverpflichtung**

“The non-utilisation obligation”, i.e. the obligation not to utilise something. A negation where no one intuitively understands what one is actually supposed to do or not do.

[Nicht•in•an•spruch•nah•me•ver•pflicht•ung]

[Not•in•entitlement•taking•obligation]

- **Die Unterbleibenswahrscheinlichkeit**

“The probability of non-occurrence”, i.e. the probability that something will not happen. A good example for the complete dehumanizing of the language. You could simply say instead, “The likeliness that something won't happen again.”

[Un•ter•blei•ben•s•wahr•schein•lich•keit]

[Non-occurrence•s-interfix•probability]

- **Die Nichtweiterverarbeitbarkeitsprüfung**

“The non-reprocessability examination”, i.e. testing whether something cannot be reprocessed. A monster word with five components.

[Nicht•wei•ter•ver•ar•beit•bar•keit•s•prü•fung]

[Not•further•processability•s-interfix•examination]

- **Die Rückführbarkeitsherstellung**

“Traceability establishment”, i.e. establishing the possibility of tracing

something. Here, the actual action (designing something so that it can be traced) disappears completely behind an incomprehensible chain of nouns.

[Rück·führ·bar·keit·s·her·stell·ung]

[Traceability·s·interfix·establishment]

- **Die Nichtbeanstandungsfähigkeitsbescheinigung**

“The non-objection certificate”, i.e. a certificate that something cannot be objected to. A prime example of bureaucratic prose. You could simply use a sentence saying, “Confirmation that there are no objections”, which wouldn’t be much longer.

[Nicht·be·an·stand·ung·s·fähig·keit·s·be·schein·ig·ung]

[Non·objection·capability·s·interfix·certificate]

As any good journalist, author, and German-tutor will tell you, if you want to write vividly and lively in German, you should avoid such nominalisations like the devil avoids holy water. Do not replace verbs by nouns and add negations or modal terms to the mix and stick them all together to make your style sound ostensibly “official” or “professional”. All you’re going to achieve is that you’ll sound stylistically stiff and difficult to understand – and often unintentionally funny.

Now, as much as the medieval clerks in their dusty chancery-offices are to blame for the often-unnecessary complication of the German language, as much do they deserve credit for coming up with many terms in the legal, administrative and financial fields which Germans today use without a second thought. In fact, presumably most German-speakers can’t even imagine that Germans ever used different words than those introduced and disseminated by the diligent chancery-clerks, whose groundbreaking inventions include, for example:

- **Die Kanzlei** – [~kants'ley] The office itself, today mainly used for a lawyer’s office, (while the German word for a workplace-office is „Büro“). From Latin “*cancellaria*”, the term replaced regional words like „*die Schreibstube*“ (literally: writing parlour).
- **Die Urkunde** – An official document or certification. From the Old High German “*urkundia*”. However, a variation of the Latin “*Documentum*” is also still in use in the modern word „*das Dokument*“.
- **Das Mandat** – [~mun'daht] A mandate; a formal command or order. From Latin “*mandatum*”, the word was introduced as a new technical legal term.
- **Das Dekret** – [~deh'krait]; A public legal decision. From Latin “*decretum*”, the word entered first the chancery vocabulary and later everyday usage.
- **Der Notar; Das Notariat; Die Notiz** – The notary; The notary's office; The note. All from Latin “*notarius*”, the terms spread via imperial offices and the church throughout the empire.
- **Das Protokoll** – The official record. From Latin/Greek “*protocollon*”, the term was introduced into chancery practice during the 15th century.
- **Die Bilanz** – [~bee'lants]; The balance sheet. From Italian “*bilancio*”, adopted

by the chancery-clerks for their administrative bookkeeping.

- **Das Konto** – The bank account. From Italian “*conto*”, the term appeared first in early 16th century financial records.
- **Das Budget** [~bü'djée = “bü-” (like in 'bureaucracy) + “djée”. French pronunciation]; The budget. From French “*bougette*”, the earliest fiscal roots appear in documents from 15th century chanceries.
- **Das Amt; Der Amtmann** – The public office; the bailiff, magistrate. From Old High German “*ambahti*” meaning “service”. Chanceries re-used the old term and standardised it in an official sense as an administrative title.
- **Der Sekretär** – The secretary. From Latin “*secretaries*” meaning “clerk” or “confidential scribe”. The term was first used in Emperor Maximilian’s chanceries.
- **Der Kanzler** – The chancellor. From Latin “*cancellarius*”, the term first became the title for the official head of a chancery and only much later the title for the head of government in Germany and Austria.
- **Der Bescheid** – [~be'shaid] The official notification or formal decision. The term had already been in use as a word for “notification” during the time of the chanceries but was adopted by the clerks as a specialised term for official decrees, notifications, and information.
- **Der Antrag** – The application or petition. The term consists of the native compound „*an + tragen*” (“on” + “to carry”), and was standardized in the legal sense of “petition”.
- **Die Verordnung** – [~fer'ord'noong] The decree, regulation, rule. A loan word from the Latin “*ordination*”, today one of the most “German” of all bureaucratic terms.
- **Die Rechtsprechung** – Literally “the law-speaking”, i.e. the passing of sentences under the law and the general legal framework in a country. From Latin “*iuris diction*”, also meaning “law-speaking” and the origin of “jurisdiction”.
- **Der Widerspruch** – [~wee'der'sprooch] The objection, the contradiction. From the meaning of the Latin “*contradiction*”, the chanceries coined this legal term utilising the German penchant for compounds; (“*conta*” = „*wider*” = against; “*diction*” = „*Wort*”; “*Ausspruch*” = word, exclamation).
- **Die Vollmacht** – [~foll'macht] The proxy (document). From Latin “*plenipotencia*” and literally transferred into German: “*pleni*” = „*voll*” = full; “*potential*” = „*Macht*” = power.
- **Die Befugnis** – The authority, as in “I have the authority to arrest you”. From Latin “*auctoritas*”/“*potestas*”, the scribes created here an abstract new noun.
- **Die Grenze** – The border. From the Czech “*Hranice*”. The term entered the *Kanzleisprachen* through the Bohemian–Saxon chanceries contact,

replacing the older German „Mark“ in most uses.

But not all new words that came out of the chanceries in the late Middle Ages and early modern period were accepted by the wider German-speaking population. Many were seen as foreign, pretentious, or unintelligible, and either disappeared or were later replaced by native equivalents during later linguistic “purification” efforts (especially in the 16th–18th centuries).



During the late medieval period, “Chancery German” absorbed for example hundreds of Latin or Romance (French, Italian) words. However, in many German states, *„französische Kanzleiwörter“* (“French chancery-words”) were seen as a symbol of elite detachment. Later nationalist and Protestant circles deliberately avoided them, and common people and reformist writers and grammarians (like Martin Luther) alike were soon pushing quite pragmatically for a de-Latinisation (aka “de-Frenchisation”) of written German by replacing many of these chancery-inventions with native compounds. Which is why German has been spared such abominations, and missed out on such gems, as the following:

- **Die Appellation** – The appeal. The Latin/French-derived term was rejected in favour of the German *„Die Berufung“*, in which the words *„der Ruf“*, (the call, the holler) and *„rufen“* (to call at) can be found, as in *„Ich rufe das Gericht an“*, (I call / appeal to the court).
- **conferieren** – To meet, to consult, to talk. From the Latin *“conferre”*. While the German word *„die Konferenz“* still exists for “a conference” and while in modern-day German “a meeting” is officially also called *„Das Meeting“* (although the German equivalent *„Die Besprechung“* exists), the verb *„conferieren“* was rejected in favour of *„besprechen; sich beraten; sprechen“*.
- **Die Obligation** – The obligation, the debenture. This Latin-derived term was soon replaced by the German words *„die Verpflichtung“* for “obligation”, in which you can find the German term *„die Pflicht“*, i.e. “the duty”, and *„die Schuldverschreibung“*, for “debenture”, literally meaning “the debt-prescription”.
- **Das Dominium; Die Possession** – Ownership; Possession. Far too Latin for many Germans and soon replaced by *„das Eigentum“* and *„der Besitz“*. The former containing the word *„eigen“*, meaning “(one’s) own”, the latter means in its most literal sense “the thing you sit on”, from *„sitzen“*, (to sit).
- **Die Affaire** – The matter, concern, issue. While the chancery-clerks attempted to establish this term as the official word for a legal matter or issue, *„die Affäre“* survived in German in a decidedly different form as the common term for “an extramarital relationship” or “fling”.
- **Der Cour** – The (royal) court. Not doable with the Germans, who insisted on keeping their *„der Hof“*, which incidentally also became the term for your run-of-the-mill “front- or backyard”.

- **Der Procès; Der Cause** – The trial, (the process); the case. While the former survived surprisingly intact in the modern term „**der Prozess**“ for a court trial, (and any kind of process), the latter was quickly relegated to the heaps of history and replaced by „**der Fall**“ (the case) or „**die Sache**“ (the matter).

Other rejected terms include:

- **Die Approbation** – The permit. Today: „**Die Genehmigung**“
- **Die Collation** – The comparison. Today: „**Der Vergleich**“
- **Die Donation** – The donation. Today: „**Die Schenkung**“
- **Die Inventarisatio** – The ‘taking of stock’. Today: „**Die Bestandsaufnahme**“
- **Die Reformatio** – The Reformation. The term survived in the religious context, but „**die Verbesserung**“ („*besser*“ = better) is used in everyday speech.

While many chancery-words were already replaced by “native” terms in the 15th and 16th century under the leadership of reformists like Martin Luther, (who thus reformed more than “just” the Church), other terms had to wait until the 17th and even 18th century before being chunked out in favour of “more German-sounding” words.

In particular the „*Sprachgesellschaften*“ (Language Societies) like the *Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft* (the “Fruitful Society” in the 17th century) explicitly fought “foreign” *Kanzleiwörter* and promoted pure German equivalents. For instance, they proposed and (mainly) succeeded with e.g.:

- „**Der Augenblick**“ instead of „**der Moment**“ – [= moment] (both exist)
- „**Die Begebenheit**“ instead of „**die Episode**“ – [= episode] (latter exists for TV-series)
- „**Der Beistand**“ instead of „**die Assistenz**“ – [= assistance] (1. religious 2. medical)
- „**Das Lehrhaus**“ for „**die Universität**“ – [= university] (only latter exists)

Many of their coinages, especially „*Augenblick*“, „*Begebenheit*“, „*Lehrmeister*“ (“mentor”), or „*Weltlauf*“ (“world course”), survive to this day, having successfully replaced the foreign terms once used in chancery and court.

Generally speaking, as predominantly administrative and legal languages, the *Kanzleisprachen* showed certain conservative tendencies from the outset and in many cases proved simply incapable of adapting to rapidly changing speech patterns and habits, political and ecclesiastical changes, and cultural and societal tendencies.

To the common people, a large number of terms and changes that came from “their” emperor Maximilian's Viennese and Prague chanceries must have appeared outlandish (read: French) and often archaic (read: Latin). This was particularly true for those living in the hilly and wooded western and central part of the empire, as well as those Germans inhabiting the wide plains and rugged coastlines in the north.

Looking for a less “oppressive” alternative, people in these areas turned to Saxon Chancery German instead, which in turn became increasingly important in central and northern Germany. However, the decisive factor in the battle for linguistic supremacy in the public offices and courtrooms of the Empire came ultimately in the form of an unassuming

clergyman, who almost single-handedly awarded victory to the Saxon underdog from Meissen and Dresden. And with this endorsement, the *Sächsische Kanzleisprache* soon took the crown as the most influential top-down contribution to New High German.

Maximilian's powerful House of Habsburg may have expected all sorts of disruptions to their *Kanzleisprachen*-introductions, but they certainly didn't expect a German monk from *Wittenberg* to butt in, who would not only completely upset the religious fabric of Europe, but who'd also, almost as an aside, raise the German language to an entirely new level.

This down-to-earth monk was called *Martin Luther*, [~Mar'teen Loo'ttar] and he handed victory to the Saxon chancery on a silver platter after having decreed for himself that, "*my language is based on that of the Saxon chancery, which is followed by all the princes and kings of Germany*".

With this rather exaggerated stance, Luther condemned the rival language versions of the imperial chanceries in Prague and Vienna to playing second fiddle in the concert of the German language – at the very latest when he completed and published his magnum opus, the first complete translation of the Bible into German. An unprecedented revolutionary act, that not only shattered the existing status quo of the religious world but also propelled the German language into a new era.

Martin's Monumental Miracle

If you should be, for some reason, unfamiliar with the historical figure of Martin Luther and should the name bring to mind only the U.S. Baptist minister, activist and political philosopher *Martin Luther King Jr.*, here are the CliffNotes™ (U.S.) or SparkNotes™ (UK) on the most influential religious figure of the last 500 years.

Martin Luther, [~Mar'teen Loo'ttar], (1483–1546), was a German theologian, author, and Augustinian monk who single-handedly sparked the Protestant Reformation and whose theological beliefs remain the foundation of Protestantism today. His most famous act of defiance against the Catholic Church was the nailing of his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church (*Schlosskirche*) in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, in which he challenged the Catholic Church's position on indulgences, among other things. Having stirred up the hornets' nest, Luther then translated the entire Bible from Latin into German, completing this monumental work in 1534 AD.



As early as 1520 AD, Pope Leo X. demanded that Luther renounce all his writings, which Martin politely refused. Naturally, such audacity had to result in Luther's excommunication and condemnation as an outlaw, both of which remained in force until Luther's death in 1546 AD.

Admittedly, almost any other act, no matter how great, must pale into insignificance when compared to causing the ultimate schism in the Christian Church and giving birth to the

Reformation and Protestantism. However, as there is already a tiny amount of literature available on this particular subject, the following paragraphs will instead concentrate on Martin Luther's contributions to the advancement of the German language, which are in many ways inextricably linked to his religious efforts.

Luther's work fell in a time when most citizens of the empire obviously had other (even if not better) things to do than learning to read, let alone read Latin, which was of course the exclusive province of the clergy.

The common people were therefore damned to blindly believe their priests as to what the Latin Bible said whenever the contents of the Book were preached to them from the pulpit, and to unquestioningly follow the clergy's assurances that this was what the Bible wanted them to do or not to do. However, Luther's translation of the Bible from Latin into German gave the common people for the very first time in history direct access to the Book of Books.

After stripping away the clergy's aura of superiority as the sole mouthpiece of God and translator of "His Word", it is easy to see why the cold fury Luther was met with by Pope Leo X., the entire Vatican and the clergy of the Empire, would only increase over time. Not only could the clergy's hitherto ignorant "lambs of God" suddenly pick up any ordinary literate person off the street and ask him or her to read the Scriptures to them in understandable German. But to the Church's further detriment, a few decades earlier a certain Johann Gutenberg had also set something truly dangerous in motion, which threatened to undermine the exalted position of the Pope's agents even more profoundly.

When Gutenberg printed his mere 180 copies of the Gutenberg Bible some seventy years earlier, its 42 lines per page were of course still written in Latin and therefore accessible only to religious scholars and well-educated, wealthy and pious laymen. But when Luther completed his translation of the New Testament into the German of the Saxon Chancery in 1522 AD, he not only opened the doors for everyone to read the stories of the Nazarene for the first time in their own language, but he also used Johann's invention to spread the Gospel far and wide across the empire. And although this amazing novelty of a "German Bible" would set believers back no less than one and a half guilders (or the price of a healthy calf), the first 3,000 printed copies sold out in less than a fortnight.

After his first *coup de grâce*, the firebrand monk went back to his desk for another twelve years and set about translating the first part of the Holy Scriptures. Finally, in 1534 AD, Luther dotted the last "I" and crossed the last "T" of the Old Testament in *Sächsische Kanzleisprache*, picked up his soutane and sprinted to the nearest printer.

From this historic moment on, the world had a complete German edition of the Bible, with both the Old and New Testaments, and printers immediately began working overtime to meet demand. The complete Luther Bible quickly became the first German bestseller in history, providing Germans from Kiel to Kärnten (Carinthia) and from Burgundy to Brandenburg with the first text shared by all German-speaking people everywhere.

In practice, this meant nothing less than that a merchant from the

Archdiocese of Bremen who travelled to the Duchy of Bayern-Straubing to sell his exotic Scandinavian wares like Surströmming™ or amber could now easily converse with his rich customers in Bavaria simply by using Lutheran Bible German. Predictably then, as soon as the trade guilds caught wind of this lucrative advantage, Lutheran Bible German began to spread like wildfire and rapidly established itself as the first genuine standardisation of German across all sovereign German states in the Holy Roman Empire, marking this for all intents and purposes as the de facto beginning of modern-day German.

Some Shifting S-Sounds and a *Schandfleck*

While Luther's Bible became literally the talk of town, the German language itself was far from idle. Instead, almost by stealth, it underwent several further major changes in the pronunciation department which are still with us today.

Most notably, the vowel combination "-EI-", like in the word „*Meister*“ (“master”), was no longer pronounced like the English "-AY-" in “say”, but now rather like the English word “eye”. This is also why the German word for “egg”, i.e., „*Ei*“, now sounds exactly like the English singular noun for the optical organ.

In addition, the sound formerly used for the letter combination “-SL-” now became the modern German “SCHL-”-sound, with the corresponding change in spelling. Which is why Germans today don't say or write e.g. „*slafen*“, where the “-SL-” sound would be pronounced in the same way as in the English translation of the word, i.e., “sleep”. Instead, modern German-speakers pronounce and write the word as „*schlafen*“, with the “SCH”-combination producing the English “SH”-sound, as in the word “shoe”. The same applies to the German word for “school”, that is „*die Schule*“. The pronunciation of „*Schule*“, as well as all other words containing the “SCH”-combination, is always the soft English “SH”-sound, as in “sheep”, never the hard “SK”-sound like in the English “school”.

But these new pronunciations were not the only newcomers to enrich the German language on this threshold to modernity. Once again, it was that linguistic jack-of-all-trades, Martin Luther, who, in addition to his down-to-earth translation of the Bible, also added a number of brand-new words to the language, which he used in his translation as well as in other writings, often seemingly unable to resist indulging his inner prankster.

Although Brother Martin was undoubtedly a devout Christian, and although his self-declared primary aim in translating the Bible was “to make God's voice audible”, the Augustinian monk clearly derived also great pleasure from playing with the peculiarity of the German language, which allows for almost limitless new compound noun creations. In this way, Luther came up with a whole list of new expressions that are still in use today, including:

- **Die Nachteule** - Literally “night owl”, Luther's term for a person who likes to be awake late or who likes to be out late into the night.
- **Der Feueereifer** - The “zeal of fire”; best known as an attitude among fanatics and zealots.
- **Der Denkkettel** - A “think note”; used in a sentence such as “*Jemandem einen Denkkettel verpassen*”, i.e., “to give someone a

- think note", meaning, "to teach someone a well-deserved lesson".
- **Der Lockvogel** - A "luring bird"; meaning a decoy (as used by hunters), often in a bait and switch scheme.
 - **Die Herzenslust** - A "heart's desire"; describing the unencumbered joy of pursuing one's desires. („*Ich genieße es nach Herzenslust*" = "I enjoy it to my heart's content").
 - **Der Lückenbüßer** - Literally a "gap penitent"; denoting an (often unsuspecting) stopgap.
 - **Der Rotzlöffel** - A "snot spoon"; Luther's word for a snotty little brat.
 - **Der Fallstrick** - Literally a "falling rope"; for a metaphorical snare or trap in which one becomes entangled.
 - **Die Richtschnur** - Literally a "string or line of alignment"; used for a metaphorical guideline or standard, e.g. a moral guideline.
 - **Der Schandfleck** - Literally a "stain of shame"; Luther's term for a disgraced person as well as for something that is a reprehensible stain on a person's or an organisation's reputation, (*cough, the Church, cough, cough*).

In his quest to make the Bible as accessible and understandable as possible, Friar Martin also coined some memorable idioms that have become part of the German language, although many Germans today don't realise, they owe them to Luther. These include:

- **Sein Licht (nicht) unter den Scheffel stellen** - Not to hide one's light under a bushel.
- **Wider den Stachel lücken** - Meaning "to lash out against the sting or spike", i.e. against the oppressor.
- **Sein Scherflein dazu beitragen** - Literally "to contribute one's mites", i.e. to do one's bit.
- **Im Dunkeln tappen** - Literally "to grope in the dark", for a situation in which there isn't even the slightest hint of a solution or answer.

Fade Out

With Johann Gutenberg's successors in the printing business creating their own supraregional printer's languages, with the scribes and clerks in the chanceries of Meißen, Prague and Vienna exerting their own influence on the language through the *Kanzleisprachen*, and with Martin Luther, the godfather of modern German, almost single-handedly lifting the German language into the modern era, one would be forgiven for thinking that the period of New High German was characterised by unprecedented linguistic changes, expansions, modifications and innovations in a relatively short time.

And yet, it took another 200 years, until the middle of the 18th century, for a written standard of German to finally emerge and to be accepted by governments and the common folk alike. Only then did the period of New High German finally come to an end and the current era of modern **Standard High German** began.

Maturity – New Friends. New Boundaries. New Freedoms.

Standard High German

„Aber Moment, so schnell schießen die Preußen nicht!“ = “But wait, the Prussians don't shoot that fast!”, (i.e., “Hold your horses, honey!”).

Before we move on to the modern era, we need to make an important stopover in the early Baroque period. More precisely, in 1634 AD, when the German nations of the Holy Roman Empire were still groaning and collapsing under the atrocities of the armies on all sides of the Thirty Years' War (1618 – 1648), while in the same year, in the peaceful capital of neighbouring France, a brand new institution was being born under the guiding hands of the grey eminence behind the throne of French King *Louis XIII*: The mighty *Cardinal Richelieu*. (Yes, the same “conniving old bastard” you probably know best from Alexandre Dumas' 1844 novel *'The Three Musketeers'*).



"And why are we going to Richelieu's Paris now?", you ask? Well, because, as has so often been the case in European history, France and Germany represent two very different sides of the same coin, especially when it comes to the way they deal with their respective languages. And what better way to understand the Germans' attitude towards their language than to take a look at their eternal neighbour and occasional rival.

Forty Immortals vs. One Undying Conviction

While the German Holy Roman Empire in the first half of the 17th century may have produced one hundred and one new methods – and the words to go with them – of slaughter, torture, starvation, and rape, Cardinal Richelieu apparently found both the time in 1634 and the muse in Paris to lay the foundations of one of the most honourable institutions in modern France, the *Académie française*.

To this day, the Académie is the most powerful body in France in all matters relating to the French language which keeps a close and relentless eye on the French public's adherence to the linguistic standards it sets. It was only at the end of the 2010s, for example, that the Académie declared that it would allow the French word for "author" ("*auteur*") to be feminised for the first time, finally making the term "*autrice*" a legitimate French word after an ideological war had been waged over it since the 17th century.

From its inception to the present day, the Académie française has been composed of never more and never less than forty members, appointed for life, who have adopted the nickname "The Immortals" (yep, seriously), and whose equally immortal objective is "*the unification and cultivation of the French language*".



It was these 40 linguistic pharaohs who were largely behind the so-called *Toubon Law* (Law 94-665) of 1994, which mandated the use of French in all official government publications, in all advertisements, in all workplaces, in all commercial contracts and in all state-funded schools, as well as in some other commercial communications and contexts.

The 40 members of the Academy, who meet regularly at the *Collège des Quatre-Nations* opposite the *Louvre* on the other side of the *Seine*, then decided, under the auspices of the Academy's *Secrétaire perpétuel* (permanent secretary), to issue a "public warning" in 2019, warning the French people that the Tubon Law had been repeatedly violated by "*an invasion of Anglo-Saxon concepts*". A scandal indeed, since the law also includes an explicit ban on foreign languages in French TV programmes (presumably raising the income of French dubbing actors to unprecedented heights), while also making it unequivocally illegal for French radio stations to play less than 40% of French songs per day.

But enough of *Cardinal Armand-Jean du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu*, of the forty *Immortels* and of their continuing iron grip on the French language. Time to soar over the rooftops of Paris and to fly east towards the old „*Vater Rhein*“ (“Father Rhine”) and his brown-golden waves with their white peaks and into the land of those unruly tribes who once defied Caesar and the Latin language.

You have seen how nice and orderly everything was organised in the centralistic kingdom of France at the time, ruled from its capital Paris by *Le Roi* and his cardinal. But now we have reached the Imperial Lands and have a bird's eye view of the Holy Roman Empire with its 1,800 different territories, ranging from large sovereign states to allodial estates, monastic territories and even to individual manors. (Oh, what a difference a day in the Teutoburger Forest can make.)

Of course, each of the 1,800 rulers – whether king, duke, mayor, abbot, baron or lord of the manor – had his own idea of how to run his territory, often including its own currency, its own taxes, its own laws and its people's own dialect of the evolving German vernacular. As you can imagine, this swirling hodgepodge immediately relegated any idea of a concerted top-down (to quote Richelieu) "*unification and cultivation of the language*" instantly to the realm of „*Wolkenkuckucksheim*“ (“cloud-cuckoo-home”). And this is a place, as we know, that only the most experienced fools, those suffering from fever and those with vivid dreams are eligible to visit.

With such diametrically opposed political realities existing in the centralist kingdom of France and the patchwork of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, it is unsurprising that these different political realities were reflected in contrasting approaches to national identity, state and government.

Ultimately, these different philosophies also determined who had the final say in each nation regarding the interpretation of the respective

language, whether it were those in the gilded palaces or those in the thatched huts.

However, it should be noted that this fundamental division between French and German speakers did not begin in the 17th century, but almost a thousand years earlier in the early Middle Ages of the 9th century. But best we let the two sides tell the story themselves.

Comte le Petit con Prétentieux: “Le Développement Français”



*“Alors, nous, les Français, are proud of the fact that the beginnings of France as an independent state can be traced all the way back to around 843 AD, after Emperor *Louis the Pious*, also called “the Fair” or “le Debonnaire” and third and only surviving son of the late and great *Charlemagne*, (+814 AD), had spent much of his later reign with battling one or the other of his sons over the throne of Charlemagne’s Carolingian Empire.*

Following the tradition of his father, Louis I. divided his empire in 817 AD between his three sons from his first wife *Irmengard*, who were *Lothair I*, *Pepin*, and *Louis* (later known as *Louis the German*). Rather naively, however, king Louis also sought to preserve the unity of the empire and therefore designated his eldest son, Lothair I. as his successor, thus making him de facto superior to his two brothers. Predictably, this arrangement proved to be unworkable in practice and ultimately initiated a series of conflicts among the three brothers as well as between daddy Louis I. and the ever-shifting alliances of his three sons.

The turmoil caused by Louis’ first official division of his realm in 817 AD was further multiplied by the king’s second marriage to the Bavarian noblewoman *Judith* and by the birth of his fourth son, *Charles* (later known as „*Karl der Kahle*“ or “*Charles the Bald*”). Judith convinced her husband Louis to redivide his empire to provide for his little son. As an obedient spouse, Louis did what his wife told him and carved-up his empire anew in 829 AD, with Charles, by now Louis’s favoured child, (duh), receiving a kingdom that included the largest part of modern-day *Allemagne*.

Sans surprise, however, his other sons, particularly Lothair I., were furious about Louis’ decision and immediately began to revolt. In the following years, old Louis “the Fair” had to fight in shifting alliances with and against his sons on the battlefield and was deposed and reinstated as king more than once, with the Pope and his bishops further intervening from time to time.

After long-suffering Louis I. transcended with a sigh of relief to the afterlife in 840 AD and a fourth and final civil war between the remaining three sons, (Pepin had died in the meantime), the *Treaty of Verdun* was finally agreed on 10 August 843, ending the Carolingian civil war and dividing the Carolingian Empire between Lothair I., Louis II. and Charles II. A division that is still recognisable on the map to this day and that had a decisive influence on the fate of the peoples of Western Europe, including

those of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and even its distant successor, the Federal Republic of Germany.

In detail, malcontent Lothair I. received the Middle Frankish Kingdom *Francia Media*, which included the imperial cities of Aachen and Rome as well as the Kingdom of Italy, the Low Countries (i.e., the Netherlands), the Rhineland west of the Rhine, Lorraine, Alsace, Burgundy, and Provence.

Lothair-loathing brother Louis II. was handed the East Frankish Kingdom of *Francia Orientalis*, encompassing all lands east of the Rhine except the Netherlands as well as the territories to the north and east of Italy. This new realm of King Louis “the German” was first called *East Francia* and soon after the *Kingdom of Germany* (Latin: “*regnum Teutonicorum*”, i.e., “Kingdom of the Germans”), whose people mostly spoke Germanic languages and later formed the bulk of the emerging Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

Et pour finir, the family’s nestling and daddy’s favourite Charles II. was given *Francia Occidentalis*, the West Frankish kingdom, spanning all lands west of the river Rhône. King Charles the Bald’s realm was at first called *West Francia*, which soon turned simply into *Francia*, while its rulers were known as “*Rex Francorum*”, (“King of the Franks”). The first king of Francia who then called himself “*Rex Francie*” (“King of France”) was *Philip II.* in 1190 AD, and the title became official in 1204, thus writing the name “France” forever into the history books.

In the end, the one brother who isn’t remembered for founding an entire nation that still exists today is chief troublemaker Lothair I., whose middle kingdom was simply swallowed up in time by the kingdoms of his two younger brothers. *Eh bien*, serves him right, the patricidal bast -. Uh, I mean, this *sac à merde*. Which is French for, uhm, “unruly heir”. *Non, vraiment, je t'assure!*

Alors, we will now make a considerable time jump to the period you folks today call the Renaissance. Before this cultural “rebirth”, *la France* in the High Middle Ages between 1050 and 1250 AD had been a decentralised and feudal monarchy, while during the Late Middle Ages (1250 – 1500), the ruling *Capetian* dynasty had been mainly occupied with consolidating their rule in an ongoing feud with their vassals of the *House of Plantagenet*, who also ruled the Kingdom of England.

This whole kerfuffle came to a head in the so-called *Hundred Years' War* (1337–1453) in which the Plantagenet kings of England laid claim to the French throne but were ultimately defeated by France. In the aftermath, the subsequently invigorated French kings expanded and extended their power in western Europe – as one does in such circumstances, *naturellement*.

Mais uniquement sur le côté, or “but that’s only on the side”, as you *Anglais* say. As for the linguistically interesting part, this started in the Renaissance, when a branch of the Capetian family ascended the French throne whose name became synonymous with the splendour and



extravagance of the *Ancien Régime*.

During his reign between 1643 and 1715, the most famous son of this *House of Bourbon*, magnificent king *Louis XIV.*, also known as “The Sun King”, got rid of the last remnants of medieval feudalism and replaced it with a centralised state under an absolute monarch, with Paris and Versailles at the core of this radiant new form of central government. And while our *Roi Soleil*’s predecessor king *Francis I.* had made French already the only accepted language for legal and juridical matters in 1539 with the *Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts*, the next and even more influential step for a centralistically managed language defined by those “up here” for those “down there” came of course in 1634 with the inception of Cardinal Richelieu’s *Académie française*.

More than 150 years later, during the French Revolution (1789–late 1790s), France was subjected to the “Reign of Terror,” first by the dictatorial revolutionary “Committee of Public Safety” (who took *Louis XVI.*’s head in 1793) and from 1795 on by the no less bloodthirsty “Directory”. Particularly for young pupils in the dialect-prone countryside, this terror also included the “proper” learning of French as promoted by the radical revolutionaries in Paris.



In 1799, Napoleon finally took the reins of state from the cold hands of the literally exsanguine revolutionaries after becoming First Consul of the Directory’s direct successor at the highest level of government decision-making, the so-called Consulate. At the time, public bulletins announcing this news could be read by about half of the surviving French population.

Mais it took another hundred years until the final quarter of the 19th century for France to become the linguistically unified country that you, *cher amis*, know today, complete with the *Toubon Law* and the forty “Immortals” holding the reins of the French language firmly in their hands while being well shielded by the walls of the *Académie français*. *Et oui*, that’s how we’ve always done it and like it, *compris*?

Anyway, *pour l’instant, au revoir et merci de votre attention, bande de supporters de l’Allemagne de merde!* Really, how can anyone be interested in that unmelodious and unruly language, *putain!*”

Bauer Hans-Peter Kleverle: „Die deutsche Entwicklung“



„Hey, pass’ auf was du sagst, *Froschfresser!* Watch what you’re saying, frog eater, *kapiert?* Got it? Dude, some people, really... Well, believe it or not, usually the French have class. No, really. But this jerk ...

Anyway, let me pick up the narrative thread from the Count of Pretentious Remarks over there.

Well, as *Monsieur Smarty-pants* so rightly pointed out, *die deutsche*

Entwicklung, i.e., the German development, began with God-fearing King Louis I., called “The Pious”, and his three ungrateful, selfish, patricidal- and fratricidal-leaning sons, who later turned into four sons, of whom three eventually crossed the finishing line, but only one of whom really deserved it. And I'm saying this even though amiable Charlie's nasty brother Louis II. “The German” was a founding father of our own Holy Roman Empire.

But while the signing of the *Treaty of Verdun* in 843 AD laid the foundations for a unified, centralised kingdom of France that grew out of hairless King Charles' Western Frankish Empire, the people of the Eastern Frankish Empire experienced a very different political fate after the death of his brother and king-colleague Louis “The German”.

The short-lived Eastern Frankish Empire soon gave way to a new construct that later got the highfalutin name of „*Das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation*“, that emerged in the 10th century with the coronation of *Otto I.* as its first emperor in 962 AD by Pope John XII in Rome. And all 76 emperors following Otto on the throne until the *Reich's* final dissolution by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1806 adhered to Charlemagne's original idea of a revived Roman Empire and ruled the “*Sacrum Imperium Romanum Nationis Germaniae*” – the “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation”, as the political entity was officially called from 1512 onwards – in the conviction that their motley empire was the true successor of the first *Imperium* on European soil.

By invoking *translatio imperii* (Latin for “transfer of rule”), i.e., the concept that an empire can be passed from one emperor to another across time and political boundaries, the East Frankish emperors legitimised themselves as the direct successors of the Roman emperors of antiquity. Consequently, Otto I. and his successors also enthroned themselves as the “natural” secular leaders of Christendom, (by God's holy will, *natürlich*), ruling above all the other kings of Europe. Not to mention that they saw themselves naturally as far above such insignificant lesser rulers as the princes, margraves, dukes, counts, barons and electors presiding over the few large and many small individual states in the empire.



All „*zweiundachtzig*“ (“two-and-eighty”) divinely ordained emperors who ruled the empire throughout its existence saw it as their primary duty to ensure peace, stability and the peaceful resolution of conflicts within the *Reich*. From the later Middle Ages onwards, the German emperors, (who were traditionally crowned in Frankfurt am Main), even began to place an additional emphasis on protecting the subjects of their empire (at least in theory) from any arbitrary and unlawful treatment on the part of the local rulers.

In practice, however, this made little difference. The local barons and earls continued to treat those entrusted to them simply as dictated by centuries of feudalism and the will of God. With such a deadlocked governmental and social constellation, widely regarded as an immovable and eternal constant for centuries, the *Reich* naturally produced generation after generation of Germans who considered their world to exist within

narrow and narrowest boundaries and who perceived the emperor only as a legendary figure who was moving exclusively high up in unreachable ethereal realms. At the same time, however, commoners experienced their local rulers' frequent arbitrariness first-hand and day after day. A circumstance that unsurprisingly led to deep-seated scepticism towards authority figures, which was passed down from grandparents to parents to children to grandchildren.

Nun, wie ihr wisst, it is certainly no secret that governments of all time periods have been well aware of the immutable fact that “*those who control the language control the masses*”, (just ask your own clairvoyant author *George Orwell*.)

Therefore, it is certainly no coincidence that a seasoned power broker such as *Cardinal Richelieu* took the time to set up a state regulatory authority for the French language in the midst of the Thirty Years' War (which France was financing from afar until 1635, when it joined the conflict as a major player, fighting alongside Sweden against Spain, the House of Habsburg and the Catholic League). *Mit anderen Worten*, while Richelieu's *Académie française* was put in front of the French people's noses just in time to secure the French government's perpetual steely grip on their language, it was long too late for the Empire to make any attempt of this kind in the 17th century, with the chancery languages as the ultimate attainable under the circumstances.

By then, the conviction that language belongs to the people, not those in power, and that it develops organically — often in small steps, sometimes in large bounds — by means of the tongues and quills of ordinary people had become firmly established throughout the German lands. This is why, even a thousand years later in the early modern era that began around 1800 AD, people still spoke no fewer than twelve different languages within the Empire's borders, including Slovenian, Italian, French, Dutch, Danish and Czech, although German remained the most common language, *natürlich*.

That's not saying much, though, considering that linguists classify for instance *Bairisch* (Bavarian) to be actually a language in its own right, which therefore does not fall under the category of the German language — curtesy of the International Organisation for Standardisation, who classified the Bavarian dialect group as an independent language in 2007, while the UNESCO even lists Bavarian in its “Atlas of Endangered Languages” as of 2009.

And that's just one example of the enduring diversity of dialects and languages in Germany. Which is why a conversation with a Bavarian, Tyrolean or Austrian will be held several linguistic galaxies apart from a conversation with a citizen of Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne or Dresden. Not to mention that even in the 2020s and beyond, people from those four cities will still have their own problems understanding each other.

All of which is to say, *meine Freunde*, that the German-speaking people have never bowed to a top-down, government-decreed language norm, and not even the “*Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung*”, (the German Spelling Council), set up as an intergovernmental body in 2004 in the aftermath of the chaotic first German spelling reform in a hundred years, has changed that. While it is the main task of the Council's representatives from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and other German-speaking regions to

maintain the standardisation of spelling in the German-speaking world, most German-speakers don't even know that the Council exists in the first place.

To be fair, though, the Council's recommendations are regularly incorporated into the new editions of the German arbiter of all things grammatical, the *Duden*. And in the end, even Germans follow this yellow dictionary and its other specialised editions when the shit hits the fan in a grammatical dispute. However, this is still a far cry from having forty "Immortals" initiate laws stipulating that forty per cent of songs on the radio must be sung in the national language. *N'est-ce pas, Count Pretentious Little Jerk?*

Anyway, now you're up to date on the libertarian attitude of the German-speaking people regarding their mother tongue, I guess. Keep that in mind for whenever you might wonder about the incessant to-and-fro in the history of the German language, if you please. „Und jetzt Tschüss, Servus und mach's gut, du neugieriger kleiner Schlingel“, i.e., "And now goodbye, cheerio, and take care, you curious little rascal'." Now I confidently place you back in the arms of the ever-flowing stream of German linguistic history – and just so you know, your next stop on your journey is *echt* a blast.

Philipp's Shattered Dream of a "Babes' Castle"



Okay, so, clearly history went down two distinctly different routes when it comes to the vernaculars of *La France* and *Deutschland*. With the latter evidently adopting a rather more "pro-organic growth" attitude towards the development of their mother tongue.

This isn't to say that there weren't some very industrious and ambitious language enthusiasts in the Empire who, for various reasons, felt strongly called upon to "improve" the German language.

One early pioneer who stood out for his dedication, positive national attitude and creativity in this regard was the remarkable and today almost forgotten German poet and author *Philipp von Zesen* (1619 - 1689).

Probably spurred on by his first-hand experiences in the Thirty Years' War (1618 – 1648 AD), which drastically demonstrated to young Philipp the dire consequences of a nation fragmented and divided within itself, von Zesen took it upon himself to vigorously replace foreign words in his native German language with "proper" German equivalents of his own creation.

What at first sounds like the ambitions of a narrow-minded nationalist who couldn't stand any "foreign influences" in his mother tongue, was in fact neither driven by a bad case of "linguistic purism" nor by a misguided sense of national superiority.

On the contrary, Philipp, who was born in the Electorate of Saxony, was tormented by the fact that his German-speaking compatriots were being torn apart and viciously crushed into pulp in a terrible war between the



great domestic and foreign powers of the time, (with France on the sidelines until 1635 AD, when it entered the war against Spain, prior to which it had fuelled the carnage – despite being a Catholic monarchy – with generous “donations” to the enemies of the Habsburg Dynasty, Spain, and the Catholic League).

That's why Philipp saw the re-Germanisation of the German language primarily as a means of uniting his people under the common banner of a renewed and "more German" language, with the ultimate (if somewhat lofty) aim of making another fratricidal war all but impossible.

In Philipp's view, centuries of fragmentation into hundreds of German-speaking states, divided along (often shifting) religious and political lines, had flung the doors wide open for the Thirty Years' War, a hellish culmination of the disaster-in-waiting that was the patchwork Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

Against this background, von Zesen could indeed be described as an early German nationalist, albeit one whose ideas differed fundamentally from those of the small-minded people who bear that label today.

During Philipp's lifetime, German nationalism was the literal idea of a united German nation, and as such was about as easy to obtain as the fabled treasure of the Nibelungs.

The reasons why Philipp and his contemporaries knew full well that their utopia would almost certainly remain a pipe dream during their lifetimes were rather obvious. After all, uniting the German people into a single nation would have meant that all those archbishops, princes, dukes, lord mayors, barons, margraves and other rulers of the many states in the empire would have had to give up their exalted and well-paid positions as local autocrats – and you can surely imagine how well such an idea went down with any of these big fish in their little ponds.

With this path to a united nation thus thoroughly blocked, Philipp clearly needed a different approach. So, one day the poet simply sat down, picked up a quill and began to do his small part to unite the German-speaking people. After asking himself, *"Why not giving my fellow countrymen a stronger sense of common identity by replacing the many foreign words in our language with my own German word creations?"*, Philipp set to work right away and himself on track to become one of history's unsung heroes who nonetheless rendered quite outstanding services to the German language.

Not only did Philipp von Zesen unify the names of many "things" that previously had different names in different regions, often influenced by the language spoken beyond the closest foreign border, but he also enriched the German language with truly imaginative new word creations,

several of which are still used by German-speakers today, even though no one knows that good old Philipp was their originator. Philipp von Zesen's most successful and timeless classical creations include:

- **Die Anschrift** - Additional to „*die Adresse*“, both: “the address”.
- **Die Bücherei** – Additional to „*die Bibliothek*“. While „*Bücherei*“ is the library in your neighbourhood, „*Bibliothek*“ is used for university-, central-, national- and generally large libraries.
- **Die Leidenschaft** – Replaced „*die Passion*“, i.e. “the passion”. The noun „*das Leiden*“ means “the woe”, or “the suffering” while the suffix „-schaft“ is related to the verb „*schaffen*“, meaning “to manage/to create”. (Looks like Philipp knew what he was talking about here.)
- **Das Tagebuch** – Literally “the days-book”, Replaced the French „*das Journal*“. Today the only legit German word for a diary.
- **Der Verfasser/Die Verfasserin** - Additional to „*der Autor/die Autorin*“, i.e., “the author”.
- **Die Versicherung** – Replaced „*Assekuranz*“, meaning “the insurance”.
- **Der Abstand** – In addition to „*die Distanz*“, both meaning “the distance”, the space between two objects.
- **Der Augenblick** – Literally an “eye-gaze” or an “eye-wink”, introduced additionally to „*der Moment*“.
- **Der Bücherwurm** – Literally “the bookworm”, denoting a person who loves books and to read. Yes, Philipp was the first to come up with this endearing term, and apparently the English liked and adopted it. (The other “nickname” for ardent book-readers in German is, by the way, „*die Leserratte*“, i.e. “the reading rat”. Seriously.)
- **Das Abenteuer** – “The adventure”. In itself not revolutionary, but most Germans don’t know that Philipp gave them with this word the nowadays exclusively used term for ‘adventure’, while the priorly common word „*die Abenteuerlichkeit*“ survived only in the adjective *abenteuerlich*, today mainly used in the meaning of “quixotic, swashbuckling, hazardous, fantastically, venturesome, or bizarre”.
- **Der Kaffeeklatsch** – - Literally “coffee gossip”, the perfect word for this situation where two or more women (sorry, but usually very few men take part in this “ritual”) get together to drink coffee, often in combination with eating cake, and exchange the latest news.
- **Die Rechtschreibung** – Translates directly into “the right-writing” or “the correct writing”, as an alternative to „*die Orthographie*“, i.e., “the spelling/orthography”.
- **Die Mundart** – Meaning literally “the type of mouth”, invented by Philipp as a German alternative for „*der Dialekt*“, “the dialect”.
- **Der letzte Wille** – Another of Philipp’s successful creations that made it also into the English language, this one as “the last will”, as an alternative to „*das Testament*“.

To any German-speaker today these words would seem to be perfectly normal German terms and probably as boring as any A1-level German textbook. And yet, at the time, Philipp's creations were a minor sensation and many of them found their way into the lexicon as well as into everyday language in record time.

But it was not all sunshine and rainbows for Philipp. Unfortunately (or fortunately, to be honest), not all his word concepts met with the

undivided applause of his contemporaries, with some of his enthusiastically presented creations even making him the laughingstock of the day.

And with good reason, as you will see. Fortunately, even Philip's more ridiculous inventions have survived the centuries, although they have never made it into the dictionary, let alone into the German vernacular. But thanks to diligent historians, librarians, and linguists, we can still enjoy some of Philip's discarded linguistic gems, such as:

- **Der Jungfernzwinger** – Literally a “spinster kennel”. Von Zesen’s rather pointed suggestion for „*das Nonnenkloster*”, i.e. a “nunnery”, a place where nuns live. You know, celibate women who officially “chose” to serve God, but who unofficially were often enough sent and held against their will behind the thick walls of a nunnery, where the Mother Superior determined their life from A (for “*Amen*”) to Z (for “*Zölibat*”, i.e., celibacy)., A kennel, i.e., a prison for animals, apparently seemed to Philipp a justified synonym in this case.
- **Der Meuchelpuffer** – The “assassination chuffer”, Philipp’s funny-sounding (at least to German ears) and (still) often ridiculed suggestion as the official replacement for the word „*die Pistole*”, i.e., a gat, an iron, a heater, a roscoe, a piece, a strap, a blaster. A pistol. (The old-fashioned German verb „*meucheln*” [~moi’cheln] means “to insidiously assassinate someone” and is still present in the term „*Meuchelmörder*” as the German equivalent to an “assassin”.)
- **Die Schweisslöcher** – Literally the “sweat holes”. A rather bras and on-the-nose suggestion for the established plural German noun „*die Poren*”, i.e., the “pores of the skin” through which you sweat.
- **Die Heilandin** – The “female saviour” or “female redeemer”, Philipp’s high praise for „*die Ärztin*” – the female doctor. (But perhaps the old letters-juggler Philipp just liked the wordplay, since the verb „*heilen*” means “to heal” in German, while „*der Heiland*”, the existing male form of Philipp’s suggestion, is the German term for Jesus “the Redeemer”.)
- **Die Hohe Schule** – Literally the „high school”, although not in the American sense of the word but instead as a rejected alternative for „*die Universität*” – the university.
- **Der Liebesstein** – The “love stone”. A comprehensible while rather odd choice for a “magnet”, which is why German stuck with „*der Magnet*”.
- **Die Wohllebenskunst** – The “art of well-living”. Von Zesen’s highfalutin attempt at a German alternative for „*die Hygiene*”, i.e. “hygiene”.
- **Das Luftkind** – Literally the “air child” or “child of the air”. A wonderfully poetic word, until you learn that Philipp created it as a failed alternative for „*das Echo*”, (meaning the same as in English).
- **Die Zeugemutter** – The “procreation mother”. Alright, admittedly, it is sometimes a bit difficult to follow Philipp's trains of thought. Or who would have guessed that the impetuous word-refiner was trying to replace the term „*die Natur*”, i.e. “[Mother] Nature”, with this cringe-worthy new word creation? – Yep, nobody did.
- **Das Lustgetöne** – The “lust soundings” or “passion sounds” ... Well, another one of Philipp’s flights of fancy that misses its mark by miles. No one knows what devil was riding on Philipp's shoulder in this case, but apparently the young von Zesen saw his suggestion as a perfectly viable option to replace the term „*die Musik*” - i.e. music - with a word that conjured up many mental images, none of which had anything to do

with the innocent act of playing or listening to music. (Especially since the unusual word „*Getöne*“ (meaning only approximately “sound, loud noise”) sounds almost exactly like the word „*Gestöhne*“ (i.e. “moaning” or “groaning”). Now add the word „*Lust*“ to it and before young ‘Phips’ could have had said: “No, not like that!”, he must have had his ears full of the guffaws and giggles of his compatriots.

- **Die Weiberburg** – A failed suggestion that is considered either the most outrageous or the most hilarious of Philipp's unsuccessful word innovations. Meaning literally a “broads castle” (U.S.) or “totty castle” (UK), i.e. a castle for babes, chicks, dames or gals, it would only be natural if you’d be thinking now that young ‘Phips’ wanted to describe with this word a rather specific place whose purpose was (and still is) often announced by red lights in the windows. However, by thinking of “a brothel” you’d be technically just as much mistaken as most of Philipp’s fans and friends.

In fact, „*Weiberburg*“ was Philipp's rather ill-conceived German alternative for the word “harem”, the historical term for the private living quarters reserved for women in a large Muslim household, or for the group of women who lived in those quarters.

While it should be noted that the nowadays pejorative term „*Weib*“ (or „*Weiber*“ in plural) for a woman (or women) did not have the same negative connotation in Philipp's time as it does today, it is nonetheless hard to imagine that most of von Zesen's female contemporaries were enthusiastic when they heard his suggestion.

Given all the above, it isn’t hard to understand why many of Philipp's ideas didn't make the cut and never found their way into the developing list of standard German nouns. Nevertheless, in the face of the turbulent (to put it mildly) times in which von Zesen was working, his valiant efforts must be regarded as an important step towards reducing the moist discharge oozing from people's sweat holes whenever they had to engage in a conversation across one of the many linguistic borders inside the Holy Roman Empire.

But even if Philipp is not widely remembered as the exceptional wordsmith that he certainly was, he has undoubtedly earned his place in the Parthenon of German language luminaries who substantially “streamlined” and promoted the *Lingua Germanica*. Not only for his many successful (and some of his unsuccessful) word creations, but also for pioneering the dissemination of German literature and campaigned for the development of an independent German literary language. In this context, von Zesen is also partially responsible for the survival and revitalisation of one grammatical “quirk” of the German language for which any German-student will instantly hate him, but which gives German an entire additional layer of nuance, paired with elegant brevity: The so-called *Präteritum* (imperfect), or “written past tense”.



However, while the “Father of modern German”, Martin Luther himself, had used the *Präteritum* extensively in his German Bible, a few centuries later, the populace, particularly in northern and central Germany, had increasingly grown accustomed to using instead the longer yet apparently “easier” *Perfekt* form (past perfect) to talk about things that happened in the past.

Perfekt vs Präteritum – Two Ways to talk about Yesterdays

German Verb (Infinitive)	English Past Tense	Perfekt (1 st pers. sing.) (Spoken Past)	Präteritum (1 st pers. sing.) (Written Past)
gehen	I went	Ich bin gegangen	Ich ging
fluchen	I cursed	Ich habe geflucht	Ich fluchte
sein	I was	Ich bin gewesen	Ich war
essen	I ate	Ich habe gegessen	Ich aß
fliegen	I flew	Ich bin geflogen	Ich flog
denken	I drank	Ich habe gedacht	Ich dachte
lesen	I read	Ich habe gelesen	Ich las

Since Philipp was a vehement advocate of a “standard” written language that was based on the language of Luther's Bible, he, together with other language “purists”, wanted to preserve the *Präteritum* in the written language as the “narrative tense”. In his own words, this was to cultivate a “serious and dignified language”. And to this day, the German *Präteritum* is in fact used in most written texts, while German-speakers tend to use predominantly the *Perfekt* form when talking to each other.

So, let’s make a quick detour and leave Philipp to his quill and parchments for a while to explore this peculiar characteristic of the German language to employ two forms of the past tense, beginning with the

Perfekt – The “Spoken Past”



From a purely grammatical point of view, it can be said that the *Präteritum*, i.e. the simple past, describes an action that has been completed in the past while the *Perfekt*, i.e. the perfect tense, connects the past with the present. In everyday speech, however, it may seem to you as if Germans use the simple past and the perfect tense often seemingly interchangeably. But as you’ve probably already suspected, this

apparent arbitrariness is in fact by no means arbitrary but follows instead centuries-old customary rules.

But first things first and to make one thing clear from the outset: in practice there exists no difference between the two past tense-forms regarding the point of time in the past to which they refer to – in contrast to the *Plusquamperfekt* (pluperfect or past perfect tense), which describes an action that was already completed before another action happened in the past. *Perfekt* and *Präteritum* are both “ordinary past”. Their differences lie in the circumstances in which you use one or the other as well as in some

ingrained exceptions to these rules. To be more precise, some verbs are used in their *Präteritum* ("written past") form even in spoken German, as you will see.

To employ either one of the two past tenses, however, you need of course first to know how the two grammatical past tenses are conjugated and formed. So, first let's take a closer look at the *Perfekt*, the "spoken past" and the two questions you need to ask yourself if you want to form a sentence in the *Perfekt* tense, the first question being:

1. "Is the auxiliary verb either „**sein**“ (to be) or „**haben**“ (to have)?"

As you've seen in the table above, the *Perfekt* is formed by combining a so-called auxiliary verb, either „*sein*“ or „*haben*“ conjugated in present tense for the respective grammatical person, with an "actual" verb in its unique and unchanging perfect-form (often, but not always, appearing with a „*ge-*“ at the beginning or, in separable verbs, in the middle).

The good news is that this perfect-form of the verb always stays the same for all grammatical persons in singular and plural alike. So, you only need to learn this one verb-form and not conjugate it in any way.

The still not so bad news is that you will need to know how to conjugate the two possible auxiliary verbs „*sein*“ (to be) and „*haben*“ (to have), while the real challenge with the perfect tense lies in memorising which one of these two auxiliaries goes together with which of two *Perfekt* verb types. Fortunately, there are some guidelines to help you in the process – but as usual, there are of course exceptions to the rule.

Generally speaking, the *Perfekt* is formed with „**sein**“ when the verb either expresses a change of state, e.g.:

- **sterben**, (to die) → *Er ist gestorben* („He is died")
- **aufstehen**, (to get up) → *Wir sind aufgestanden* („We are gotten up")
- **einschlafen** (to fall asleep) → *Ich bin eingeschlafen* („I am fallen asleep")
- **wachsen** (to grow) → *Die Pflanze ist gewachsen* („The plant is grown")
- **schmelzen** (to melt) → *Das Eis ist geschmolzen* („The ice is melted")

or when the verb expresses a movement from A to B, for example:

- **gehen** (to go) → *Wir sind gegangen* („We are gone.")
- **kommen** (to come) → *Du bist gekommen* („You are come.")
- **fliegen** (to fly) → *Sie sind geflogen*. („They are flown.")
- **umziehen** (to move house) → *Sie sind umgezogen*. („They are moved.")
- **verduften** (to vamoose) → *Er ist verduftet*. („He is vamoosed")

However, there are a few exceptions to the rule that do not meet either of these two requirements and are still formed with „*sein*“, for instance:

- **passieren** (to happen) → *Es ist passiert* („It is happened")
- **bleiben** (to stay/remain) → *Ich bin geblieben* („I am stayed")
- **gelingen** (to succeed) → *Der Versuch ist gelungen*. („The trial is succeeded")

In the 'benigning', you will probably need some time to wrap your

head around the idea of forming the perfect tense in German sometimes with „*sein*“ (to be), since in English the perfect tense is exclusively formed with “to have”, e.g. English: “He has died” vs German: “He is died”.

However, no need to get nervous, because only about 20% of German verbs can or must be formed with „*sein*“ while the other 80% form the perfect tense with „*haben*“. So, your “default setting” should be the „*haben*“-form while you learn, bit by bit, those verbs that are formed with „*sein*“. However, it is important that you have a firm grasp of the conjugations of „*sein*“ and „*haben*“, of course.

Table: Conjugation of „*sein*“ & „*haben*“ (present tense)

Person:	<i>sein</i> (to be)	<i>haben</i> (to have)	English
ich	bin	habe	I am / have
du	bist	hast	You are / have
er, sie, es	ist	hat	He, she, it is / has
wir	sind	haben	We are / have
ihr	seid	habt	You are / have
sie/Sie	sind	haben	They are / have

Mind you, it’s not only the German language that made these two *Perfekt* auxiliary verbs its own, but also Dutch, French, Italian and other European languages. The reasoning behind such a construct with auxiliary verbs is actually quite fascinating.

But let’s quickly get the basics down first. So, in German, „*haben*“ has become a typical auxiliary verb for transitive verbs, for instance: „*Ich habe ein Zauberbuch gelesen.*“ (“I have read a spell book”), where „*lesen*“ (“to read”) is a transitive verb because you can ask: “Who or what have I read?” and the answer would be: „*Ein Zauberbuch*“, as the accusative object.

However, „*haben*“ is also the auxiliary verb for most intransitive verbs, (otherwise we wouldn’t reach the 80%, after all), that don’t have an accusative object. For instance, „*Ich habe geschlafen*“ (“I’ve slept”) is an intransitive verb where no accusative is possible. Why? Because asking: “Who or what have I slept?” and answering „*Ich habe die Hängematte geschlafen*“ (“I have slept the hammock”) would sound like you’ve got a bit of a concussion after the hammock-ropes broke.

„*Sein*“ on the other hand occurs as an auxiliary verb only with a special subgroup of verbs. As stated above, these are either verbs of motion („*gehen, fahren, kommen, laufen*”; “to go, drive, come, walk”), or verbs indicating a change of state („*sterben, einschlafen, aufwachen*”; “to die, fall asleep, wake up”) or a few special cases („*sein, bleiben, passieren*”; “to be, remain, happen”).

This idea of the two auxiliary verbs for the *Perfekt* tense was of course not conceived by Philipp von Zesen but instead goes as far back as to the ancient “ancestor” of many European languages, the fabled “Indo-European” language. Later, the Romans actually adopted the idea into the Latin language before, much later again, the Romance languages turned it into the “*auxiliaire être/essere*”, (“the auxiliary ‘to be’”), e.g. in French: “*je suis allé*”, or in Italian: “*sono andato*”, (“I am gone”, instead of “I have gone”).

In parallel, the same trend developed in Old High German and

Middle High German. For transitive and most intransitive verbs, German now uses „haben“, („Er hat gezaubert“ = “He has worked magic”), while for verbs of movement from A to B or change of state, „sein“ is used, („Er ist geflogen“ = “He is [has] flown”, or „Er ist metamorphiert“ = “He is [has] metamorphosed”).

“But why don't German and these other languages simply stick with „haben“ as the only auxiliary verb in the past perfect tense, like in English? That would be so much easier. Why bring „sein“ into play to make things complicated?” you might somehow rightfully interject now.

Well, now we come to the fascinating part, since the answer to this question is one part semantic, one part philosophical and one part historical. The thought process behind the use of „sein“ in this case goes mainly like this: In its fundamental meaning, „haben“ represents a possessive verb. This in turn makes it ideally suitable for events where a subject (the acting element of the sentence) “takes possession” of something through an action, in the meaning of the subject performing or causing the action towards or with something/someone.

„Sein“, on the other hand, is basically a “state“- or “existence“-verb and therefore best suited for describing those processes that cause a change of location or state, in other words the transitions from one state



(of being or of being located) to another. For example, in German you cannot say: „Ich habe geschwommen“, which sounds about as wrong as “I am swum” in English. The reason is that you can’t ask “Who or what have you swum?”, since there simply isn’t anything that you can have “taken possession” of. Instead, German sees such movements like swimming, walking, flying, driving, etc. as the “means” to move from A to B or to change a state, in the manner of: “I am [**the one who has moved by having**] swum”.

Originally, the old Indo-European speakers used the *Perfekt* form, (i.e., the verb-form with, in most cases, the prefix „ge-“), still in a pure and not *periphrastic* way, that is, not by expressing something with multiple words, but instead with a single inflected form and therefore also without auxiliary verbs. Over the centuries, these old single-word inflection forms were then slowly dismantled by each new generation of German-speakers and were ultimately replaced by the constructions with „haben“ and „sein“ as we know them today.

For the early German-speakers who started this process, „sein“ was also an obvious choice because the verb had already been used since ancient times as a “copula” [a connector between subject and verb, like in English: “to be” – e.g., “I am flying”], to mark the end-result of a “state”: „Er ist gestorben“, (“He is [has] died”, following the logic: “He is [**the one who has**] died”, or, „Ich bin geflogen“ in the meaning of, “I am [**the one who has moved by having**] flown”.

All clear so far? Good. Then this leaves us now only with one other question that you need to ask yourself before forming the past perfect form in German, and that's:

2. "What is the *Perfekt*-form of the main verb?"

Now, as stated above, the good news is that the *Perfekt*-form of a German verb is the same for all grammatical persons, which means that you only need to learn this one word without conjugations, (instead, the conjugation happens with the auxiliary verb „*sein*“ or „*haben*“).

Furthermore, verbs in *Perfekt* will predominantly appear with the prefix „*ge-*“ and will always end either in the letter „*-t*“ (so-called “weak verbs”) or in the syllable „*-en*“ (“strong verbs”). There are approximately only 150–200 strong or mixed verbs ending in „*-en*“, while in contrast there are literally thousands of weak verbs ending in „*-t*“, (because new verbs in German are almost always conjugated weakly).

Finally, you need to know that separable verbs, i.e. verbs whose prefix-syllable gets detached and thrown to the end of the sentence when conjugated in the present tense, have their „*-ge-*“ placed in-between the prefix-syllable and the rest of the verb, for example: „*anrufen*“ (to call) → „*hat angerufen*“ (has called).

Naturally, also here there are some exceptions to the rule, where the *Perfekt* of the verb is formed without a „*ge-*“, like:

- **passieren** (to happen) Perfekt: „*Es ist passiert*“
- **bekommen** (to get) Perfekt: „*Sie haben bekommen*“;
- **entscheiden** (to decide) Perfekt: „*Man hat entschieden*“
- **zerstören** (to destroy) Perfekt: „*Wir haben zerstört*“

And that's already all there is to forming the perfect *Perfekt*-sentence. The rest is learning by doing (and studying the verb-forms). Speaking of which, studying “new” verbs plays an even more important role with the other “normal” past tense form, the fabled

***Präteritum* – The “Written Past”**

Now, the *Präteritum*, or “written past”, represents a whole other den of grammatical lions when it comes to the changes which a verb undergoes to fit in the mould of this special past tense. Admittedly, it sometimes even seems as if the ancient German language “creators” invented completely new words at random for their “*synthetic*” past tense by coming up with almost unrecognisable “new” single-inflected verbs.

By the way, the fact that verbs in *Präteritum* are single-inflected, i.e. do not have any auxiliary verb, is about as good as the news will get, I'm afraid. Apart from that, best be prepared to relearn every verb once more from scratch.

However, there is at least some logic to the madness, since you can differentiate between regular, irregular and mixed form verbs in the *Präteritum*, (or “imperfect past”).

1. **Regular verbs** form the *Präteritum* simply by cutting the “-en” from the base form of the verb, (e.g., „spielen” = “to play”), and adding the ending „-te” to the stem for these two grammatical persons:

- First Person Singular: „Ich spielte”
- Third Person Singular: „Er, sie, es spielte”.

while the regular verb-endings for the other grammatical persons always are:

- Second Person Singular: „Du spieltest”
- First Person Plural: „Wir spielten”
- Second Person Plural: „Ihr spieltet”
- Third Person Plural: „Sie spielten”

But don’t worry, most of the time, the only *Präteritum* forms used in common spoken (!) German are those for „*ich*” (first person singular) and „*er, sie, es*” (third person singular), and to a lesser extent for „*wir*” (first person plural) and „*sie*” (third person plural), with the latter two being pretty rare in conversation, while the *Präteritum* form for „*du*” (second person singular) is virtually never used in spoken German.

In fact, asking a German: „*Spieltest du nicht gestern Fußball?*” (“Did you not play football yesterday?”), will result undoubtedly in an immediate laughing fit, only to be topped by: „*Aber ihr spieltet doch auch letzten Sonntag!*”, (“But you [plural] also played last Sunday!”). These forms



sound extremely pretentious and are even in written German extremely rare. It’s not even far-fetched to think that many Germans have never in their lives heard the correct *Präteritum* of „*spielen*” in second person plural, („*Ihr spieltet*”) said out loud. The sheer projected “hubris and pretention” that emanates from a speaker using this form is almost off the charts and the resulting ridicule should be a fair warning not to imitate the tone-deaf fool who believes to “score” with it.

“So, what then do Germans use instead?”, (he asked rhetorically). Well, they use the *Perfekt* form, of course. Which, at least when talking, is the case with most verbs in the past tense today. So, you would actually ask: „*Hast du nicht gestern Fußball gespielt?*”, and say: „*Aber ihr habt doch auch letzten Sonntag gespielt!*”.

Another bit of good news: The number of regular verbs in *Präteritum*, (“written past”), actually continues to grow, since almost all new verbs entering the German language are regular in *Präteritum*, for instance: „*chatten*” → „*Ich chattete*”; „*surfen*” → „*Ich surfte*”, or „*killen*” → „*Ich killte*”.

2. On to the second group, where you’ll find the **irregular verbs**, which form the *Präteritum* without any reoccurring ending and often have a

vowel change in their stem. So, either you know the correct verb-form, or you take an educated guess and hope for the best. In both cases you'll likely get the hang of it after a while. Examples for irregular *Präteritum* verbs are:

- **gehen** (to go) → „ich ging, du gingst, wir gingen, ihr gingt“ (went)
- **sehen** (to see) → „ich sah, du sahst, wir sahen, ihr saht“ (saw)
- **finden** (to find) → „ich fand, du fandst, ihr fandet“ (found)
- **kommen** (to come) → „ich kam, du kamst, ihr kamt“ (came)

Now, the weird thing about the “written past” verbs is that German-speakers use some of them all the time in their spoken language, while completely ignoring the *Perfekt*, the “spoken” past tense, in such cases. *Präteritum* verb-forms which are constantly used in common parlance instead of in their *Perfekt* form include among others:

- **sein** (to be) → „ich war, du warst, wir waren, ihr wart“ (was)
- **haben** (to have) → „ich hatte, du hattest, wir hatten“ (had)
- **wollen** (to want) → „ich wollte, du wolltest, er wollte“ (wanted)
- **dürfen** (be allowed to) → „ich durfte, wir durften“ (was allowed)
- **sollen** (shall, should) → „ich sollte, du solltest, wir sollten“ (should)
- **können** (can) → „ich konnte, er konnte, wir konnten“ (could)
- **müssen** (must) → „ich musste, du musstest, sie mussten“ (had to)

It is therefore perfectly normal to say, „Ich weiß, ich sollte gestern anrufen“, (“I know, I was supposed to call yesterday”), while the same sentence in *Perfekt*, i.e., „Ich habe gestern anrufen gesollt“ sounds to German ears like a troglodyte trying to communicate after falling from a very tall tree – a *faux pas* that can rarely be made up for with a simple „Entschuldigung“, (“Sorry”), and the explanation that it was just a slip of the tongue.



(No, seriously, using the *Perfekt* form with these verbs will immediately single you out as an uneducated, low-IQ ignoramus and can be a promotion-killer in a business environment. As a foreigner, your colleagues or boss may give you the benefit of the doubt once or twice – but every act of goodwill has its limits. And in private life, your new German boyfriend or girlfriend will most likely correct you a few times, but after a while, your use of the *Perfekt* with verbs like *sollen*, *können*, or *haben* will almost guaranteed drive them up the wall or out of the door.)

3. Finally, there are the so-called **mixed verbs**, which have a „-te“ ending like the regular verbs, but also a stem change like the irregular verbs, for example:

- **bringen** (to bring) → „ich brachte, wir brachten“ (brought)
- **kennen** (to know) → „ich kannte, wir kannten“ (knew)

- **denken** (to think) → „Ich dachte, ihr dachtet“ (thought)
- **rennen** (to run) → „ich rannte, wir rannten“ (ran)

Now, with all this out of the way, let us once more return to Phillip von Zesen, who was not the “inventor” of the *Präteritum* but certainly helped to stabilise and legitimise it as a written and narrative tense, while the spoken language had already largely abandoned it in favour of the perfect tense.

So, if you always wanted to blame someone for the fact that there are two simple past tenses in German, one for the spoken (*Perfekt*) and one for the written (*Präteritum*) past, now you know at whom to direct your ire.

As if this wouldn’t be enough, however, Philipp von Zesen helped not only to standardise German past tense-forms, but also other “highlights” of German grammar, as well as word-spellings, to improve intelligibility – and in the hope to further his dream of a unified and unifying language.

His efforts, and those of several other early German-enthusiasts, also included the systematic use of declensions and conjugations to make the language more coherent and precise. Which is another good reason why Philipp should immediately be made the patron saint of all German-students, who are certainly extremely grateful for the standardised German article conjugation system. Right?

Table: The German Definite Articles

Grammatical Case	Masculinum	Femininum	Neutrum	Plural
<i>Nominativ</i>	der	die	das	die
<i>Genitiv</i>	des	der	des	der
<i>Dativ</i>	dem	der	dem	den
<i>Akkusativ</i>	den	die	das	die

Nom: <i>The X who can do magic.</i>	Gen: <i>The magic wand of the X.</i>
Der Mann, der Magie kann. Die Frau, die Magie kann. Das Kind, das Magie kann. Die Kinder, die Magie können.	Der Zauberstab des Mannes. Der Zauberstab der Frau. Der Zauberstab des Kindes. Die Zauberstäbe der Kinder.
Dativ: <i>The throne belongs to the X.</i>	Akk: <i>The X who we fear.</i>
Der Thron gehört dem Mann. Der Thron gehört der Frau. Der Thron gehört dem Kind. Der Thron gehört den Kindern.	Der Mann, den wir fürchten. Die Frau, die wir fürchten. Das Kind, das wir fürchten. Die Kinder, die wir fürchten.

*[Mann = man; Frau = woman; Kind = child; Kinder = children]

Interlude: The Three German Genders – Assigning Sex with no Rhyme or Reason?

“Why on Earth do you need three German genders anyway? And why is there apparently not even any logic behind the assignment of genders to objects/nouns?”

Two questions that almost all students of the German language have asked themselves in frustration at the beginning of their studies – and indignantly demanded to have them answered by their language tutors soon after.

In the following, you will find an explanation that at least tries to answer these questions as far as possible. Before that, however, we must first clarify one thing: The German grammatical gender is a noun-class system and not a statement about biological sex! (Which should be clear if you consider that “neuter” isn’t a sex but still one of the three so-called genders.)

In other words, masculine, feminine, and neuter are labels, not meanings that indicate a “male” or “female” (or “neuter”) object. A “table” might be masculine in German – „*der Tisch*” – but it doesn’t have “male genitalia”, just as a “door” is feminine – „*die Tür*” – without showing any physical female attributes. And German-speakers also don’t see a door or a table and associate a biological sex with them.



Table: The Three German Genders

Gender	Personal pronoun	Spoken	English		Definite Articles	Spoken	Indefinite Articles	Spoken
Masculine	er	<i>air</i>	he		der	<i>dare</i>	ein	<i>ayn</i>
Feminine	sie	<i>sea</i>	she		die	<i>dee</i>	eine	<i>ayne</i>
Neuter	es	<i>ess</i>	it		das	<i>dass</i>	ein	<i>ayn</i>

Now, it might surprise you, but many languages that are nowadays proud of their “simple” article-system once had noun classes themselves. But while some Indo-European languages preserved them, others just didn’t. In the Germanic language group today, only German, Icelandic, and Faroese have kept their three-gender classification, while English, Dutch, and the Scandinavian mainland languages once had three genders but later reduced them to one or two.

But how were these genders assigned then? Did the old Germanic tribes look at a tree and then voted to determine that “tree” is masculine („*der Baum*”), because it has a phallic shape? Or did a council of elders sit one night around the campfire and decide that the sun shall be feminine („*die Sonne*”) because it is warming and nurturing like a mother?

Well, historically, scholars have often tried to read some sort of symbolism into German genders, while modern linguistics reject this approach nowadays almost completely.

So, are there no discernible patterns behind German object genders? Well, sort of – but they’re merely statistical and not absolute. Which is why any attempt to find a “deeper reason” behind German

gender-assignments will unfortunately always remain a busted flush.

Still, there are some common tendencies that you might want to remember for moments in which you grapple for the correct gender. They won't help you out in all situations, but hey, better than nothing, right?

Masculine: days, months, seasons, weather, many tools

- (*der Montag, der Sommer, der Regen, der Hammer*)
- [Monday, Summer, rain, hammer]

Feminine: many abstract nouns, especially with the endings *-ung, -heit, -keit*

- (*die Freiheit, die Hoffnung, die Liebe, die Einsamkeit*)
- [freedom, hope, love, loneliness]

Neuter: collective or mass nouns, many with the endings *-chen, -lein, -ment*

- (*das Wasser, das Volk, das Instrument, das Mädchen*)
- [water, a nation's people, instrument, girl]

Furthermore, you might want to take note that in German **all alcoholic beverages are masculine** (*der Wein, der Whisky, der Schnaps, der Jägermeister™, etc.*) – except beer! (*das Bier*).

Finally, **all fruits are feminine** in German (*die Banane, die Orange, die Birne, die Erdbeere*) – except apple and peach! (*der Apfel, der Pfirsich*).

So, keep in mind that the real drivers behind German genders were sound-changes, analogies, morphological rules, direct borrowing from Latin and French, and non-subjective associations. In a nutshell, German gender is based on grammatical memory, not on any worldview.



Now, you might have noticed above that the German word for “girl” is listed in the neuter-category, (or you might have known this already, of course). But how can something so decidedly feminine receive a neuter gender?

Good question. Some people like to tell you the following story in this regard: The term „*Mädchen*” is the diminutive form of the word „*die Magd*”, denoting a maiden, handmaid, or farmgirl. To clarify that a young maiden was not yet capable of procreation and to “protect” her from the male gaze (and more), a young girl was therefore classified as neuter („*das Mädchen*”) until she entered adulthood.

According to ecclesiastical law in the Middle Ages, becoming a woman happened rather quickly back then. Girls became adults at 12 years of age and boys at 14. (Yes, unfair, but who would have advocated for little girls at the time?) From this age onwards, girls were considered eligible for marriage (*pubertas*). However, this didn't mean that they were considered

"fully grown" in social terms, only that marriage was legally possible. In fact, from a secular legal standpoint, the age of majority was set at between 21 and 25 years old, depending on the region.

As nice as this story may be, though, the true reason for „*das Mädchen*“ is purely grammatical and very easy to explain. See, „-chen“ is a diminutive suffix, i.e. placing it at the end of a noun transforms the object in question automatically into a small version of itself. And since all nouns with „-chen“ (or „-lein“) are without exceptions neuter, when turning „*die Magd*“ into a “small”, i.e. young, handmaid or farmgirl, the gender must change from feminine to neuter.

The three genders and their corresponding articles in the four different grammatical cases may well be one of the most “hated” aspects of German grammar. But there are good reasons for why this system has not only survived all linguistic storms of the past centuries but is also alive and kicking today, without any discernible efforts to change it.

Most importantly, the different genders and their declined forms in the four cases help with sentence structure clarity. Take for instance the following example:

„**Den Fuchs beißt der Mann.**“ = “The man bites the fox.”

„**den Fuchs**“ → accusative (object – the “receiving” part)

„**der Mann**“ → nominative (subject – the “acting” part)

The same also goes for the indefinite articles of „*ein*“.

„**Einen Fuchs beißt ein Mann.**“ = “A man bites a fox.”

You know right away who does what purely from the article, and not from word order. Naturally, you would assume that it is the fox who is doing the biting and therefore put the subject in front of the object. And

in English, you must do this to make clear who (subject) bites whom (object). In German, on the other hand, you do not have this restriction. You can therefore either say,



„**Der Mann beißt den Fuchs.**“ / „**Ein Mann beißt einen Fuchs.**“

„The man bites the fox.“ / “A man bites a fox.”

or

„**Den Mann beißt der Fuchs.**“ / „**Einen Mann beißt ein Fuchs.**“

„The man is bitten by the fox.“ / “A man is bitten by a fox.”

In both cases it remains clear who’s biting whom. In English by

comparison, should you want to place the object before the subject and not rely entirely on intonation or Italics (*"The man (!) bites the fox"*), you must resort to the rather cumbersome construction of:

"The man is bitten by the fox."

Meanwhile, the sentence structure remains unchanged in German and the meaning is just as perfectly clear as in the first example, because thanks to the declined articles you can immediately see that:

„**den/ein** Mann" = accusative → object

„**der/einen** Fuchs" = nominative → subject

Admittedly, if both nouns are feminine or neuter, the word order does carry more weight, because the articles are identical in nominative and accusative, e.g.:

„**Die** Katze beißt **die** Frau."

„**Die** Frau beißt **die** Katze."

So, the gender system increases clarity, even if not in every single sentence. This becomes even more apparent in a more complex example like:

„**Dem** Bergführer gibt **der** Bergsteiger **das** Rettungsseil."

„**dem** Bergführer" (dative) = recipient / indirect object [*guide*]

„**der** Bergsteiger" (nominative) = subject [*mountaineer*]

„**das** Rettungsseil" (accusative) = direct object [*rescue rope*]

You can see that the indirect object, i.e. the recipient, is in first place in this sentence, while in English in comparison, you would have no other choice but to say:

"The mountaineer gives the rescue rope to the mountain guide."

In German on the other hand, you can reorder your sentence parts freely:

„**Der** Bergsteiger gibt **das** Rettungsseil **dem** Bergführer."

„**Der** Bergsteiger gibt **dem** Bergführer **das** Rettungsseil."

„**Das** Rettungsseil gibt **der** Bergsteiger **dem** Bergführer."

„**Dem** Bergführer gibt **das** Rettungsseil **der** Bergsteiger."

„**Das** Rettungsseil gibt **der** Bergführer **dem** Bergsteiger."

Throughout, the meaning and sequence of events remains clear because the case-marked articles assign precise roles to each noun through the different cases and their respective declined articles.

While English lost most of its case endings and relies on fixed word order and prepositions, German has kept its four cases and three genders and thus allows a considerably more flexible syntax.



But the true practical advantage of this system lies in its possibility to give emphasis to any sentence part simply by placing it at the beginning of a sentence. If you want to direct the attention to the mountaineer, you put him at the first position, so that everyone knows that it is the mountaineer and not someone else who hands over the rope. If you want to make clear that it is the rope that is handed over and not something else, you put this first in your sentence. And if you need to emphasize that the recipient of the rope is the mountain guide and not someone else, you let him climb to the top of your sentence, then followed in the sentence's rope team by the second-most important part. (Notice, however, that the verb will always remain in the second position in a main clause, no matter what.)

So, German gender isn't about any "sexual" meaning at all, nor is it philosophical or semantic. It is infrastructure, plain and simple. Thanks to the three genders in their four grammatical cases, German sentences have a flexible word order that allows you to focus on or emphasise the part that you deem most important, without having to rearrange your sentence, which ultimately results in a satisfying sentence-structure clarity.

Alright, so much for that. Now, do you still remember our Philipp and his dream of a unified and unifying language?

Well, he wasn't quite finished with his valiant efforts, which is why German-speakers and learners owe Philipp also a debt of gratitude for his contributions to the simplification of German syntax, where, among other things, he sought to organise the use of subordinate and main clauses, thus creating a more comprehensible German sentence structure and further adding to the declined articles' success in this field.

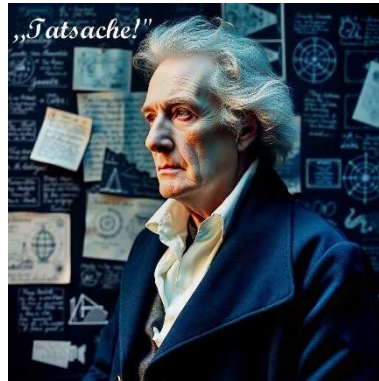
And any German-student who is deridingly laughing out loud now about the part where it says "more comprehensible" would do well to consider the fact that German syntax would certainly look far more convoluted today without their patron saint Philipp and his linguistic comrades-in-arms and their lifelong struggle to tame the German language-beast, to make it more accessible to adventurous language students.

Anyway, after Philipp finally ascended to the eternal *Weiberburg* in the sky, (at least we can hope so for him), at the ripe old age of seventy, it still took another two hundred years until the fearless verbal acrobat's dream finally took shape in the 19th century with the proclamation of the first German nation-state (the second German Empire) in 1871.

But before this came to pass, first another figure entered the stage of German literature and academia whose name would soon tower above all others who came before or after him.

Interlude: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – The German Cultural Giant

To be frank, there is literally nothing that could be said here about the great Goethe that hasn't already been said a thousand times in a more elaborate and eloquent manner. The internet and any given library in Germany can provide you with metric tons of literature about Germany's "godfather of literature" as well as with all his works in dozens of different editions.



But hey, since you're here, why not venture a glance at what made this exceptional man tick and why he can rightfully be called the "German cultural giant", a title that no one else in the German literary canon can rival – (except Martin Luther, of course).

So, without further ado, let's start with the basics: Johann Wolfgang Goethe (known as "*von Goethe*" from 1782 onwards) was born on 28 August 1749 in Frankfurt am Main and died on 22 March 1832 in Weimar (now in Thuringia). He was not only an author and poet, but also a diplomat, politician, and natural scientist and may indeed be considered one of the last German polymaths.

Perhaps surprisingly, Goethe's legacy includes also many scientific works. For instance, he wrote about botany in '*Metamorphosis of Plants*' (1790), and worked in zoology and anatomy, discovering the intermaxillary bone in human jaws, *Os intermaxillarein*, in 1784. Working in geology and mineralogy, he amassed a collection of over 18,000 mineral pieces which still exists in Weimar today, while in his studies of volcanism he postulated that volcanoes were not exclusively created by internal heat. But he was particularly interested in optics and colour theory. In his works in this field he emphasised the subjective perceptual experience of colours through the human eye, which later became an important foundation in art theory and even in psychology.

Throughout this period, Johann also devoted time to Weather- and Climate Theory, observing clouds and keeping a weather diary, while on the side translating the cloud classifications of his contemporary Luke Howard in London from English into German. He even dedicating a hymn about "his clouds" to Howard in 1821. The two began corresponding by letter in 1822, adding to the enormous number of letters Goethe wrote in his lifetime. Scholars estimate that Johann wrote an astounding number of around 20,000–30,000 letters during his life, of which 15,000 are still in existence today, while the "Weimar Edition" ("*Weimarer Ausgabe*") contains around 20,000 letters which he received from scholars, artists, scientists, and authors.

Among them can be found such illustrious names as *Friedrich Schiller*, (their exchange between 1794 and 1805 is in fact legendary and shaped the Weimar Classicism), his early Weimar confidante, adviser, and close companion *Charlotte von Stein*, the philosopher and fellow *Sturm und Drang* thinker *Johann Gottfried Herder*, his sovereign, patron and political partner *Carl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach*, and the statesman, linguist, and intellectual peer *Wilhelm von Humboldt*.

Other pen pals of Johann included European figures like *Napoleon*, *Lord Byron*, or *Alexander von Humboldt*, the most famous German explorer of his time. Alex's older brother Wilhelm, on the other hand, preferred to stay at home in Prussia as a scholar, writer, statesman and educational reformer, only to singlehandedly initiate the reorganisation of the Prussian education system in the spirit of neo-humanism.

And while Goethe and Napoleon met only once in person (in 1808 in Erfurt, during the *Congress of Erfurt*), the French Emperor spoke with great admiration of Goethe and specifically mentioned '*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*', which, according to his own statements, he had read several times.



Yet, Goethe wasn't just a man of books and letters, but also a man of ledgers. From 1775 on, he served at the court of *Duke Carl August in Weimar*, juggling roles from financial administration to cultural policy, basically embodying the 18th-century version of "wearing too many hats." He even dabbled in diplomacy, representing Weimar in delicate talks across Europe.

Although he preferred poetry to paperwork, Goethe knew that running a duchy was also an art, just with fewer rhymes and more receipts. Unsurprisingly, thanks to his intellectual capacities, he then soon became the most powerful man in Weimar, second only to the duke.

To no one's surprise, least his own, this new position earned Goethe also his fair share of criticism as "the poet of despots". And undeniable, his work in Weimar had its „*Licht- und Schattenseiten*“ ("light- and shadow sides", an expression that was inspired by Goethe himself). For instance, did he try to free peasants from oppressive corvée labour and tax burdens? Certainly. But did he also advocate for the forced recruitment of local children into the Prussian army and for measures to restrict freedom of speech? Yes, he also did that.

In the end, Goethe's work in Weimar was a mixed bag, and after an on-and-off employment in some capacity as a politician, functionary, diplomat or privy councillor (*Geheimer Rat*) for 39 years in the service of the Duke and the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, (and its around 100,000 inhabitants), Johann Wolfgang called it quits in 1815, after having put the small duchy thoroughly on the cultural and political map of Europe.

Johann's extensive contribution to the "modernisation" of the German language during his time in Weimar, but also before and afterwards, can not only be found in his literary works but also in his treatises on philosophy and natural sciences. (Seriously, when did the man ever sleep?).

Before Goethe entered the picture, scientists and educators communicated customarily in Latin. Johann wrote in German. And not in the typically convoluted style of scholars, but in a style that was sophisticated yet clear and generally understandable. The immense

influence his works and writing style achieved even during his lifetime indubitably helped to establish German as a fully-fledged cultural language.

Furthermore, with his new form of literary and poetic writing he swept away all the old cobwebs and remnants of the Baroque period literature. Goethe's works appeared in a clear, simple and rhythmic language that was welcomed by his contemporaries as more modern and closer to spoken language. But of course, this wasn't enough for Johann, who promptly experimented with different styles, from folk song melodies to classical blank verse and philosophical discourse to prose and thus demonstrated for anyone to see and read that German can be versatile and shaped into beautiful simple ballads as well as into highly complex works.

In regard to word creation, Goethe could perhaps not compete with his kindred spirit Philipp von Zesen in terms of sheer numbers, but Johann did come up with some of the most commonly used German terms today, for example:

- **Die Tatsache** – Literally: “the deed-case” or “deed-object”. What English calls “a fact”. Today, the term is also a one-word sentence in German, for instance when someone says: *„Katzen tun so, als würden sie uns erziehen, nicht umgekehrt.“*, (“Cats act as if they are training us, not the other way around.”), then you can simply answer with: *„Tatsache!“*, (“And that’s a fact!”; “Indeed!”).

In an ironic or sarcastic way, *„Tatsache“* is also used as an answer if someone says something that’s unlikely or hard to believe, like, *„Ab morgen gehe ich regelmäßig Sport machen.“*, (“Starting tomorrow, I'm going to exercise regularly.”). – *„Tatsache.“* (“Yeah, sure you do.”).

You can use the term also as a one-word question if you want to express your surprise or disbelief to a statement like, *„Es gibt über 25.000 Burgen und Schlösser in Deutschland.“*, (“There are over 25,000 castles and palaces in Germany.”). – *„Tatsache?“*, (“For real?”). *„Ja, Tatsache.“* (“Yep, for real.”).

- **Die Umwelt** – Literally: “the around-world”. Here, Goethe used the preposition *„um“* as a prefix, since the little word has almost always something to do with “moving around”, “turning (around)” or “circling” something, for instance in the words *„umfahren“*, (“drive around” [or “drive over”] something), *„umsehen“*, (“to look around”, “to browse”), or *„die Umleitung“*, (“the detour”, “diversion”).

In combination with the term *„Welt“*, (“world”), this became a word that’s nowadays on everyone’s lips, since *„Umwelt“* is the German term for “environment”. Probably, Johann would be astounded, and perhaps a little bit pleased, to see how one of his word creations has made such a career, even though it is due to the dire conditions of our *„Umwelt“* today.

- **Das Selbstbewusstsein** – Literally: “the self-awareness-being”. In English: “self-awareness” and “self-confidence”. Now, full disclosure, although Goethe is often credited with the introduction of the term *„Selbstbewusstsein“* into everyday language, he was likely not its original inventor. Rather, his influence lay in popularising the term and embedding it in the vernacular of his era. By making the term more

widely known and accessible, Goethe and his contemporaries in the field of philosophy – particularly Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte – ensured its lasting place in the German language. Fichte even made it the central concept of his „*Wissenschaftslehre*“ (“Science of science/knowledge”).

Before Goethe and his philosophising brothers in spirit, German-speakers at the time tended to use instead more descriptive terms, like “self-knowledge”, or “the feeling of oneself”, while the new term „*Selbstbewusstsein*“ brought the whole concept down to a catchy, new common denominator.

- **Die Anschauung** – Literally: “the looking-at” or “the viewing”; from the verb „*schauen*“, (“to look”, “to view”) and the preposition „*an*“, which often indicates “at” or “on”, plus the typical German noun-ending „-ung“. Perhaps the most philosophical of Goethe’s terms and one that carries a rich and layered meaning which is not easily rendered in a single English word.

In colloquial parlance, it is most often used in the meaning of “point of view” or “position on a topic”, e.g. „*Okay, das ist deine Anschauung.*“, (“Okay, that’s your point of view.”).

For Goethe, however, „*die Anschauung*“ referred rather to “perception” or “intuition”, i.e., the way in which something is apprehended, either through the senses or by the mind. But leave it to meticulous *Immanuel Kant* to hone and sharpen the meaning of the term to its finest point. For him, „*Anschauung*“ had a much more precise significance in philosophical contexts, denoting “an immediate sensory intuition”, in contrast to “abstract concepts”. For example, Kant drew a distinction between „*die Anschauung*“ as a direct perception, like seeing a box, and „*der Begriff*“ (“term”) as the idea or concept of a box. Which just goes to show once again how well German is suited when it comes to distinguishing finest abstract details, (and why you need to read Kant in original German).

In more mundane realms, however, the word „*Anschauung*“ itself is rarely used nowadays. Instead, Germans use „*die Meinung*“ (“opinion”) or „*der Standpunkt*“, (“point of view”). However, when adding the word „*Welt*“ to the term, the resulting compound noun „*Weltanschauung*“ is a different breed of axolotls. This noun refers to the “comprehensive conception of the world and humanity’s place within it”, denoting a guiding framework of beliefs, values, and interpretations of how the world is and how it should be.

German scholars in philosophy, religion, and cultural studies use „*Weltanschauung*“ to describe the overarching perspective or philosophy through which an individual or group interprets life and reality, while Finn-Jonas, (22, sociology student in the seventeenth semester), uses the term in every third sentence while loudly explaining to you over your tenth beer of the evening what he believes to be the



reasons why humanity is heading in the totally wrong direction.

- **zahllos** – Literally: “number-less”, in English: “countless”. An adjective that Goethe formed from the already existing word „*zahlreich*“, which literally translates to “rich in numbers” meaning “many”, “plentiful”, “a lot”. The ending “-los” usually translates into something like “nothing or none” like in „*ahnungslos*“ (“clueless”). However, in this case it rather indicates “beyond measure, uncountable, infinite”, like in “countless”.
- **wandelbar** – Literally: “able to change”, in English: “mutable”, “changeable”, “alterable”. Goethe here used the ending “-bar”, which is comparable to the English ending “-able”, and the verb „*wandeln*“, which is often used also as a reflexive verb; „*sich wandeln*“, meaning “to metamorphose” or “to convert (oneself)”.
- **Die Heiterkeit** – Literally: “the cheerfulness”. Goethe combined the adjective „*heiter*“, meaning “cheerful, buoyant, jocular”, with the typical adjective-turned-noun ending “-keit”. Probably one of the most used of Goethe’s word creations to this day.

Now, if you are wondering why Goethe’s clear and concise writing style, his demonstration of the versatility of the German language, and even his newly created as well as promoted terms had such an influence on the German-speaking population in such a short time, well, one reason is certainly that his works became school reading-material early on, and his language style was held up to pupils as an example of “good German”. From then on, generations of German-students were “tortured” with Goethe’s ‘*Faust*’ in German classes, since Goethe, together with Friedrich Schiller, had set the standards for style, expression, and word choice, which are more or less still in effect today

Of course, this is by no means to say that Germans today still talk or write in the style of Goethe’s times. Yet the „*Frankfurter Jung*“, (“the boy from Frankfurt”) has definitely left his conspicuous mark on the German language and will likely remain the undisputed poster child for German literature and language use for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps, you now feel inspired to immerse yourself in Goethe's works? Well, then here is a list of his most famous works for you. No light reading, of course, but once you're hooked you probably won't be able to put it down. Enjoy.

Theatrical Plays

- ❖ **Faust. Part One of the Tragedy** (1808) – Johann’s most famous work tells the story of the scholar Faust, who makes a pact with Mephisto, (“the devil”). The German literary work, which contains many idioms, phrases and plots Germans still use and refer to today in everyday conversations.
- ❖ **Faust. Part Two of the Tragedy** (1832) – published posthumously, this part is more complex, symbolic and often difficult to grasp, but despite (or because) of it, it is considered Goethe's „*Lebenswerk*”

(“lifework”).

- ❖ **Götz von Berlichingen (1773)** – “*Sturm und Drang*” drama about the “Knight with the iron hand”, [see also chapter: “Swearing in German – An Art in Itself”, subchapter: “He shall lick me in the backside” – Götz von Berlichingen]
- ❖ **Egmont (1788)** - A drama about freedom. The inspiration for Beethoven to later compose his famous „Egmont Overture”.
- ❖ **Iphigenia in Tauris (1787)** – A classical drama that deals with the aspects of humanity and reconciliation.

Novels

- ❖ **Die Leiden des jungen Werther** (The Sorrows of Young Werther), (1774) - An epistolary novel that made Goethe famous throughout Europe, sparking enormous enthusiasm shortly after its publication, particularly with many young people who identified with Werther's feelings, his infatuation, and ultimately his suicide. This phenomenon was so widely recognised that it later became known as the “Werther effect”, denoting a situation in which reports of suicide will trigger copycat-acts. The sad reason behind this was that during the so-called “Werther craze” – which is only comparable to the cultural impact a globally popular film or music band or artist might have in modern days, (think “Beatles-mania”) – reports indicate that some young men actually took their own lives after reading ‘*Werther*’.

In fact, we still have reports from the end of the 18th century of young men, (some even dressed in Werther-style clothing with a blue tailcoat and yellow waistcoat), who committing suicide, often with a copy of the book nearby. However, historians are cautious, since many of these stories come from newspapers, letters or second-hand sources, which tend to become easily exaggerated or mythologised.

Nevertheless, there are documented cases of suicides during this period that have been linked to Goethe’s work, and some countries, like Italy, Denmark, and Saxony, actually banned the book for a time of fear of copycat-suicides.

But although the „*Werther Fieber*”, (“fever”), is an early example from the late 18th century of the then new mass culture and its effects, Goethe is hardly to blame for a “wave of suicides”. This exaggeration clearly lies at the doorstep of the moralists and their scaremongering. Well, at least in this respect, little has changed.

- ❖ **Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre** (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship), (1795/96) – A coming-of-age novel, cornerstone of the German *Bildungsroman* (education/coming-of-age novel) tradition. This difficult, dense and not entirely easy-to-digest novel became a “bane” for generations of older German secondary school pupils and university students alike.
- ❖ **Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre** (Wilhelm Meister’s Travels), (1821/29) – Not really a sequel but much more fragmentary and

experimental, with less plot, more episodes, novellas, reflections, social and utopian ideas. Goethe himself called it „*ein chaotisches Ganzes*“ (“a chaotic entirety”), but it is also a reflection of his late life philosophy.

Poetry

- ❖ **Erlkönig (1782)** – A poem full of love between father and son and full of sadness when you finish reading it. Many Germans know at least the first verse:

*Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.*

[Who rides so late through night and wind?
It is the father with his child;
He holds the boy securely in his arm,
He holds him safe, he keeps him warm.]

- ❖ **Wanderers Nachtlied II** (Wanderer’s Night Song II), (1780) – A short poem but with a sucker punch at the end that will leave you behind slightly dazed and melancholic.

Yet another work of Goethe that is still often quoted, sometimes in “foreboding” jest (by quoting only the first two and last two lines together), or to point out how quiet a scenery appears (quoting only the first two lines), or as a joking warning (quoting only the last two lines), or to point out that people suddenly fell silent (by quoting only the third-to-last line from the bottom). The complete poem goes like this:

*Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, bald
Ruhest du auch.*

[Above all the peaks
There is peace,
In all the treetops
You can hardly feel
A breath of wind;
The birds are silent in the forest.
Just wait, soon
You too will rest.]

- ❖ **Der Zauberlehrling** (The Sorcerer's Apprentice), (1797) – A ballad about a young sorcerer's apprentice who is left alone in the old witch master's den and decides to fill a bathtub with water, presumably to soak in peace for a while. To this end, he wants to use the magic he has learned from his master and casts a spell on a broom to fetch water with a bucket. But alas, the broom performs its task only too well, and the little wizard has forgotten the spell to make the broom stop. In desperation, he grabs and breaks the broom handle – only to now have two brooms continue the task even faster. Soon the entire witch master's house is flooded – and the little apprentice realises that he cannot get rid of the spirits he has summoned and that only the master can help him now. In the end, he cries out for his master, who swiftly returns and speaks his famous spell to command the brooms to return to their corner.



Many Germans know at least some lines from this masterwork, even if they don't realise where they actually came from. The most famous and most often quoted line is certainly „*Die ich rief, die Geister; Wird ich nun nicht los*“, which is mostly (mis)quoted open-ended as „*Die Geister, die ich rief ...*“, („The spirits that I called ...“). followed by a sigh and used to indicate that what you had wished or asked for priorly has now turned into a nightmare that you can't get rid of anymore – for example, inviting your in-laws to stay at your house indefinitely, or allowing your dim-witted neighbour to help you repair your Jaguar™ E-Type™. The complete last two verses go like this:

*„Und sie laufen! Naß und nässer.
Wirds im Saal und auf den Stufen.
Welch entsetzliches Gewässer!
Herr und Meister! hör mich rufen! —
Ach, da kommt der Meister!
Herr, die Not ist groß!
Die ich rief, die Geister
Werd ich nun nicht los.“*

[“And they run! Wet and wetter.
It gets wetter in the hall and on the steps.
What a terrible flood!
Lord and Master! Hear me call! —
Ah, here comes the Master!
Lord, the need is great!
The spirits that I called
I now cannot get rid of.]

*„In die Ecke,
Besen! Besen!
Seids gewesen.
Denn als Geister*

*ruft euch nur, zu seinem Zwecke,
Erst hervor, der alte Meister.“*

[“Into the corner,
Brooms! Brooms!
Become have-beens,
For as ghosts,
Only the old master calls you forth,
For his own purposes.”]

With the master’s line, *„Besen! Besen! Seids gewesen.“* being another line sometimes quoted in the hope that something will stop soon. Another popular line, particularly with children, who like the *„Walle, Walle“-*part, [~valla, valla], is the incantation at the beginning, when the sorcerer’s apprentice chants:

*„Walle! walle
Manche Strecke,
Daß, zum Zwecke,
Wasser fließe
Und mit reichem, vollem Schwall
Zu dem Bade sich ergieße.“*

[“Flow, flow,
Some distance,
So that, for the purpose,
Water may flow
And with rich, full waves
Pour into the bath.”]

Yes, be careful what you wish for – or stir up. Anyway, apart from these and other famous lines from Goethe’s poems, there are naturally also quotes that come from Goethe’s novels, plays, and other writings which have found their way into everyday German language and are alive and kicking in the 21st century. Next to that (in)famous *Götz von Berlichingen* quote that’s on everyone lips nowadays, (you know, the one with the friendly request to move one’s tongue to the rear end of the Götz-quoting person for the purpose of licking it), Goethe’s play bearing the same name of the “Knight with the iron hand”, also gave us the quote:

- ❖ **„Wo viel Licht ist, ist starker Schatten“** – (“Where there’s much light, there’s strong shadow”). This quote made the terms **„Schattenseiten“**, (“shadow sides”) and **„Licht- und Schattenseiten“**, (“light and shadow sides”) popular in Germany, which are often used to either describe the (assumed) negative sides of an idea, project, undertaking, or proposal, or the good and bad sides of something, similar to the “two sides of a coin”.

Other famous Goethe-quotes include:

- ❖ **„Augenblick verweile doch, du bist so schön!“** – (“Moment, oh please

linger, for you are so beautiful!") – The quote appears in Goethe's *'Faust I'*, in the study room scene, shortly before Faust finally seals the pact with Mephisto. Here, Faust and Mephisto negotiate their pact, where Mephisto will serve Faust on earth, but in return Faust belongs to him after death.

Faust believes that his restlessness and infinite longing will prevent him from ever experiencing a moment when he will be so happy that he would want to pause. Safe in this belief, Faust therefore formulates this famous sentence as a bet: If he would ever say, "Oh, moment, please linger, you're so beautiful!", i.e., if he is ever so content and perfectly happy that he wants to hold on to the moment, then Mephisto may have his soul.

Nowadays, Germans tend to quote only the first half of the sentence, **„Augenblick, verweile doch ..."**, assuming that everyone around knows the end.

This is usually said when you feel that the current moment is so nice and pleasant that you wish it would never end, like sitting with old friends together until late in the night, drinking, laughing, reminiscing – and suddenly it hits you that this is a unique moment that will never come back and you wish that it would go on just a little bit longer.

- ❖ **„Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich's sein."** – („Here I am human, here I am allowed to be."). From *'Faust I'*, scene 'Before the Gate' (Easter Walk), when Faust and his famulus Wagner are taking a walk, encountering various people; citizens, students, and farmers, with the latter celebrating spring, nature, and the resurrection of Jesus. Faust, acutely aware of the contrast to his own gloomy study room, feels the life of nature and the immediacy and community and exclaims the sentence to express this feeling.

Today, you might exclaim the same sentence, (or just the first half), with a sigh of pleasure when you feel exceptionally comfortable at a place, be it in nature or, more often, at some place with friends or family during a Sunday lunch or after a filling barbeque with a beer or wine in your hand, the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, the summer wind is caressing your face and you simply feel "human".

- ❖ **„Edel sei der Mensch, hilfreich und gut!"** – („Noble be man, helpful and kind!"). The first line of Goethe's poem *„Das Göttliche"*, ("The Divine"), (1783), with the first verse reading:

*„Edel sei der Mensch, hilfreich und gut!
Denn das allein unterscheidet ihn
Von allen Wesen, die wir kennen."*

["Noble be man, helpful and kind!
For that alone distinguishes him
From all other beings we know."]

Goethe reflects in this poem on the unique moral calling of human beings, contrasting humans with the rest of nature. In essence, nature

is driven by necessity and instinct, i.e., animals follow their urges, elements follow their laws, etc., while the human being alone has the potential for ethical self-determination.

Today, the quote, (or just the first half), is mostly used in sarcastic mockery or jest when someone behaves anything but “noble, helpful, and kind”, (for instance aimed at the 45th and 47th U.S.-president), to indicate that humanity is morally going down the drain.

- ❖ **„Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.“** – (“Grey, dear friend, is all theory, and green is the golden tree of life.”). A quote from ‘Faust I’ in the famous study room scene. This is said by Mephistopheles in the guise of Faust to a young visiting student in a “lecture” about bookish learning versus vibrant life experience, to undermine the student’s confidence by mocking the ideal of true learning.

People often wrongfully assume that this quote was Goethe’s own point of view, while Goethe gave these lines deliberately to Mephisto, who personifies irony, negation, and destruction.

Nevertheless, nowadays a certain type of Germans likes to quote the first part of the line as **“Grau ist alle Theorie ...”** (often without even knowing the second half), to indicate either that someone’s argument is solely based on learned facts instead of personal experience, (duh!), or to point out that you shouldn’t rely overly much on what your teachers or the instructions in the manual say but just go and dive into your task, (e.g. repairing the engine of your Jaguar™ E-Type™), to get first-hand experience by getting your hands dirty. (Whether that’s good advice or not is ultimately up to you, of course.).

- ❖ **„Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust.“** – (“Two souls dwell, alas, within my breast.”). Another quote from ‘Faust I’, spoken by Faust himself, again in the scene ‘Before the Gate’ (Easter Walk), to his assistant Wagner. After having exclaimed earlier *„Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich’s sein“*, he soon falls back into his usual existential despair and tells Wagner:

*„Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der andern trennen:
Die eine hält, in derber Liebeslust,
Sich an die Welt, mit klammernden Organen;
Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dunst
Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen.“*

[“Two souls dwell, alas! within my breast,
One longs to separate from the other:
One clings, in coarse lust of love,
To the world, with clinging organs;
The other lifts itself violently from the mist
To the fields of lofty ancestors.”]

In other words, one soul is bound to earthly desires, sensory life, and material attachment, while the other strives upward toward the

eternal, the spiritual, the infinite. A tension that is central to Faust's tragedy: Exactly because he cannot reconcile these opposing forces, he becomes vulnerable to Mephistopheles' bargain.

Today the line is often used in a far more mundane manner, when someone wants to indicate that they simply cannot decide between two options: „*Chocolate Cake oder Crème Brûlée ... ach, zwei Seelen wohnen in meiner Brust, Charlotte!*“

- ❖ „*Der Worte sind genug gewechselt, laßt mich auch endlich Taten sehn!*“ – (“Enough words have been exchanged, let me finally see some action!”). One more quote from the scene ‘Before the Gate’ (Easter Walk) in ‘*Faust I*’. But this time, the words aren’t spoken by Faust, but in the middle of a lively dialogue between two *Bürger* (citizens) who have been debating ideas. Then one grows impatient with empty talk and cries out the famous demand.

Germans like to quote this line in total or just the first half whenever they are tired of an ongoing discussion and demand to finally get a move on. This sentiment is deeply ingrained into the German work ethics and when someone says “*Der Worte sind genug gewechselt*” or simply “*Genug der Worte*”, everyone knows, now it’s time to stop talking and to get to work and get things done.

Incidentally, this sentiment became programmatic and was overzealously followed by the generation of Germans immediately following Goethe’s death in Weimar in 1832 at the ripe old age of 83.

Sidenote: According to his doctor Carl Vogel, Goethe’s last verifiable words were: „*Mehr Licht!*“, (“More light!”), supposedly uttered as he lay on his death bed, asking for the shutters to be opened to let in more daylight. People at the time interpreted all sorts of highfalutin meanings into these words, while in Frankfurt the rumour went around that he actually just wanted to say, “*Mer liescht ... (hier so schlescht)*” in his native Frankfurt dialect, (in High German: “*Man liegt hier so schlecht*”, meaning: “One is / I am lying so uncomfortable here”), but just couldn’t finish the sentence after the first two words, which sound in dialect pretty close to „*Mehr Licht*“. But that’s just a rumour.)

Anyway, Goethe shuffled off this mortal coil just before he could experience the outbreak of the industrial revolution in Germany, (and perhaps that was a blessing for old Johann), when the entire nation seemed to enter a frenzy, trying to outdo each other in inventing and implementing ever new applications for the newly harnessed steam power. This went hand-in-hand with an old dream of Philipp von Zesen and many other Germans that was finally coming true; the unification of (almost) all German-speaking territories in one nation, the second German Empire.

And in the midst of all these political upheavals and revolutionary innovations, also a new type of German language “purifier” arose and entered the playing field.

The Reich's Rail and Mail: Breeding Grounds of German Pernickety

Sparked by the inception of the first pan-German nation in 1871, countless societies, clubs, associations, and institutions bearing the word „*Deutsch*“ in their name now shot up like „*Pfifferling*“-mushrooms all over the new *Reich*. Accordingly, it didn't take long before the *Allgemeine Deutsche Sprachverein*, (General German Language Association), saw its first light of day in the year 1885, declaring its mission to be “the Germanisation of the many foreign (i.e., mainly French) words”, to which people in Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Köln, or München had been accustomed to in their daily parlance until now.

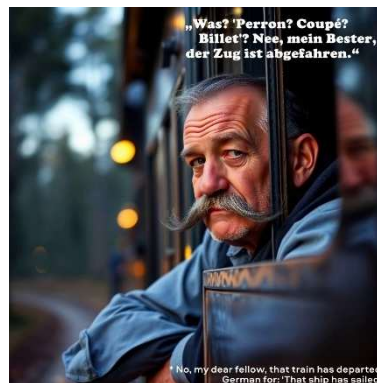
Due to the rapid developments in this heyday of industrialisation and to the accompanying enthusiasm and support shown at least by the literate and better-off part of German society, the vast majority of terms that were successfully “re-Germanised” by the *Sprachverein's* language-enthusiasts was soon to be found in the areas most closely related to fields were the greatest (and by now generally available) inventions and innovations of the steam-engine era captivated the new nation.

At the centre of the general excitement and interest in those days naturally throned the railway, („*die Eisenbahn*“), indubitably the crowning achievement of industrialisation, (and in those days also the literal synonym for German punctuality, believe it or not). Here, one inconspicuous man who had already early on signed his name on the *Sprachverein's* membership list, quickly stood out.

With construction engineer *Otto Sarrazin* (1842 – 1921), a man proclaimed himself the patron saint of the German ‘railway language’ who was not only a bigwig in the technical department for the railway system in the Prussian Ministry of Trade, but also a leading representative of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein*, whose chairman he became in 1900.

Additionally occupying himself as a technical writer and editor of two important technical journals, Sarrazin ceaselessly campaigned for the “purity” of the German language, primarily by “avoiding any unnecessary foreign words”. By no means satisfied with merely enforcing this attitude in his own publications, Otto used his influence also to rigorously clear the terminology-slate of “foreign” words used by German railway companies and their passengers at the time.

Taking up the previously non-existent mantle of chief language-purifier for the steam engine world, Sarrazin came up with and successfully pushed through several German alternatives for commonly used French words. He coined for instance the nowadays uncontested German term „*Abteil*“ for the previously common French word “*coupé*”, denoting a railway compartment. German-speakers can also thank Otto for the word „*Bahnsteig*“ in lieu of “*perron*” for a station platform, and for replacing “*billet*” with „*Fahrkarte*“, the modern German word for a train ticket, as well as for „*Rückfahrkarte*“, i.e. the return ticket.



Sarrazin even wrote and published a “Germanisation”-dictionary in 1886, where he also lists the word „*Fahrrad*” as the German replacement for the French “*bicyclette*”. However, it is rather unlikely that Otto was truly the originator of this very German, as in on-the-nose, word, (after all, it literally means “drive-wheel” or “ride-wheel”), since it seems that German cyclist clubs may have beaten him to the finish line by introducing the word „*Fahrrad*” into their vocabulary already a year earlier in 1885.

In another area that was picking up steam at the time, (mainly thanks to the railway), a rather more illustrious man was also making a name for himself with his own word creations. In fact, this *Ernst Heinrich Wilhelm Stephan* (1831 – 1897), was no less a figure than the Postmaster General of the new German Empire, and as such the organiser of the German postal system and co-founder of the Universal Postal Union. For such outstanding services to the “Fatherland” Stephan received the coveted name-affix „*von*” in 1885, making him from then on *Generalpostmeister Heinrich von Stephan*.

In such a prominent position, it was a simple matter for von Stephan to then “drive the countless ‘wildlings’ out of the German language”, as he himself once phrased his declared objective as a self-proclaimed language-preservationist.

All in all, good old Heinrich, (or “*Heini*”, as is the commonly accepted abbreviated form of this first name), issued more than 670 official orders for the removal of mainly French terms from the German postal language, to be replaced by Heini’s as well as other German-purifiers’ word-creations, applicable and officially signed, stamped and sealed as of 21 of June 1875. Which is also why the German speaking world will forever be indebted to Heini for the most German of all German postal-bureaucratic term-creations, the word „*postlagernd*”, (English: “postal storage”) to forever replace the French “*en poste restante*”.

The autobiographer *Karl Techentin* wrote in his book “*Heinrich von Stephan. Generalpostmeister.*”, (Leipzig, 1899), about the man, the myth, and surely the legend amongst all postmen worldwide: „*[Heinrich von Stephan created] an alleyway that expanded rapidly and soon penetrated victoriously from the individual administrative area of the post office into all areas of our authorities, into legislation, the army, railway and building administration, schools and the entire written word.*”



To put it bluntly, all this modern-day German bureaucratic gobbledygook can trace its first offender back to none other than fusspot Heinrich, (if we disregard the medieval chanceries for a moment). Making this decal of the

archetypical Prussian senior civil servant indubitably the first culprit and original instigator of much of this unspeakable gibberish in official forms, regulations, letters, manuals, and provisions which all German citizens have to put up with to this very day, regardless of whether they want to start a

business or merely fill out the application for an “authorisation of a drunken wedding”.

Yes, you laugh – but this is in fact a genuinely existing official German application-form, since according to the law, a marriage is not valid in Germany if the parties involved are not conscious or do not realise that they’re getting married. So, logically you will need to apply for an official authorisation in Germany if you prefer to be drunk as a skunk during your own wedding. No wonder that the nitpickers from the General German Language Association, aka the *Sprachverein*, made Heinrich their first honorary member in 1887. And perhaps it's also no mere coincidence that the name “Heini” is still used today as a mild German insult for a silly or stupid man. Who knows.

Adolf’s Linguistic Legacy: German Taboo Terms

To be fair, however, the valiant endeavours of engineer Otto and postman Heini must also be regarded in the context of their own time. The nascent German Empire under *Kaiser Wilhelm I*, and later under his grandson *Wilhelm II*, had unleashed an irresistible wave of German pride and nationalism that permeated the German *zeitgeist* at the turn of the century in a way that is perhaps only comparable to the ultra-nationalism of certain sub-groups in the United States of America during the reign of the 45th/47th president.

From a modern perspective, of course, it is not particularly surprising that such blind enthusiasm and uncritical fervour for anything that looked, sounded, tasted, smelled or felt somehow “German” in the last third of the 19th century, also played a not insignificant role in another development: the rather hasty establishment of freshly minted German colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia.

In order to keep up with the great colonial powers, German officials, military leaders and merchant barons heeded their *Kaiser’s* call to secure a “place in the sun” for Germany („*Ein Platz an der Sonne!*”) and sent German troops, settlers, bureaucrats and traders to those last blank spots on the colonial map of the world where the British, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and French hadn't already hoisted their own flags, often atop piles of freshly killed natives.

At the same time, both William I (who ruled from 1871 until his death in 1888) and his grandson William II – who succeeded his father *Frederick III* on the throne in 1888, when Frederick had succumbed to throat cancer after only 99 days on the throne – were both massive groupies of the original Prussian army and its spawn, the all-new, all-German „*Deutsche Heer*” (German army). Unfortunately, when such imperial fanboy-passion for anything that wears a uniform or goes “boom!” is combined with some of the wondrous technological inventions of booming industrialisation, the result can all too easily turn into a veritable world war.

In 1914, after having established the *Reich’s* colonies in sunny Africa and in the Pacific, and after having filled the order books of the rapidly growing German steel industry to the last page with orders for the most modern weaponry, and after having increased and modernised „*das deutsche Heer*” and „*die kaiserliche Marine*” (the Imperial Navy), and finally

after having stockpiled gigantic reserves of the newest and deadliest weapons and ammunitions, Wilhelm II finally believed that the German Empire was ready to confidently step into the ring with the other great European powers, i.e. Britain and Russia, to find out once and for all who of the three grandchildren of late *Queen Victoria of Great Britain and Ireland* had really inherited their grandmother's balls of steel.

Nothing less was at stake than the final answer to the long-simmering question of who would answer the call in Europe if for instance the Americans were to ring the “old continent” in future by using this newfangled invention that its developer, the German physicist *Philipp Reis*, had named „*Das Telefon*” when he presented his device back in 1861 at the *Physikalische Verein* (Physics Association) in Frankfurt am Main.



Would the respective U.S.-president hear a deep voice answer: „*Алло, это Nicolai! Что ты хочешь!?*”, (“Hello, this is Tsar *Nicolai II*, Emperor of Russia, King of Congress Poland and Grand Duke of Finland! Whatcha want?”)? Or would Nicky’s other cousin *George II* pick up the receiver in London with his infamously short temper and bark: “*Oi, don’t bug me right now, you ungrateful colonists!*”? Or would instead the third cousin, Wilhelm II., snarl into the receiver: „*Präsident wer? Kenn ich nicht. Falsch verbunden!*”, (“President who? Never heard of him. Wrong number!”).

Well, at the latest after the Americans had entered the “Great War” on April 6, 1917, two and a half years after fighting had begun in Europe, Kaiser Willy knew exactly who President Woodrow Wilson was.

When World War I finally ended on November 11, 1918, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, it had cost the lives of nine million combatants in total. Germany alone had senselessly lost no less than 2 million soldiers, Russia mourned 1.7 million dead in the field, Great Britain counted 886,000 killed or wounded servicemen and the United States had to report 116,516 KIA in a war they had fought on another continent, while France struggled with the devastating loss of around 1.3 to 1.5 million killed *soldats*, representing a significant portion of the male population of French conscripts.

Additionally, more than seven million civilians had paid with their lives for the question of supremacy in Europe, to which the post-war answer appeared to be unambiguous only at first glance.

Sure, the *Kaiserreich* had been utterly abolished by the time the last echo of the cannons of WW I had faded away. However, its revolutionary successor, the democratic Weimar Republic (1918 – 1933) was still home to the same highly combustible mélange of imperial loyalists, centrists, and left-wing and right-wing radicals as it had been before the fall of the first German nation state. And many of them were only waiting in the wings for the despised democracy in the new Republic to be washed away in a storm of their own making.

Whether German communists, socialists, social democrats,

Christian centrists, imperial counter-revolutionaries, or national socialists, most of the political camps at the time believed in democracy about as much as billionaires believe in a fair distribution of the tax burden.

However, one issue on which many German ex-soldiers and sailors as well as civilians and civil servants were united was the conviction that the second German *Reich* had been cheated out of a fair victory in WW I.

Propagandists, particularly in the military and on the far right, were quick to establish a narrative that went down in history as the „*Dolchstoßlegende*“, (i.e. the “dagger-stab” or “stab-in-the-back” legend), which claimed that the German army would not have been defeated if not for the “traitors” in their own political ranks back home, with the Social Democrats as the main-suspects.

The surviving German military leadership pushed this plucked-out-of-thin-air claim because it shifted the blame on social democrats to protect their own power and reputation, but also to discredit democracy and slander their hated political opponents – infamously culminating in the guttersnipe rhyme: „*Wer hat uns verraten? Sozialdemokraten!*“, (“Who has betrayed us? Social Democrats!”).

Next to the internal political petty war, which often degenerated into open street battles, another major destabilising factor for the shaky young democracy, and a special linchpin for right-wing agitators and instigators, were the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, formalising Germany’s complete surrender and signed on June 28, 1919, by representatives from the Allied and Associated Powers and from Germany.

The treaty imposed numerous tough conditions on the loser of the war. For instance, Germany now had to cede significant territories, most importantly Alsace-Lorraine to France as well as Silesia and parts of East Prussia to the newly founded Polish Republic. Furthermore, the new German republic was forced to hand over all its overseas colonies to other colonial powers. Additionally, military restrictions included a limitation of the German army to a strength of 100,000 men plus severe restrictions on artillery, tanks, and aircraft, while constrictions on industrial production and trading activities greatly impeded the Weimar Republic’s reconstruction efforts.

The successor to the *Kaiserreich* was furthermore obliged to pay truly enormous reparations to the victorious powers to compensate for war damages which led to considerable economic difficulties for the first German republic. (On a side note: Germany paid the last instalment of its war debts from WW I ninety-two years after the end of the war, on October 3, 2010, when it transferred the final payment of 200 million Euros.)

But probably most humiliating and annoying for many nationalistic Germans who had lived through the pan-European turmoil leading up to WW I, the Treaty of Versailles held Germany solely responsible for the outbreak of the First World War and left the country no other option but to officially recognise its unilateral war guilt.

Now, whether the German *Kaiserreich* (and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is, rather inexplicably, often overlooked in this regard), were the exclusive culprits who had held the flame to the fuse and ignited the “War to end all wars”, or whether some blame is to put also on other players in the great game on the European chess board of the early 20th century, well, that’s a debate mainly led in historians’ circles today, while

global public opinion in the 21st century has by now unambiguously settled on Kaiser Wilhelm II. and his „*Pickelhauben*“, (as the spiked helmets worn by many German soldiers in WW I were called) as the sole villain of the story.

From the perspective of many German subjects in those days however, the case was not quite that clean cut, as you can imagine. After all, up to the beginning of the war, the banner of the *Kaiserreich* had been flying high for more than forty years, seemingly soaring from triumph to triumph and from one industrial, military, economical, and political peak to the next. For the average German citizen in the aftermath of the war, it was thus almost inconceivable that Germany's perceived “natural” superiority in almost every important sector in Europe had not only ended so abruptly, but that this end had apparently also been facilitated by an alliance of “lesser foreign powers” and by certain “enemies from within”.

Naturally, these easy explanations for such an immensely complex situation were ideally suited to be put front and centre in the propaganda of radical post-war splinter groups.

One such rather obscure political party that exploited for instance the „*Dolchstoßlegende*“ to the hilt but also ran with any other three-word-slogan that would smear the democratically elected government of the Weimar Republic and that would blame France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S. for Germany's “downfall” and that would also relentlessly push the idea of the German people's “dire need for a strong leader”, had given itself the name *NSdAP* – the *National-Sozialistische deutsche Arbeiter Partei*, or in short: the Nazis.

Young men roaming the streets of Berlin, München, Weimar, or Nürnberg in packs, often clad in the uniform brown shirts („*Braunhemden*“) of the Nazi-party's paramilitary combat organisation during the



Weimar Republic, the so-called SA („*Sturmabteilung*“), these *Braunhemden* chanted and hollered slogans like „*Deutschland erwache!*“, (“Germany awake!”), „*Arbeit und Brot!*“, (“Work and Bread!”), “or the infamous „*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!*“, (“One people, one empire, one leader!”).

Cheap and simple slogans which nonetheless spoke to many post-war German men and women in their downtrodden and often desperate situation – from the ex-soldier with his amputated leg to the war widow with her three small children – and to their instinctive desire for a strong leadership, national reinvigoration, and a return to former prosperity.

Carried away by an assumed widespread support for his party's idea of an “awakened Germany”, a certain small-fry agitator named A. Hitler then attempted, together with another 2,000 early-day Nazis, to violently seize power in Bavaria (and subsequently in all of Germany) in the so-called *Bierhaus-Putsch* in Munich in 1923 – only to fail spectacularly, mainly thanks to brave Bavarian policemen.

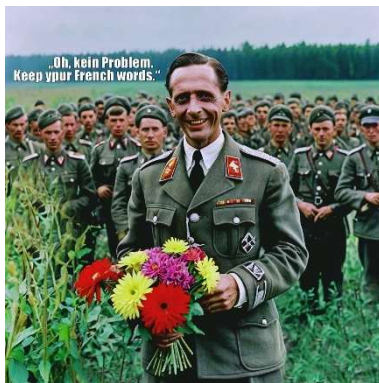
However, it only took another ten years of Nazi-propaganda for the German people to democratically elect the by then famous Adolf Hitler in 1933 to the office of German chancellor, i.e. the head of government. And

just like that, the 43.9% of German voters who had made their cross on the ballot paper for the *NSdAP* had, whether wittingly or unwittingly, opened the gates to twelve years of literal Hell on Earth, accompanied by the foul-smelling ghouls of fanatic nationalism and so-called “Aryan supremacy”, supported by megalomania, inhumane racism, and indiscriminate brutality.

One of the first things that went out of the window in 1933, together with any last shreds of decency and morals, naturally was the typical first victim of any dictatorship: The truth.

Now, when you think of Nazis and the “truth”, the first catchword that usually comes to mind is “propaganda”, closely followed by terms like “censorship”, and “Aryan supremacy”. Surely, one might assume therefore, the Third Reich will have unleashed an unprecedented linguistic purification frenzy as soon as they had taken total control of the media and “cleansed” the German language of any and all foreign- and foreign-sounding vocabulary, to be replaced by purely German terms.

And as anyone knows who didn’t exclusively attend PE-classes in school, the *Nationalsozialisten*, or *Nazis* in short, certainly had it in for anyone and anything deemed to be “non-Aryan” and non-conducive to the „*Herrenrasse*“, aka the Nazis’ brain-fart idea of a “master race”.



However, Hitler’s propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wasn’t only extremely fanatical but also exceptionally devious. He understood very well that simply prohibiting the use of well-established French, Italian, English and particularly Latin loanwords would only lead to reactions of defiance and resentment in parts of the German population. Instead, in November of 1940 Goebbels therefore had an official decree published, in which the Nazi-regime “*expressly disapproves of the artificial replacement of foreign words long since naturalised into German*”.

At this point, you might be inclined to wonder whether *Reichspropagandaminister* Goebbels had come to realise that he could not simply reshape the German language in a way that the Nazi-ideology deemed fit and that he had therefore abandoned all attempts to manipulate the German linguistic system, right?

Nah, come on. Of course not. Naturally, there was a method to this apparent magnanimity. Already during the tumultuous days of political upheaval in the Weimar Republic, Goebbels and his “intellectual” cronies in the Nazi-party had mastered the art of propagandistic linguistics. This also included the particularly devious technique of using the usually more elegant and sophisticated-sounding ‘foreign’ loan words to obscure and to “soften” the true intentions of the Nazis.

One man who had had first-hand experience of the Nazi-Terror as a Protestant convert of Jewish origin was German literary scholar, Romance philologist, and politician Victor Klemperer (1881 – 1960). His famous book ‘*Lingua Tertii Imperii: Language of the Third Reich*’ is considered one of the most important works on the use of language by the Nazis and excels with

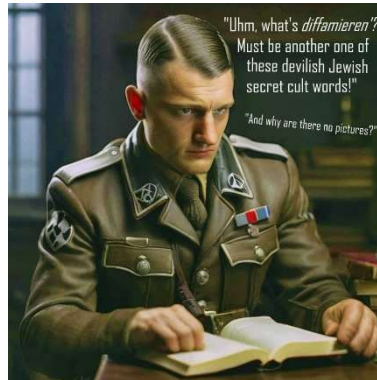
its in-depth analysis of how National Socialist propaganda changed the German language to spread the ideas of National Socialism.

In his book, Klemperer writes: *“Indeed, the Third Reich loved the full-sounding foreign expression from time to time: „Garant” [guarantor] sounds more significant than „Bürge” [bailman] and „diffamieren” [to defame] more imposing than „schlechtmachen” [to malign]. Perhaps not everyone understands [these words] either and then it has an even greater effect on them. [...]”*

In short, the Nazis specifically utilised terms of the elaborate German language level, often derived from Latin or Latin-based languages, with the explicit aim to confuse, dupe, and intimidate the common German citizen. To eradicate such words from the German language would therefore have been even counterproductive for the terror regime.

As despicable (and typical) as this instrumentalization of the rich German vocabulary certainly was, however, the truly irreparable damage the Nazis have inflicted on the German language only came fully to light sometime after their downfall.

You see, Hitler and his demonic cronies had specifically appropriated a noticeable number of previously “neutral” German words and had not only deviously twisted their original meanings to their liking and advantage but had also used these terms ad nauseam in their inflammatory rhetoric. And this to such an extent and scope that the “mere” twelve years of their “Thousand-Year Reich” had been more than enough to drill these words and their perverted meanings so deep into the German and Austrian people's minds that these words and phrases are still recognised as “sullied terms” by each new post-war generation, whose long-term memory is also ingrained with the names of the most notorious Nazi monsters:



Name	Title/Position	Date of Death	Cause of Death
Adolf Hitler	Führer & Reich Chancellor	30 April 1945	Suicide (shot himself in Berlin bunker)
Heinrich Himmler	Reichsführer SS, Chief of Police, Gestapo	23 May 1945	Suicide (cyanide cap-sule, British captivity)
Joseph Goebbels	Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda	1 May 1945	Suicide (poison), previously murdered his six children with his wife
Hermann Göring	Reich Marshal, Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe	15 Oct. 1946	Suicide (cyanide caps-ule, night before exe-cution in Nuremberg)
Joachim von Ribbentrop	Reich Foreign Minister	16 Oct. 1946	Executed (Nuremberg Trials)
Wilhelm Keitel	Chief of the High Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW)	16 Oct. 1946	Executed (Nuremberg Trials)
Rudolf Hess	Hitler's deputy (until 1941)	17 Aug. 1987	Suicide (hanging, Spandau Prison, highly controversial)
Julius Streicher	Editor of ‘Der Stürmer’	16 Oct. 1946	Executed (Nuremberg Trials)
Martin Bormann	Head of the Party Chancellery, Hitler's private secretary	2 May 1945	Suicide (cyanide capsule in Berlin)

But enough of these cowardly ghouls and back to their “legacy” in the German language.

Now, while the German words and phrases in question here are in their majority not outright “Taboo Words”, it certainly depends on the context as well as on your intonation and intentions whether your use of such a phrase or term will make any sane German and Austrian visibly cringe upon hearing them. However, with a small number of words you can be dead certain to invariably trigger an instantaneous and noticeable wariness in any educated German and Austrian.

Such unequivocally “evil” terms that will make every upstanding Austrian and German cringe like an electric shock to the private parts include, for instance:

- **Gleichschaltung** –forced alignment of all society areas with Nazi ideology.
- **Untermensch** – ‘sub-human’, people considered ‘inferior’ by the Nazis.
- **Lebensraum** – ‘living space’; justification for aggressive eastern expansion.
- **Endlösung** – final solution; codeword for extermination of European Jews.
- **Volksgemeinschaft** – idealised, classless community of all ‘Aryans’.
- **Arier** – ‘Aryans’; pseudo-scientific term for people of the ‘master race’.
- **Herrenrasse** – [~hären-rasse]; The ‘master race’.
- **Entartet(e Kunst)** – ‘degenerate (art)’; defamation of modern (art) forms.
- **Sonderbehandlung** – ‘special treatment’; code word for mass murder.
- **Konzentrationslager** – ‘concentration camp’ and
- **KZ** – [~kah-zett]; the abbreviation for *Konzentrationslager*
- **Vergasung, vergasen** – lethal gassing of “undesirables” in a
- **Gaskammer** – ‘gas chamber’.
- **Todesmarsch** – ‘death march’; for columns of Jews herded over weeks into KZs.
- **Blut und Boden** – ‘blood and soil’; glorification: ‘Aryan ancestry’, rural lifestyle.
- **Endsieg** – the ‘final victory’; invocation of inevitable triumph of Nazi-Germany.
- **Totaler Krieg** – ‘total war’; the ‘final stage’, proclaimed by Goebbels in 1943.
- **Endkampf** – ‘final battle’; dramatic phrase for the hopeless war at the end.

These words are beyond redemption and will generally be used only during discussions of the Nazi-era in a historical context.

(On a side note, you should also be aware that the public utterance of phrases like „Heil Hitler” or „Sieg heil” or „Alles für Deutschland” (“Everything for Germany”) constitutes a criminal offence in Germany and is punishable by hefty fines and in severe cases even by years-long prison sentences. And the excuse of just having made “a joke” certainly doesn’t cut it there.)

Aside from terms like the above, which will usually make Germans noticeably concerned, you also have a number of German words which are used in everyday conversations without much ado, and which are seemingly harmless – until they aren’t.

Admittedly, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause for such instantaneous switches from at one moment just using “a normal German word” to the instant when you are abruptly triggering the fine-tuned “Warning! Nazi-Speak!”-alarm in Austrians and Germans. Context and your intonation certainly play a role, but when and how exactly you will set off the alarm in your German or Austrian friends, well, that’s something every visitor to the two countries needs to suss out for themselves. Unfortunately, this is just one of those cases where there is no alternative

to the age-old “learning by doing”-method.

The most prominent words the Nazis used in their camouflage language, thus soiling them enough to still trigger at least a tiny ringing of the “Nazi-Speak Alarm” in German and Austrian minds include:

- **Die Heimat** – ‘home, homeland’; heavily ideologically charged during the Nazi era, now used positively again by many, but not entirely unburdened.
- **Das Lager** – ‘camp’; in certain contexts, e.g. ‘labour camp’, ‘concentration camp’ immediately associated with Nazi crimes.
- **Die Euthanasie** – ‘euthanasia’; actually neutral in medicine and ethics, but in Germany burdened by the Nazi killings of the sick and disabled.
- **Der Führer** – ‘the leader’; Hitler’s “title”. A word forever automatically associated with the top-instigator of Nazi-horrors.
- **Das Volk; das deutsche Volk** – a nation’s people; the German people.
- **Heil** – i.e. the greeting “Hail” (but also: ‘salvation, health, healing’). Followed by the name “Hitler” part of the infamous Nazi salute.
- **Der Sieg** – ‘the victory’; Followed by the word ‘Heil’ part of another deranged Nazi salute.
- **Die Treue** – ‘loyalty’; a positive word when used in relation to marriage or partnership, but heavily burdened when used in connection with
- **Die Ehre**, – ‘honour’; a term that is even enshrined in modern German law (§185, §186, §187 StGB) where anyone who defames another person (*Ehrverletzung* = ‘honour offence’; ‘defamation’), can be sued for injunctive relief, revocation, or damages. However, in combination with “Treue”, the term becomes immediately a trigger for “Nazi-Speak Alarm” of the highest order.

These words remain (highly) ambivalent and can only be “defused” by the context in which they appear. Now, to give you a better idea of what is meant by “ambivalent”: You won’t, for example, get into any murky Nazi waters with words like „*Reiseführer*”, (“travel guide”), „*Führerschein*”, (“driving license”), „*Heil- und Kostenplan*”, (“therapeutic and cost schedule”), or „*Heilsalbe*” (“healing ointment”), and you can talk equally unconcerned about „*Treue*” in its meaning of “faithfulness” in a relationship, or use the term „*Sieg*” when you refer to a “victory” in a sporting event.

With the terms „*Volk*” and „*Ehre*” on the other hand you’re already entering an area where the ice is getting noticeably thinner. For example, if you are innocently mentioning „*das deutsche Volk*”, (“the German people”), sensitive German ears will inevitably hear the inaudible undertone of Hitler’s snarling voice, who used this phrase ad nauseam in countless speeches. (Incidentally, this might also be the reason why most Germans prefer instead to use the uncontaminated term „*die Deutschen*”, (“the Germans”), instead.

As mentioned above, the conversational ice becomes even more fragile when you combine certain terms, particularly „*Ehre*” (“honour”) and „*Treue*” (“loyalty”), words that are irrevocably tainted. Just like „*Kameradschaft*” (“comradeship”) or „*Gehorsam*” (“obedience”) through their erstwhile appropriation by the infamous SS, (*Schutzstaffel*), the fanatical Nazi-organisation that claimed as its motto: „*Meine Ehre heißt Treue*”, (“My honour is [called] loyalty”).

As any educated German and Austrian knows, this “loyalty” wasn’t a commitment to the people or the state but was meant to be the exclusive loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Hence, the word „*Treue*” was redefined as the unquestioning obedience to the person of Adolf Hitler, while the word

„Ehre“ was twisted into an expression of blind pride in a mindless allegiance to a mass murdering dictator.

So, this is how Hitler, Goebbels, the *Nazionalsozialisten*, the *SS*, the *Gestapo*, and all other Nazi-organisations went about corrupting numerous German words and phrases, and their perverted Nazi-meanings are still reverberating in the back of many German-speakers' minds whenever they come up in conversations, even these many decades later.

A Spelling Reform. A Re-Reform. And a Re-Re-Reform.

Considering the sheer enormity of the atrocities and devastation unleashed by the Nazis, one may rightfully assume that all things considered, the German language still got away lightly with “merely” some stained vocabulary



and tainted phrases as perpetual painful reminders and conversational sinkholes. Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of World War II and “zero hour”, (i.e., „die Stunde Null“, as the unconditional surrender of the German *Wehrmacht* and the complete collapse of the Nazi regime on 8 May 1945 is called in German), nobody left on German soil was seriously interested in remedying the linguistic damage done by the Nazis, let alone in modernising or regulating the German language, even if this was a time of new beginnings.

In the 1950s, most surviving Germans preferred to turn a blind eye on their immediate past and instead play-pretended that the new West-Germany was a place for frolicking and to enjoy the new-found prosperity thanks to the „*Wirtschaftswunder*“, (“economic miracle”). At the same time, socio-conservative attitudes remained firmly in place, with the man and husband as the undisputed “master” of the household.

The former §1354 BGB, („*Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*“), the German Civil Code, in fact stated that: “The husband shall decide on all matters relating to the couple's life together.” A married woman was only allowed to pursue gainful employment – unless the activity was compatible with “her duties in marriage and family life” – if her husband consented. As was the case when she wanted to open or manage her own bank account, since banking transactions were considered legal acts that fell within the scope of household management.

The German films that were released in cinemas during this period reinforced this status quo by presenting happy families with sometimes dim-witted but unchallenged heads of the household and clever but submissive wives and happy children. German popular songs („*Schlager*“) sang of romantic love and the beauty of nature, and the emerging television medium showed street interviews in which women regarded their role as happy, subordinate wives as a matter of course.

However, when the 1960s came around and with them the return of prominent persecutees of the Nazi-regime to Germany from their exiles in Sweden and other countries, (like the later and late 4th Chancellor of

Germany and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Willy Brandt, SPD), the political and social climate in Germany began to turn. By the end of that decade, and after at times violent mass demonstrations by students and the younger generation, German society had begun its almost 180 degrees turn-around from the „*Nierentisch Ära*“, (“Kidney table era”, an ironic and derogatory reference to the popular piece of furniture from the 1950s; synonymous with Boeotian middle-class homeliness and kitsch). This emancipation from the remnants of Nazi-ideology, revisionism, and reactionary societal structures then continued to persist throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.

In this “free-thinking” political and social climate, any suggestion to establish some German version of the *Académie française* as yet another regulatory body decreeing rules and regulations was obviously out of the question, even more so than usual. A sentiment that prevails until today, with most Germans remaining steadfastly opposed to any governmental regulation of the German language.

Of course, this isn’t a position that originated in the 1960s. You may recall the times of the early printers around Johann Gutenberg, the disliked Chancery languages, and Martin Luther’s German Bible, who all furthered the Germans’ conviction that language is crafted by the people and for the people. This deeply ingrained aversion to any officials tampering with their language prevails until today, even when done in a well-meaning attempt to “improve” the German language. Or perhaps especially then.

This “anti-authoritarian” sentiment was once again made abundantly clear when, following one hundred years of leaving the German spelling rules well alone, in 1996 a certain group of people had the well-intentioned idea to subject Standard High German to a general overhaul by designated experts. And who else could these people have been other than politicians, or more precisely the ministers for culture and education of the 16 federal states of Germany.

As the highest authorities in the land on all educational and cultural matters, (since culture and the school system are the sole responsibility of each of the sixteen federal states and not of the federal government in Berlin), the so-called *Kultusministerkonferenz*, (Conference of the sixteen Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs), therefore boldly decreed the big Orthographic Reform (*Rechtschreibreform*) in 1996. Naturally, Austria was an equal partner in this reform process and representatives from the Austrian Ministry of Education took part in the negotiations and implemented the reform alongside Germany, while Switzerland was also officially involved but applied the reform rules less strictly, (e.g. by not using the letter “ß”). Alas, and who’d have guessed it, the German-speaking public was not particularly amused.

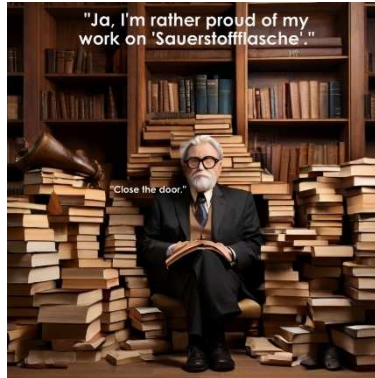
Nonetheless, after the government-appointed experts had taken their sweet time to modernise the written German language by, amongst other things, ridding German spelling of all assumed and actual inconsistencies and outdated peculiarities, the sixteen ministers finally presented their lengthy list of new rules, applicable in all of Germany, which included also the following changes:

- **Separate and compound spelling of verbs:** As an example, the former separable verb „*radfahren*“ now became „*Rad fahren*“, (“riding a bicycle”),

since „Rad“ (“wheel”) is a noun – and according to the new rules, a noun cannot be compounded with a verb, hence they now became two separate words. The reformers also decided to split all former verb-verb compounds into two, thus turning e.g., „spazierengehen“ into „spazieren gehen“, (“to take a walk”), as well as to split all “sein” (“to be”) compounds, therefore changing for instance „dabeisein“ into „dabei sein“, (“to be part of something”, “to participate”).

- **Sound-letter assignment regarding triple consonants:** Before the change,

whenever two identical consonants bumped into a third same letter in a compound noun, writers had to omit one of them and be left with only two same consonants out of the original three. Now, the new rule states that when there are three identical letters following each other, it is what it is. That’s why „Ballettänzer“ became „Balletttänzer“, (“ballet-dancer”), „Sauerstoffflasche“ became „Sauerstoffflasche“, (“oxygen bottle”), „Schrittempo“ became „Schritttempo“, (“walking speed”), etc.



- **Sound-letter assignment regarding ß/ss:** A specific German pronunciation-rule states that any vowel placed in front of two identical consonants always needs to be spoken short/quick. Which means that any *a, o, u, i, e, ä, ü, or ö* preceding a double-S (ss) is pronounced in a clipped and short manner.

Before the reform, certain words were written with a double-S while the preceding vowel was nevertheless pronounced long and stretched. To eliminate this irregularity, the reform wisely changed the spelling of these words, which is why „Fluß“ is now written „Fluss“, (“river”), „daß“ is spelled „dass“, (“that”), „Faß“ became „Fass“ (“barrel”), „Kuß“ turned into „Kuss“ (“kiss”), and so on.

On the flip side, words in which the vowel precedes a sharp-S-sound but is nonetheless pronounced long/stretched kept their „ß“ (sharp-S). Therefore, for instance the spelling of the German word for “foot” remains to be „Fuß“, [ˈfʊs], since it is spoken with a long U- [ˈfʊs] sound.

- **Upper and lower case for adjectives:** Prior to the reform, adjectives which were nominalised, (i.e. turned into a noun), were written with a lower case first letter, despite the immutable fact that all nouns in German are spelled with an upper case first letter.

The reform corrected this, turning for example the phrase „auf deutsch“, (“in German”), into the now correctly spelled „auf Deutsch“ with an upper-case D, since „Deutsch“ is used as a noun here. This applies to all adjectives in substantival usage, like e.g., „die Roten“, (“the reds”), „die Blöden“, (“the stupid ones”), or „die Hübschen“, (“the pretty ones”).

Additionally, when the superlative of an adjective is used like a noun, it is also capitalised. For example, „Es wäre am Besten wenn Du jetzt still wärst“, (“It would be best if you were quiet now”), or „Das Wichtigste ist, erst zu denken und dann zu reden“, (“The most important thing is to think first and then talk”).

- **Failed Spelling Changes:** While most of the above changes are logically sound and genuinely improve German spelling, the language reformers still got themselves into some hot alphabet soup with several of their more outlandish spelling-suggestions. Unnecessarily tampering with traditional terminology, the scholars tried for instance to change the time-honoured culinary term „*Chicorée*“, (“chicory”, an aster whose buds can be prepared as a salad or vegetable), into „*Schikoree*“, which was roundly rejected and quietly disappeared from the dictionary again in 2011. The same path into the dustbin of spelling history took the „*Grislibär*“, which remains a „*Grizzlybär*“ to this day, or the unpalatable „*Ketschup*“ and „*Majonäse*“, which never managed to replace „*Ketchup*“ and „*Mayonnaise*“ and ended up in the kitchen waste in 2016.

Naturally, the reform entailed many further minor and major changes. But you get the gist. To no one’s but the experts’ own surprise, many of the new rules were immediately met with a fierce headwind. Public discussion raged up and down the land, through the media, on the emerging internet, and in schools, universities, offices, and pubs from Flensburg to Garmisch.

This dispute ebbed and flowed over the next eight years, until in 2004 even the politicians couldn’t take it any longer and finally ordered the first reform of the initial 1996-reform. To appease the most vociferous critics, the spelling-commission now invalidated some spellings that had just been newly introduced in 1996, while making the use of old pre-1996 spellings optional and acceptable alongside re-reformed 2004 spellings.

In essence, the hapless linguists who were tasked with unravelling the initial reform were faced with a veritable Gordian knot, i.e., the almost unsolvable task to evoke as little as possible of the 1996-reformed spellings while simultaneously appeasing the many professional critics in German universities, editor’s offices, and publishing houses.

Not to their credit, the experts’ “solution” to this problem consisted mainly of adding and allowing further spelling variations, thus creating even more confusion among the public. For instance, the initial 1996-reform decreed that the only correct spelling for the reflexive verb with the meaning “to be sorry” would be „*Leid tun*“, [~lied toon]. The 2004-re-reform however then allowed to use both „*Leid tun*“ and „*leidtun*“ as correct spellings – only for this rule to be revoked again in 2006, when it was determined that „*leidtun*“ is the only accurate spelling, although this clearly violates the rule about noun-verb compounds.

As was to be expected, the 2004 re-reform did little to calm the dispute and instead quickly led to a reform of the re-reform in 2006. Further minor changes were undertaken in the years 2011 and 2017, and a new preface was added in 2018.

(In the course of these changes, also the problem with “*leidtun*” was somewhat solved. Today you write “*leidtun*” together as a verb, for instance in a sentence like, “*Das könnte Dir noch leidtun!*”, (“You might still be sorry for that!”), while you write “*Leid tun*” separately when “*Leid*”, (“sorrow”), is used as a noun accompanied by a verb, e.g. “*Es tut mir Leid!*”, literally meaning: “It does {give} me sorrow”. Or simply, “I’m sorry!”).

Perhaps the most incisive new introduction to the realm of the

German language in the course of the reforms was, however, the inception of the *Deutsche Rechtschreibrat*, the German Spelling Council. After prominent representatives of large publishing houses like *Stefan Aust*, then publicist of the *Spiegel-Verlag*, or *Mathias Döpfner*, head of the *Axel-Springer-Verlag*, (home of the *BILD Zeitung*), had publicly campaigned in 2004 for a return to the traditional spelling rules of pre-1996, the German Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs proposed setting up the German Spelling Council in June 2004. The new permanent council was to take over the tasks of the Intergovernmental Commission and was also to involve critics of the spelling reform. The Austrian Education Minister officially approved the proposal on 27 September, and the German Conference of Education Ministers gave their go-ahead on 16 October 2004. Today, the *Rechtschreibrat* regularly publishes new rules and spellings on www.rechtschreibrat.com for anyone who wants to or must stay up to date on all things grammatical in German.

Frankly, however, most Germans got already tired of the endless debates about spellings sometime between 2004 and 2006, and while schools and civil servants must abide to the reform rules and proclamations of the *Rechtschreibrat*, many print- and online-publications continue to use a mix of old and new spellings, particularly when it comes to the PH-to-F changes, where e.g. the old spelling of „*Delphin*“ turned into the new „*Delfin*“ (“dolphin”), or „*Photographie*“ into „*Fotografie*“ (“photography”), where in both cases both variations are still in use today. Also, many older Germans continue to use the pre-1996 or pre-2004 spellings, while younger Germans grow up with the reformed spellings in school, heralding the inevitable death of any old spelling-remnants in the coming years.

All in all, it's probably fair to say that nobody really cares anymore about the whole spelling-debate today. And since the *Rechtschreibrat* and its influence doesn't even come close to that of the *Académie française* in France, there is also no ultimate executioner who enforces the rules with the sharp axe of the law. Hence, in everyday German life, a sort of "live and let live" attitude has established itself, where old and new spellings peacefully co-exist. (Although, both camps will usually unite in the blink of an eye as soon as they discover any unambiguously obvious misspellings.) And whenever a serious dispute about spelling or grammar arises after all, Germans simply refer to *Der Duden*.

The Yellow Arbitrator

Der Duden, the original German dictionary, has long since become synonymous with the final arbitrator in all quarrels on German spelling. That's why you will still find a well-used print-edition of *Der Duden* with its



signature yellow cover lying around somewhere in most German homes, companies, editor offices, administrative departments, schools and universities, usually covered with a thick layer of dust, since nowadays

there's of course also an online edition available. (Although the, for pupils always amusing, German "wordplay" with the dictionary's (and its originator's and namesake's) name will probably never get old. That's because the word „*Duden*“ sounds exactly like the last two words in the question: „*Ha, wer bist du denn?*“, that translates roughly to: "Huh, who're you [supposed to be]?").

The almost mythical status assigned to *Der Duden* in Germany to this day has its roots once again in the era of the first German nation-state. Philologist, lexicographer, and grammar-school teacher *Konrad Duden*, (1829 – 1911), was the first person to publish a Complete Orthographic Dictionary of the German Language in the year 1880 and thus just nine years after most German-speaking territories united in 1871 to form the second German Empire.

Shame on anyone who will think ill of him, but undeniably Konrad had a rather suspiciously good timing for publishing his work right at the height of this surge of German national pride – and consequentially made a pile of cash with it.

For the next 140-plus years, nothing could topple *Der Duden* from its throne as Germany's highest authority on spelling. Although, not for a lack of trying by competitors like *PONS*, *Langenscheidt*, *Brockhaus*, *DWDS*, or *Oxford*. In fact, some alternative German dictionaries are arguably even a little more modern and up to date than the slightly old-fashioned workhorse. Yet, if you want to be one hundred per cent certain that you got the spelling of „*Rechtschreibungswörterbuch*“ ("orthography dictionary") right, then you will likely still refer to Konrad Duden's lifetime-achievement for the definite answer – unless you are looking for words like „*Rindfleischetikettierungsüberwachungsaufgabenübertragungsgesetz*“, a law from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania that has since been repealed and means something along the lines of "Beef Labelling Monitoring Task Transfer Act", which today only survives as a famous example for a Frankenmonster-word with 63 letters.

According to the *Duden* editors, words like this are off limits because only words that are actually widely used in everyday life, in the media or in literature are included in the *Duden*. Furthermore, since the German language theoretically allows for infinitely long compounds, new "record words" could be created constantly. Ergo, if such words were included, the *Duden* would be infinitely large. So, bad news for the „*Rindfleischetikettierungsüberwachungsaufgabenübertragungsgesetzesänderungsvorlagenparagraphenunterkontrollleur*“, ("Beef Labelling Monitoring Task Transfer Act draft amendment-paragraphs sub-auditor").

Gendering: Big Stink over a Little Star

By now it's pretty obvious that the specifically German *laissez-faire* attitude towards official regulation of the German language has its advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, the language remains in the hands and mouths of the citizens, and whenever prescribed changes are to be introduced, it remains to be seen whether such new rules will really prevail in the writings and on the lips of the people, or whether they will simply be ignored.

On the other hand, the general indifference towards the

Rechtschreibrat as the final arbiter in all grammatical matters has just recently led once more to the same bickering and squabbling among self-appointed and real experts as during the 1996 and 2004 reforms. Politicians might have hoped that the latest public language-debate would have been quickly doused by the German Spelling Council, but if you would've put your money on the Council in this matter you could have just as well bet on the success of the (dead serious) suggestion to introduce emojis as an official addition to German grammar "to better express emotions". (Yep, we are all doomed.)

Anyway, what has everyone fired up and led to the latest major trench warfare on the battleground of the German language is the 'correct' use of the gender-inclusive endings of certain nouns (mainly designations and professions), which represents the specifically German variation of the so-called "pronoun debate" that, like so many things these days, began in the U.S.A in the wake of the '#metoo' campaign, which exploded onto the public scene in 2017 like a steam kettle under too long overpressure.

In the English-speaking world, this debate revolves predominantly around the question whether people should be addressed by their preferred pronouns, for example, "*they/them, ze/zer, hey/hem, qui/quem*", etcetera, or if the established pronouns "*he/him*" and "*she/her*" should remain adequate for interpersonal use.

Amongst the roughly 100 million German-speakers, however, the pronouns-topic amounts to little more than an ignorable footnote in the ongoing story of the 'gender wars'. Mainly, because in German each "thing" has been assigned one of three genders, being either a "he" (*er/der*), a "she" (*sie/die*), or an "it" (*es/das*), which will drive any discussion about 'gender-neutral' pronouns straight into the wall of rigid German grammar.

But for another and more specific reason, because the German pronoun-equivalent to the English "they/them" is "*sie/ihnen*", where "*sie*", [ˌsiː], (here as the plural "they"), can easily be mistaken not only for the singular female pronoun "*sie*", ("she"), but also for the formal address of "*Sie*", (the formal singular "you"). Furthermore, "*ihnen*", [ˌiːnən], ("them"), can just as easily be misinterpreted as the formal singular address in the grammatical dative case: "*ihnen*" (formal singular "you", "your/s"), although usually it would rather be taken as the plural dative pronoun "*ihnen*", ("them") – if you can grasp the gist.

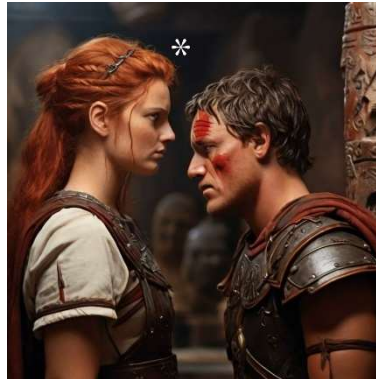
Finally, gender-neutral neo-pronouns like "*ze/zer, xe/xem, hu/hum, ne/ner, fai/fairy*" and others have gained little traction in German simply because there are no declension-rules or tables available that would show the multiple different declined forms of these pronouns in the four German grammatical cases as well as for the three genders male, female, and neuter. And what would German be without its pronoun declensions:

- **8 forms of reflexive pronouns**, (such as '*mich*', '*mir*', '*dich*', '*dir*'),
- **16 forms of relative pronouns**, (equal to '*der, die, das*' in all cases and genera).
- **16 forms of personal pronouns**, (singular and plural for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person in the 4 cases),
- **48 forms of demonstrative pronouns** (e.g. '*dieser*', by declension in 4 cases and 3 genera, singular/plural), and
- **96 forms of possessive pronouns**, (8 stems such as '*mein*', '*dein*', etc.,

each in singular/plural and the 4 cases for each masculine, feminine and neuter).

Unsurprisingly, these insurmountable grammatical hurdles make gender-neutral pronouns a deeply alien concept to the German language. But God forbid that this should stop the German-speaking world from arguing at length about gender-conforming language, of course. While the Anglo-Saxon hemisphere is bogged down in a trench war on “hey/hem/heir”, “zie/zim/zir”, or “ve/ver/vis” pronouns, the thorn in the flesh of the DACH-countries consists therefore instead of a rather unassuming culprit that comes in the shape of an inconspicuous asterisk.

More precisely, the literal star of the show in the latest German gender-grammar dispute is the so-called „Gendersternchen“, aka the “little gender star”, also known as the “gender asterisk”, which became synonymous for all types of „Wortbinnenzeichen“, or “internal punctuation marks”, such as asterisks, colons, or underscores, for instance in words like „Pilot*innen“ (male*female pilots), „Krieger:innen“ (male:female warriors), or „Polizist_in“ (policeman_policewoman).



With the traditional as well as any newly minted German pronouns out of the running as the main apple of discord in the battle between progressives and traditionalists, professional and self-appointed German linguists have decided to fight instead over the correct spelling and thus the right gendering of (mainly occupational) terms in German.

This “problem” arose because unlike in English, where you can easily distinguish a male “policeman” from a female “policewoman” (or even just use the gender-neutral “policeperson”), the German default term for a person in their professional capacity, (or any other descriptive term, for that matter), is usually the masculine grammatical form, e.g. „der Polizist“, (“the policeman”). And if you want to make it clear that you are talking about a female police officer, or a female driver, citizen, warrior, etc., you simply add the specific suffix „-in“ to the end of the noun, as in „die Polizistin“, „die Fahrerin“, „die Bürgerin“, „die Kriegerin“, etc.

Linguists call this use of the masculine grammatical form in singular and especially in plural „Das generische Maskulinum“ (“the generic masculinum”), and it is precisely this plural form that is the linguistic bone of contention among two opposing clans of German-speakers. But to get the full picture, you first need to know that German has several different ways to form a plural and how it’s done.

Table: All Possible Plural Forms of German Nouns

Noun-type in <i>Singular</i>	Ending in <i>Plural</i>	Example <i>Singular</i>	Example <i>Plural</i>	<i>Probability</i>

That Damn German Language!

<i>Singular</i> noun ending with -e	Add: -n	Die Vase Der Hase	Die Vasen Die Hasen	98% Vase Rabbit
<i>Singular</i> noun ending with: -er / -en / -el / -chen / + (some with -e)	No change in plural	Der Krieger Das Mädchen (Das Gebäude)	Die Krieger Die Mädchen (Die Gebäude)	90% Warrior Girl Building
Masculine noun not ending with -e	Add: -e / -en / -er	Der Tisch Der Pilot Der Mann	Die Tische Die Piloten Die Männer	90% Table Pilot Man
Feminine nouns not ending with -e	Add: -n / -en	Die Kartoffel Die Frau	Die Kartoffeln Die Frauen	90% Potato Woman
Neuter nouns not ending with -e	Add: -e / -er	Das Pferd Das Kind	Die Pferde Die Kinder	70% Horse Child
Nouns with foreign origin	Add: -s	Das Handy Das Sofa	Die Handys Die Sofas	90% Phone Sofa
If Plural-noun ends with -e or -er ...	... then the vowel in <i>singular</i> turns into its Umlaut in <i>plural</i>	Die Stadt Das Haus	Die Städte Die Häuser	100% City House

So, depending on gender and the ending of the noun/identifier in singular, the noun's *generic masculinum plural form* can either have an „-en“-ending like in „Die Polizisten“, or it can end with an „-e“ like when „Der Zwerg“ (“the dwarf”) brings his entire family of all „die Zwerge“ to the party. Or the plural might only be recognisable by the change of article, as when „der Krieger“ (“the warrior”) joins a raiding party of „die Krieger“. And neuter nouns, for example „das Kind“ (“the child”) can receive an „-er“ at the end to multiply into „die Kinder“ (“the children”), etcetera.

However, if you want to emphasise that a group of people is made up entirely of women, German has the handy feminine plural suffix „-innen“, to indicate a female plural group-noun, for instance, „Die Pilotinnen“, „Die Kriegerinnen“, or „Die „Freundinnen“ (“female friends”).

When German politicians, newsreaders or journalists want to make it clear that they are addressing people of both genders, they usually do so by simply mentioning both plural forms, for example, „Liebe Polizistinnen und Polizisten“, (“Dear girls and boys in blue”), or „Sehr geehrte Zwerge und Zwerginnen“, (“Honoured dwarfs and dwarfettes”). However, when German-speakers refer to a mixed group of male and female dwarfs, policemen, etc., they usually still tend to use the generic masculine plural noun, e.g. „Zwerge“, „Polizisten“, etc., without most people batting an eyelid.

Well, “most” people – but not all. In the mid-2010s, gender-equality advocates began to raise their voices against the apparent male favouritism inherent in the generic masculinum, stating that its customary use excludes

women and turns them invisible in society. To alleviate this injustice, at first some language-equalisers therefore suggested to use from now on exclusively the female plural for all group-nouns, i.e., to always add the „-innen“ suffix, which would automatically include men and make women more seen and heard. Since this suggestion didn't find much traction, however, advocates for linguistic equality then switched lanes and brought the by now (in)famous „Gendersternchen“ into play.



To clarify that women are part of a group, reformers proposed as the new default a novel spelling for all plural group-nouns which makes use of the “gender-asterisk” to indicate the inclusion of both genders while simultaneously highlighting this special aspect. With this new spelling in place, you now would write for instance, „Die Krieger*innen“. Alternatively, you could also use an internal dash as in, „Die Krieger/innen“, or the internal capital letter “I”, as in, „Die KriegerInnen“.

	Traditional	Reformed
Singular Male	Der Pilot	Der Pilot
Singular Female	Die Pilotin	Die Pilotin
Plural Pure Female	Die Pilotinnen	Die Pilotinnen
Plural Pure Male & MIXED	Die Piloten	Die Pilot*innen

The debate about whether this solution should become the accepted spelling standard is still raging at the time of writing. However, in an interview with the *Schwäbische Zeitung* newspaper, the chairman of the German Spelling Council said: *“Our statement is as follows: internal word characters such as underscore, gender asterisk, colon or other special characters are not part of the core of German orthography. These special characters as meaning signals within words cannot be included in the Official Rules of German Orthography because they cannot currently be scientifically justified. On the other hand, the Council cannot ignore the fact that internal word characters are used to indicate all genders.”*

With this wishy-washy verdict of the Council finally out in late 2024, it remains to be seen whether the governments of the 16 German federal states will continue to set their own standards regarding the gender asterisk or whether they will follow the Council's weak lead and enforce a ban of the gender asterisk at all schools and administrative bodies sometime in the second half of the 2020s.

A standardised nationwide regulation would certainly be desirable in view of the patchwork of regulations at the time of this writing, where the gender asterisk is currently considered correct at schools in Lower Saxony, while In Hessen, Schleswig-Holstein, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt teachers and civil servants are to regard the internal punctuation mark as a spelling mistake. Students in Baden-Württemberg on the other hand have to readjust from teacher to teacher, as the state government leaves it up to each teacher to decide whether gendering is the right or wrong thing to do, while in neighbouring Bavaria, internal punctuation in schools is marked as an error but not categorised as a mistake.

Apart from school regulations, Bavaria has also passed actual laws

against gendering in its administrations, while district administrators and mayors in other states have ordered their civil servants to draft all official documents exclusively in the new gendering-confirming style.

So, it should be clear that it is still very much up in the air whether „*gendern*“ (yes, that’s a German verb now) and the „*Gendersternchen*“ will catch on permanently in the German-speaking world.

What isn’t written in the stars, however, is the easily foreseeable future in which further unstoppable equality advocates will collide with other immovable language conservationists in any number of German talk shows, on debate stages and in feuilletons to continue bickering loudly about the generic masculine, the gender-asterisk, and gender-appropriate language.

But to be fair, both sides have some pretty compelling arguments. On the one side, the main argument of the fighters for equality is that the generic masculine excludes women from “the picture” and makes them virtually invisible in conversation. To alleviate this injustice, it should therefore not be too much trouble for everyone to use the gender asterisk in written German („*Polizist*innen*“) and either pronounce it with a pause („*Polizist...innen*“) or at least consistently mention both genders („*Polizisten und Polizistinnen*“), with the latter being already the rule almost without exception these days.

Furthermore, in the spirit of equality, certain generic masculine plurals should be replaced by a more neutral term that is less likely to imply a masculine bias. For example, the “old” term „*Studenten*“ (“students”) is to be replaced by „*Studierende*“ (“those who study”), while „*Lehrer*“ (“teachers”) become „*Lehrende*“ (“those who teach”), „*Teilnehmer*“ (“participants”) turn into „*Teilnehmende*“ (“those who participate”), and „*Arbeiter*“ (“workers”) become „*Arbeitende*“ (“those who simply want to do their job”). These changes have already taken root in parts of the media, where for example the *Tagesschau*, the main news programme on German television, regularly uses the term „*Studierende*“.

However, proponents of the traditional generic masculine in the plural claim that the changes demanded by gender equality advocates lack a fundamental aspect of any functioning language. Namely: consistency.

As an example, they like to cite the term „*Gäste*“ (“guests”), for which there is no feminine form in plural, (nor in singular), since the masculine „*der Gast*“ also denotes a female guest while the feminine form „*die Gästin*“ simply doesn’t exist.

The same is true for other terms such as „*Personen*“ (“persons”) and its singular, „*die Person*“, as well as „*Kinder*“ (“children”) and its singular, „*das Kind*“, or „*Mitglieder*“ (“members”) and its singular, „*das Mitglied*“, or „*Leute*“, (“people”), which doesn’t have a singular – simply because German knows neither „*Personinnen*“, nor „*Kinderinnen*“, „*Mitgliederinnen*“ or „*Leutinnen*“. Fervent advocates for the generic



masculinum argue therefore, that the German grammatical categories of masculine, feminine and neuter are used regardless of the actual biological gender and that the generic masculine is therefore meant to include all genders equally, whether it's in a term like „*die Person/die Personen*“ or in „*der Student/die Studenten*“.

An argument that also passes the test of time historically, as the generic masculine has been documented since the times of Old High German and has always been interpreted as gender-abstracting. Its use was meant to simplify and generalise; a form that refers to people regardless of their biological gender. Additionally, grammatical changes during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment further reinforced the already existing grammatical tradition of the use of the masculinum as the “standard form”, because it was generally regarded as more neutral and universal.

Finally, opponents of the new grammatical and spelling form are quick to point out that the generic masculine was essentially a means of reducing linguistic complexity and maintaining consistency, since it's simply faster, easier and more intelligible to use one form for all genders than to introduce differentiated forms.

Having said this, however, there is no doubt that historically, women have indeed been excluded from many social activities, professions and basic rights, including the study and writing of scholarly texts or taking up a profession in most guilds. Leaving it by necessity to the men to tinker with and shape the main body of German grammar as a reflection of their own everyday life.

No wonder then, that during the Middle Ages the habit emerged to use a male-characterised plural form for almost all occupational groups, since the masons („*Steinmetze*“) working on the new cathedral were in fact all men, as were almost all tanners („*Gerber*“), fletchers („*Pfeilmacher*“), brewers („*Brauer*“), or soldiers („*Soldaten*“). Later, when women began to play a larger role in many professions, it had already become customary and generally accepted to use the masculine plural form for any group of people, naturally including any female persons who were part of a group.

From a modern perspective, it is of course understandable that many women today take offence at this historical injustice and demand that it be corrected retrospectively, even if only grammatically. However, given the Germans' notorious historical aversion to any forced changes in their language, the question remains whether adapting a naturally grown language to the *zeitgeist* with a crowbar is the right way to achieve real gender equality.

However, the answer to this question might have already been given, at least according to a representative survey conducted in 2023 by the opinion research institute *Civey* for the news portal *t-online*. In keeping with the German tradition of non-interference in their language, 80% of Germans over the age of 18 were outright against gendering and the gender asterisk, while only 14% were for the reshaping of this particular field of German grammar.

It remains to be seen whether this result will change in favour of the reformers in the future or whether gendering will one day be a mere footnote in the history books of the German language. Who knows. Discuss.

Of Body Bags, Basecaps, and Brokkoli

While the success of this latest attempt to teach Germans how to be “happier” with their own language is still up in the air, the experts at the German Spelling Council are simultaneously chasing events also in other areas, always trying to at least partially tame the untameable beast that is the German language.

One focal point in this seemingly never-ending race to catch up with the beast is the spelling of Germanised words. Only recently in 2024, the Council decided for example that a number of words that had previously been “simplified” for “ease of use” would now officially be written again in the traditional way in which most Germans had been writing them all along anyway.

The Spelling Council stated, that *“Germanised variants of foreign-language terms that are not or hardly verifiable in current usage have been deleted”*. Thus, the modern „Jogurt” got its traditional „h”-dollop back to be a „Joghurt” again, „Spagetti” returned to its Italian roots as „Spaghetti”, a „Panter” became a „Panther” once more, and the „Tunfisch” (“tuna”) enjoyed its revival as a „Thunfisch”, to name but a few examples.

Fortunately for the ever-busy linguists at the *Rechtschreibrat* as well as for ordinary German-speakers, and despite Philipp “Babes’ Castle” von Zesen’s, Otto “Fahrkarte” Sarrazin’s or Grandmaster Postal Heinrich “postlagernd” von Stephan’s best efforts to purge the German language of foreign (i.e. mainly French) influences, German is downright brimming with foreign terms that escaped the back-and-forth of dictated “improvements”.

And it isn’t the French vocabulary alone that has the stubborn tendency to show up in front of German’s entrance door, demanding to be let in. No, German retains the persistent propensity to open its doors, windows, skylights, and cellar hatches for quite a lot of other languages too, including of course English, but also other lingo-friends like Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Arabic, Czech, or Indian.

Some **English Words** many Germans today consider to be genuine German terms include for example: *Das Team, Der Manager, Das Meeting, Der Club, Der Computer, Das Keyboard, Das Internet, Die Couch, Der Joint, Die Basecap* (‘Baseball cap’) *Der Backpack, Der Player, gendern, pokern, interviewen, dealen, chatten, surfen, posten, downloaden, sexy, happy, fit, crazy, cool, and fair.*

But the German language doesn’t stop its appropriation here. In a somewhat cringy move, German has also come up with several **English-Sounding Words** that have either no meaning at all in the English language or are used for something completely different in English. The most infamous example in this regard may well be the neo-German word „Body Bag”. In English a “body bag” denotes a rather sombre piece of equipment used for the earthly remains of fallen soldiers



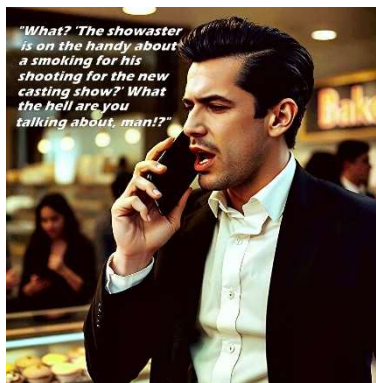
and deceased loved ones. In German, however, the same word has become an alternative term for “rucksack”, (which is particularly weird, since „Rucksack” itself is a German word). Probably, „Body Bag” just sounded “cool” to some war movie-savvy German teens, or more likely, the term was coined by some well-paid and badly educated marketing “experts” during a “brainstorming” session at their local Starbucks™ while slurping their Iced Sugar-Free Vanilla Soy Caramel Macchiato with Extra Whip and Cinnamon through a paper-straw.

Further examples for English-sounding German words and their German meanings include:

Table: English-Sounding (very) German Words

• Das Handy – the German word for a mobile/smart phone.
• Der Hometrainer – an exercise bicycle.
• Die Basecap – a baseball hat/cap.
• Der Discounter – the discount shop, like Aldi, Lidl, etc.
• Das No-Go – something that is strictly not done.
• Der Dressman – a male fashion model.
• Der Showmaster – a gameshow-host.
• Die Casting Show – a talent-show on TV.
• Das Happy End – the happy ending in a movie.
• Die Trainer – (plural), sports shoes, jogging shoes.
• Das Public Viewing – crowd-watching a game on XXL-screens.
• Das Shooting – the photo-shoot.
• Der Smoking – has nothing to do with ciggies. It’s a Tuxedo.
• Die Boxen – loudspeakers.
• Der Oldtimer – a vintage car. Not an old man.
• Der Pullunder – a sleeveless pullover/jumper.
• Der Beamer – a video projector. Not the slang-word for a BMW.

But the German love for English goes even further. In the age of the internet, German Millennial- and Gen Z YouTubers like to regularly mix genuine **English Expressions**, (often with German grammatical declensions and conjugations), into their speech, just as if these phrases have been part of the German language all along. You can hear this trend regularly occurring with radio-DJs, TV-show hosts of youth music programmes, and particularly “cool” YouTubers and Tiktokers, but also on the streets from urban “wise” kids aged 12 to 29. Interestingly, in recent years this “trend” was adopted also by a sub-group of the older population – namely the well-off type who likes to brag about his latest amorous conquest at the bar of his tennis club while playing with the key-fob of his new Porsche™ 911™ S/T. In other words, the difference between “cool” and “cringe” depends entirely on the circumstances. Here are some examples:



- **„Das ist ein bisschen cringe jetzt.”** = “That’s a bit cringe now.”

- „**Ich habe das seriously nicht so gemeint.**“ = “I seriously didn’t mean it like that.”
- „**Aber bitte no hard feelings, Leute!**“ = “But please no hard feelings, guys!”
- „**Ich muss das mal checken.**“ = “I’ve got to check this out.”
- „**Remember, Freunde, denkt nicht an next week, lebt euer Leben right now, und enjoyed das schöne Wetter, it’s free!**“ = “Remember, friends, don’t think about next week, live your life right now, and enjoy the beautiful weather, it’s for free!”

English may be the undisputed spearhead of the ongoing internationalisation of German, but other European languages are not lagging far behind and are happily leaving their own linguistic footprints on the German language carpet.

Take for instance **Italian**, whose success is also partly due to the many Italian immigrants who came to Germany as „*Gastarbeiter*“, (lit. “guest workers”) in the 1950s and 1960s and who subsequently stayed in the country with their families. Many “*bambini*” and “*nipoti*” (“grandchildren”) of these first-generation immigrants later opened car repair-shops and petrol stations, hairdresser- and fashion-shops, import-export businesses and design-companies but often also restaurants, pizzerias, and ice-cream parlours and thusly introduced the marvellous Italian kitchen in a delicious combination together with its vocabulary to German culture and society.

Especially in the southern states like Bavaria, Germans now greet each other with “*Ciao!*” or “*Ciao bella!*” as a matter of course, while many unfortunately also still order “*Due Espresso*” in an Italian café, even though this is and will always be grammatically and culturally incorrect. Instead, Italians will order “*Due caffè (espresso)*” if they want two espressos, because coffee is “espresso” by default in Italy, *capito?*



What most Germans also don't realise is that there is a long list of Italian terms outside the kitchen that are considered “typically German” and are used without any acknowledgement of their actual Italian origin. The list includes such common terms as: *Bank*, *Bilanz*¹, *Brokkoli*, *Diva*, *Faschismus*, *Ghetto*, *Kanal*², *Kartoffel*, (from the Italian *Tartufolo*, i.e. truffles), *Lava*, *Oper*, *Primadonna*, *Risiko*³, *Salat*, *Zitrone*⁴, or *Zucker*⁵.

When it comes to German’s ancient neighbour **French**, however, Postmaster General Heinrich von Stephan and railway engineer Otto Sarrazin could have continuously kicked out one French word per day for the rest of their lives and yet, another one would have just as quickly found its way back into German through the backdoor.

No other language has left so many ineradicable traces of its vocabulary in the German language as *le français*, which is why there is even a term for them: “Gallicisms”. From *Affäre*, *Affront*, and *Agent*

provocateur to *Zigarette* and *Zivilisation*, more than a millennium of close neighbourhood have made the German language unthinkable without its dear French cousin.

But not only close neighbours have contributed to the richness of the German language. From **Spanish**, for example, German adopted predominantly words denoting the nicer things in life, like *Platin*, *Tabak*, *Karamell*, and *Gitarre*. In the same vein, **Indian** gave German words like *Pyjama*, *Yoga*, *Shampoo*, *Kajal*, or *Katamaran*. And **Arabic** also provided German with several words for certain pleasantries, such as *Alkohol*, *Sofa*, *Artischocke*⁶, *Kaffee*, and *Mokka*, as well as other seemingly “natural” German words like *Kuppel*⁷, *Ziffer*⁸, *Chemie*⁹, and *Algebra*.

Other languages that have contributed their fair share to the German vocabulary include **Yiddish**, (*Stuss*¹⁰, *Techtelmechtel*¹¹, *Gauner*¹², *Kluft*¹³, *Tacheles*¹⁴), **Turkish**, (*Heckmeck*¹⁵, *Schabracke*¹⁶), **Hungarian**, (*Dolmetscher*¹⁷, *Tollpatsch*¹⁸), as well as **Polish** and **Czech**, (*Pistole*, *Säbel*¹ and *Roboter*).

Glossary

1 – <i>die Bilanz</i> = balance (sheet)	10 – <i>der Stuss</i> = codswallop, baloney
2 – <i>der Kanal</i> = channel, canal, duct	11 – <i>das Techtelmechtel</i> = fling, love affair
3 – <i>das Risiko</i> = risk	12 – <i>der Gauner</i> = crook, trickster
4 – <i>die Zitrone</i> = lemon	13 – <i>die Kluft</i> = outfit, uniform
5 – <i>der Zucker</i> = sugar	14 – <i>Tacheles</i> = straight talking
6 – <i>die Artischocke</i> = artichoke	15 – <i>das Heckmeck</i> = fuss, nonsense
7 – <i>die Kuppel</i> = cupola, dome, vault	16 – <i>die Schabracke</i> = old house; ugly woman
8 – <i>die Ziffer</i> = digit, cypher, number	17 – <i>der Dolmetscher</i> = interpreter
9 – <i>die Chemie</i> = chemistry	18 – <i>der Tollpatsch</i> = klutz, butterfingers
	19 – <i>der Säbel</i> = sabre, sword

Fade Out

And so, we've come to the provisional end of the eventful history of the German language. From here on, we can only speculate about the future development of German, although further anglicisation is certainly a safe bet.

Now that you have been introduced to *Deutsch's* intricate history, its relatives and at least some of its quirks, you may very well agree with your friends' warning that German is indeed "*a bit difficult*" and "*quite complicated*".

On the other hand, perhaps this journey through the centuries has piqued your interest. Either way, whether the *Chemie* is right between you and German or whether this *Affäre* will remain a mere *Techtelmechtel*, that's now entirely up to you, as no one is going to put a *Meuchelpuffer* to your head, of course. And who knows, maybe one day you will even be an active *Player* in shaping the future of this beautiful beast of a language.



Part II: The Secrets of the German Language

Die Geheimnisse der deutschen Sprache

Pronunciation: “German, Motherf**ker! Do You Speak It!”

“The German language sounds like a typewriter eating tinfoil while being kicked down the stairs.”

Dylan Moran, Irish Comedian



We’ve all heard it in countless sketches, movies, series, jokes, and talk shows: Spoken German apparently sounds either like a cat who has trouble regurgitating a hairball, or like a lawnmower dragged over a gravel bed, or of course straight up like Adolf Hitler throwing one of his infamous hissy fits.

Comparisons between German pronunciation and “hilariously” exaggerated examples of some horrendous noise are ten a penny or a dime a dozen today, from Irish comedian *Dylan Moran’s* tinfoil-eating typewriter tumbling down the stairs to the late British comedian and actor *Willie Rushton’s* quote that, “*German is the most extravagantly ugly language; it sounds like someone using a sick bag on a 747*”.

And yeah, fair enough. After all, it’s true that German – with its harsh “ch”-sounds and serpentine hissing “s” – can ‘*certainly*’ at first glance resemble more the ‘*Black Language*’ of *Sauron’s Mordor* than *Tolkien’s* beautiful Elvish language of ‘*Sindarin*’.

That said, it’s about time to clarify that the German language as it is often portrayed in British and American films and television programmes, has little to nothing at all to do with how German-speakers sound today.

You see, modern Germans do not scream or shout all the time like the „GröFaZ” („*Größter Führer aller Zeiten*” = the “Greatest Leader of all Times”) during his last days in the „*Führerbunker*” under Berlin. Nor do they speak exclusively in short, choppy sentences like some fanatic „*SS-Obersturmbannführer*” (“SS-Senior Assault Unit Leader”) bellowing orders to his „*Panzerschwadron*” (“tank squadron”). And German-speakers also don’t tend to roll the “R” with their tongue like German radio announcers and „*Wochenschau*”-newsreels reporters in the 1930s and 1940s.

If the great satirist Willy Rushton had listened to some currently spoken German instead of getting his German experience mainly from Hollywood's World War II movies on the BBC, he might have known that modern German-speakers have a far softer and rounder pronunciation than the one assumed by most American actors in war films and TV series.

And if the exceptional Dylan Moran had taken the time to engage in a few meaningful conversations with ordinary citizens in Germany or Austria instead of just asking for the nearest wine bar, he would undoubtedly have come to the conclusion that there exists not just one German pronunciation but that there are in fact dozens of different German dialects, some of which are extremely soft on the ears while others have a harsher sound to them – while all of them sound distinctly different from "ze German on yorrr tellewision".

Now, don't get this wrong, far be it from any German to make the German language sound better than it does in your own ear canals. Depending on the speaker and the dialect, there can indeed be an overabundance of raven-like croaking and a noticeable lack of anything resembling a nightingale's song.

But believe it or not, the opposite can be true as well. So, with all due respect, Willy, Dylan, and all the rest of the German-bashing crowd, here's a suggestion: Why don't you just go and play hopscotch on the



Autobahn? And while you're at it, best take your tired stereotypes right with you. Much obliged. Everyone else, however, might instead go on YouTube™ and enjoy listening to some German singers to get a feel for the "unknown" softer side of German pronunciation.

For example, you could listen to German pop singer *Mia* beautifully trilling '*Mein Herz tanzt*', ("My heart dances"), or to singer-songwriter *Reinhard Mey*'s soulful ballad '*Über den Wolken*', ("Above the clouds"), or you could spend a few minutes watching the video of classical opera singer *Olena Tokar* emotionally performing, '*Lied an den Mond*', ("Song to the moon"). After that, you can still make your mind up whether a tinfoil-eating typewriter or the sound of "*vomiting into a sick bag on a 747*" really hits the nail on the head as a valid comparison for "The Sound of German".

Whatever your verdict may be, though, you can be sure that Germans and Austrians and the German-speaking Swiss, Tyrolians, Belgians, Luxembourgian, and Liechtenstein citizens are all well aware of their own language's reputation in the world and will often be the first to point out, (and even joke about), how strange German must sound to unaccustomed ears.

However, you will also find that most German-speakers are all too happy to speak such an "ugly" language and willingly dispense with any of the praise that is usually heaped on the Italians and the French for having "*oh, such a beautiful language*". Instead, German-speakers almost

unanimously prefer the practical advantages that come with the absence of any “song-like” speech melody or ear-pleasing pronunciation. In other words, only the most fanatical German Francophones and *Italiano*-enthusiasts would want to voluntarily exchange German’s sharp edges, roughness, and tongue-twisting pronunciation for the softness, delicacy, and melodiousness of the two languages of Latin origin.

But perhaps you now assume that this is just a defensive reaction from hurt German-speakers who are merely secretly jealous of the perceived beauty of these other languages. Well, to find out if you’re right or whether there really is something to the claim that this “weird” German pronunciation has advantages that outweigh those of the two “pretty” languages, we will have to first wade into the supposedly murky, (but in fact crystal clear), waters of German pronunciation rules.

No Gâteaux. No Queue. And Ghoti isn’t a Fish!



German-speakers will usually be the first to agree that a German sentence, even when softly sung by an alluring Instagram™ model to promote her Only Fans™ account, will never invoke the same elegant and hormone-releasing effects as the same words sung in French. After all, "the language of love" owes its well-deserved reputation as a beautiful language to its almost complete lack of harsh and edgy sounds,

allowing soft-sounding syllables to flow seamlessly into one another. Envelope this in the slightly lilting French intonation and you have the overall acoustic pleasantness that so effortlessly distinguishes the French language as “God’s preferred way to initiate the mating process” – while German on the other hand seems to belong exclusively to the parade ground and the domain of the burly non-commissioned officer.

The same goes for Italian, of course. Even if the hottest German gigolo would passionately sing a German song to promote his Patreon™ channel, his attempt would never reach the same limb-weakening effect as that of his hot-blooded Italian counterpart.

It is simply a fact of Nature that German can't hold a candle to Italian's undeniable beauty, which is largely due to the Italian language's penchant for ending almost every word with a soft-sounding vowel. Combine this with Italian's characteristic rising and falling intonation and the result is that even mundane sentences can suddenly sound like a harmonious rhyming poem or an improvised romantic love song.



Bottom line, while Italian and French give you all the room you need and then some to express your emotions, passions, feelings and desires tonally, German on the other hand doesn’t give you even a hair's

breadth of potential leeway when it comes to pronouncing every single letter in a word precisely and clearly. On the contrary, German regards any omission of the sound of even one letter, (something you might easily be tempted to do in an attempt to "smooth out" your pronunciation, or out of laziness, of course), as a serious violation of the fundamental principle of the language, which is: Precision – with a capital "P".



Such violations out of carelessness or deliberate negligence are usually punished immediately, either by making the offender crassly misunderstood or even by rendering their whole speech incomprehensible. Purposefully "swallowing" or "biting off" German letter sounds simply goes against the "Golden Rule of Proper German Pronunciation", which states that, *"In German, each letter or*

combination of letters in a word corresponds to a particular sound that must be clearly pronounced".

This is also why, for example, a word like "gâteaux", (French for "cake"), would drive the precision-obsessed German linguistic beast up the wall, as it would rigorously demand the pronunciation of every letter (and especially the "X" at the end), while being completely confused by the fact that the entire "-EAUX" combination is supposed to produce a simple "O"-sound.

Of course, our nitpicking German brat would have the same meltdown also with English words like "queue". See, once German recovered from its fainting spell after seeing this word, it would then be forced to translate the two "UE"-pairs in "queue" into two "Ü"-sounds, since the umlaut "Ü" is also written as "UE", (for example in crossword puzzles or if you can't find an "Ü"-key on your keyboard). Attempting to pronounce the result in German would result in a sound not unsimilar to the eerie alarm call of some obscure Australian wingless bird, screaming, "KÜ'Ü! KÜ'Ü!"

But let's be entirely honest here, the English language likes to play fast and loose with its pronunciation anyway. Just take for instance the famous "Ghoti"-example. If you haven't heard of this brilliant demonstration of English's helter-skelter pronunciation rules, the classic "Ghoti" internet meme is based on the impeccable logic that, *"if the GH-sound in the word "enough" is pronounced like an F, and the O in "women" makes the short I-sound, and the TI in the word "nation" is pronounced SH-, then the word GHOTI should be pronounced just like the word FISH."*



Such uncontrollable chaos is of course neatly kept in check by the unwritten "Golden Rule of Proper German Pronunciation", which prevents

German from even entertaining the faintest possibility of a "KÜ'Ü!"-screaming bird or of a cake with a string of silent, freeloading letters attached. Not to mention the decidedly fishy notion of some mutant *Ghoti*, thank you very much.

Consequently, the “Golden Rule” also prevents German from producing the same elegant sounds as smooth-flowing French or the same sing-song quality as temperamental Italian or the creatively inclined English willy-nilly letter-sound changes. After all, if there is only one specific sound attached to each letter and letter-combination and if you must pronounce each of these letters clearly and to the letter, your options to elegantly blend words and syllables quickly becomes rather limited.

Incidentally, this German penchant for “precision pronunciation” is also the reason why German sometimes takes on that notorious “staccato” quality (also known as “machine-gun speech”), which tends to become more pronounced the more serious, determined or agitated a German-speaker becomes in a discussion.

In fact, the next time you're in a room together with some Germans, Austrians or Swiss who are in such a heightened emotional state, you may notice that the degree of their attempted persuasiveness corresponds directly to an increase in choppy syllables and overly precise enunciation.

Of course, this phenomenon is likely to be accompanied by an increase in vocal volume. But German-speakers at least include this intermediate stop on the open-ended excitement scale, whereas native speakers of some other (not to be mentioned by name) languages tend to skip any gradual incline and go straight to the extremes by immediately starting to shout, scream, yell, or bark.

An Ugly Brat with Nuances

Now put yourself in the shoes of the German language for a moment and then seriously claim that you too wouldn't eventually reach the point where your carotid artery is about to burst after



hearing for the umpteenth time that pesky question: “Hey German, why can't you just sound a bit more like beautiful French or pretty Italian, you ugly brat?”

I'm pretty sure that rather sooner than later you too would split your seams and finally yell back: “Because I simply like precision more than prettiness, dammit! And now leave me alone, mum!”

While German runs to its room and slams the door, U.S.-journalist Breena Kerr explains in her article “How Italian became the language of love”, (BBC Travel-blog, June 2017), why it so happens that in this second “Language of Love”, even a burly Venetian patriarch cursing out his motorboat-mechanic because of a blocked valve will still come across to

a foreigner as just a particularly energetic troubadour performing a post-modernistic poem.

As Brenda Kerr writes: *“Dr Patti Adank, who teaches speech, hearing, and phonetic sciences at University College London, says that Italian is attractive to the ear because of its so-called ‘melody’. Italian benefits from a very high number of words that end in vowels and few words with many consonants in a row, creating an open sound that makes it perfect for singing.”*

Leaving aside for a moment this other stereotypical trait of the Italian language (you know, the one where all burly Italian men *“speak-a al-a-ways-e like-a this-e”*, as if they were Super Mario clones), there remains little mystery as to why you've heard so much about Italian gigolos and French temptresses, but never anything about German Casanovas or Sirens.

Incidentally, this fact also means that German men and women are forced to step up their flirting game in other areas in order to impress the opposite sex. For instance, by showing off their carefully assembled collection of crypto coins, their excellent riding skills (on a horse, you perv), their outstanding talent in archery, their effortlessness when dancing, or their high alcohol tolerance threshold in the pub, where the 15th *Jägermeister* is on the house.

In short, you will need to be innovative and versatile if you want to impress the opposite sex in German-speaking countries, since sweet whispers or melodious singsong as a flirting technique are predictably a non-starter in German.

Al. of which raises the question: What's the actual root cause for this “un-sexiness” and lack of allure of spoken German?

Well, naturally the first thing that comes to mind here is the aforementioned “Golden Rule of German Pronunciation”. This forces German-speakers to pronounce every letter in a word clearly and with the specific sound assigned to it in order to be understood unequivocally, thus making elegant transitions and slurred singsong almost impossible.

And the fact that German therefore has a tendency of “over-pronouncing” single letters and especially vowels doesn't help either. Nor does German's habit to particularly emphasize its “plosives”, also known as “occlusives”. These are the so-called “pulmonic consonants” in which the vocal tract is blocked so that all airflow ceases, while the occlusion is made with the tongue tip or lips, letting the letter-sound out with an “explosion” of air in one burst.

Typical plosives include “K”, “T”, “P” and “B”. Take this together with the harsh sound of the hard “-CH-”, (you know, the one that resembles a cat regurgitating a hairball), the soft “-CH-”, the hissing “S”-sound and the forceful “Z”-sound, and you already have almost all the ingredients in a recipe for the perfect “frightful language”.

However, one especially potent



“spice” is still missing, which grows naturally out of the fertile ground of “Precision Pronunciation”: the micropause – an often confusing but essential part of proper German pronunciation, showing up between each word as well as between some but not all syllables.

All this taken together results in spoken German sounding often abrupt and harsh. On the other hand, this clarity of speech provides the advantage of being able to clearly distinguish between e.g. “n”- and “m”-sounds, for instance when you say: „Ich halte dem Mann den Hund hin.“, and: „Ich halte den Mann dem Hund hin.“ = “I hold the dog out to the man.” and: “I hold the man out to the dog.”

However, there’s yet another and quite different reason for German pernickety when it comes to clear pronunciation. See, once you are “burdened” with a language that can easily make a fool out of you by mispronouncing or misspelling a single letter, then over the centuries your “language-tribe”, and hence you too, will quite naturally develop a special ear for even the most subtle sounds uttered between the lines. And before you know it, your “tribe” will have begun to exploit these pronunciation nuances to transform them into a clearly regulated “secret language” nestled inside your actual language.

Think of it this way: Suppose you're listening to a classical orchestra playing a composition by a conductor who had told a TV news station in an interview that the “true genius” and “elemental message” of his work is only revealed by a single silver note that occasionally rings out of a tiny triangle amidst all the constant tuba blows, violin crescendos, and timpani bangs; barely audible, if at all.

Having seen the interview with the conductor and composer, you might still buy a ticket for the concert and listen to this “masterwork” just for the fun of it. However, it’s quite possible that from now on you are more likely to associate the conductor with terms from the circus and its clowns than with those from the world of classical music.

In contrast to this slightly flabbergasting scenario, let’s now imagine a second scenario, in which the composer has instead masterfully interspersed the angelic ring of the silver triangle in his overall composition, thus giving it its own space while simultaneously tuning down the other instruments at the right time. In this case, you would indubitably pick up on the triangle’s nuanced message and would recognise the silvery-bright tone as a real enrichment of the musical work.

Which scenario would you choose? The one where the full orchestra can play uninterrupted without “making room” for the triangle sound, or the one where the orchestra tones down its resounding thunder and clamour to allow the more subtle and nuanced tones to breathe and be heard?



Well, your likely answer can perhaps best be paraphrased by a

popular American “cake”-idiom: “You cannot ring your triangle during a crescendo and expect it to be heard too”.

You see, the hypothetical early German-speakers realised that their language had to die one of two deaths. German would either have to adopt the characteristics of languages derived from Latin in order to sound resonant and melodious with all the smooth transitions and the full shebang, just like the wide-ranging orchestra in full swing but thus drowning out the subtle undertones like the triangle’s spherical yet significant “*ping!*” – or German would have to renounce the possibility to produce an uninterrupted pleasant singsong melody or an unceasing smooth and suave string of sounds and instead leave more opportunities to create and to notice the finer undertones, subtle changes and hidden meanings inside of a word or sentence, which are then pronounced just that tiny bit differently depending on the message they need to transmit.

While by no means becoming “bland” or “toneless”, the German language therefore “decided” to strip away all the frills, ornaments and embellishments that would drown out the subtle undertones, only to then set about fine-tuning the often-tiny sound-changes, the minute ups and downs in syllable-emphasis, and the intricately placed micropauses, by assigning a precise meaning to each of them.

Consequently, to exploit these subtleties and to maximise the conveyance of their multiple meanings, all extraneous singing, syllable fading, consonant abrasion, and “meaningless” emotional pitch exaggeration had to be reduced to a minimum.



Now, it will probably take a while, but when you have spent some time among German-speakers, you will inevitably notice that spoken German is filled to the brim with such nuanced subtexts. They may be subtle and may take some “learning by doing” at first, but German's finely tuned intonation, inflections, accents, micropauses and syllable stresses are an intrinsic and indispensable part of the language.

Once you are fluent in German, you will therefore not only be able to proudly claim to have mastered the cryptic German grammar and to have acquired the ability to navigate an ocean of 3.5 million German words (and counting), but to also have become a virtuoso in the art of conveying the multiple meanings of a word by minutely shifting your intonation, accentuation, and micropauses.

In fact, you could then even brag that the German system of nuanced accentuation is almost comparable to none other than Mandarin (*Putonghua*), the main language spoken in China, where slight changes in intonation (called “*tone sandhi*”) can completely change the denotation of a word.

So, now you know two of the main reasons why German does not sound as melodious as Italian or as smooth as French, and why it often

appears “clipped” and sometimes even “robotic”.

For one, the many plosives and harshly pronounced letters combined with frequent micropauses don't allow for a melodious whole and make German sound “hacked off” and “unemotional”. However, this makes it possible to clearly understand the final letter(s) of a word, an essential characteristic for determining whether you are e.g. referring to a female, male or neuter person, animal, or thing, whether you are speaking in the present or past tense and even whether the cat in your story is either walking or rather floating across the table. But more on that cat later.

The second reason why a melodious pronunciation is unthinkable in German is its underlying “code” of nuanced intonations, stresses, pauses and omissions, which create a second level of meanings in every conversation, even in short exchanges of pleasantries or seemingly superficial chats.

Speakers of French, Italian and probably most other languages would argue now that the same is certainly true of their own language as well. And they would be right, of course – at least as far as the hidden second layer of communication consisting of a “concealed code” is concerned. However, Italians use far more often their hands to express these nuances and intonations, while the French are masters of facial expressions and subtle gestures. But no doubt, Italians and French, like all other peoples, also use the tonality in which something is said to carry additional meaning, for example to express sarcasm, enthusiasm or irony.

“So, what's the special deal with Germans, then?” you ask?

Well, as you will quickly notice when visiting Germany, Austria or Switzerland, people here have never developed a culture of conveying underlying meanings through hand or head gestures or facial expressions. (In fact, this may be yet another reason for the stereotype of the “cold” and “unemotional” Germans.) Instead, German-speakers compensate for this lack of strong body language and absent catalogue of facial expressions with an array of intonation nuances and deliberately placed micropauses and by purposely omitting whole letters or words, which we will look at in more detail shortly.

Now that you have safely tucked away in your grey little cells the answer to the question; *“What leads to the German language's reputation as a choppy, seemingly over-emphasising beast, prone to regular hissing and throat-clearing?”*, we can move on to the more exciting question: *“Why and how did this extreme division between Latin-derived languages and Germanic linguistic philosophy occur in the first place?”*

Again, much of the answer to the question lies, who would have believed it, in the question itself: As so often is the case, it all comes down to the Roman Empire with its Latin-speaking conquering armies, who left an indelible linguistic mark wherever they established a permanent presence. Not only that, but also the Roman way of life in general had a lasting cultural impact on the societies under its *iron-fist-in-a-velvet-glove* influence.

There's no doubt that the task of determining the precise mechanisms underlying a language's development, the changes it has undergone throughout history, and the factors that have shaped its unique perspective on the world has kept scientific linguists busy for centuries and

will continue to be a study-object for many years to come. And certainly, no one wants to piss off these experts professionally or to encroach on their area of expertise, like for example certain movie actresses and actors do when they intervene in the highly complicated field of politics.

Nevertheless, and just for fun, let's rummage a bit through the old and dusty box of hypothetical 'What if?'-stories and see if a little fairy tale might shed some light on the different ways of thinking and the unique characteristics of three exemplary and hypothetical European "tribes", that played a not unimportant role in shaping their respective languages. So, get a hot beverage, lean back and relax: It's story time.

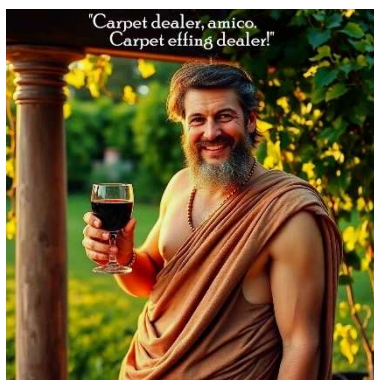
A Tale of Three Tongues

ONCE UPON A TIME, on a not-so-distant continent, there were three specific tribes who lived alongside many others. Each of these three peoples had their own peculiarities, which were closely intertwined with the land they lived on. The fertile soil, the favourable and frequently changing weather and the local nature provided them with a cornucopia of fine vegetables, fresh fruit, rich maize and plump grapes for tasty wine as well as precious hops and malt for a flavoursome beer, while all sorts of walking, swimming, and flying animals were there for the taking to provide various succulent meats. To varying degrees, all three tribes felt therefore that they had truly been blessed by *Yummyummy*, the God of Nutritional Abundance.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE TRIBES could be found living on a peculiarly boot-shaped peninsula in the south of the continent. These people were known as a lively and communicative folk who enjoyed all the favours of *Cazzochealdo*, the local Goddess of the Sun and the Seasons, while being grateful that she usually was merciful enough not to overwhelm them with her burning love.

Thusly, these Southerners thrived in a temperate and sunny climate that provided them with fertile fields and lush vineyards as well as an abundance of fish and seafood delicacies generously provided by *Il Fruttidimare*, the God of the All-surrounding Sea and its Fishy Bounty. This abundance as well as the laid-back approach to life in general also prompted these folks to develop a certain confidently-cocky attitude that got enshrined in the motto: "*Seize the day*", which translates to the Latin idiom of "*Carpe diem*" (~car'pə dee'əm) – (or "*Carpet dealer*", as that one tipsy guy at that one wine festival I visited with my ex once called it.)

Mother Nature's (*Mona's*) bounty of delicious gifts gave our fortunate southern tribe ample opportunity to praise *Mona's* God-given beauty and, consequently, to indulge in the pleasures of *la dolce vita*. And there was no one in the wide lands of the continent who actually blamed them for enjoying excellent food and wine, elegant fashion, bespoke shoes, and some seriously sleek sports cars.



To no one's *grande sorpresa*, in the course of time such bountiful beauty, refined lifestyle, and joyous emotions found their way also into our southern tribe's native tongue. And when people came from far and wide to visit the lands of these Southerners to partake in the beauty of their towns and cities, their many beaches and mountains, and their amazing artistry in the kitchen, they could not help themselves but to praise also the Southerner's language's melodious quality and *la pura bellezza di questa lingua*.

THE SECOND OF THE THREE TRIBES had made its home further to the west of the continent and had settled on a vast and diverse piece of land that stretched from the harsh climate of the Northern Sea to the sun-kissed beaches of the Middle Earth Sea, with fertile soil all around. And when the Westerners, (who called themselves *Les Occidentaux*), looked at their land, they found themselves immensely favoured by *L'Abondance*, the Goddess of Fertile Land, Fruity Wine and Beefy Livestock.

In their exuberant enthusiasm at this opulence, *Les Occidentaux* turned the basic task of food preparation over time into an entirely new art form at which they naturally excelled. With ever new inventions in this new field of "*cuisine*", even traditional farmers became transformed into suppliers of the most outlandish demands made by the new "royalty", i.e. the small group of so-called *chefs de cuisine*.

Following these demands, Western farmers began to venture out into the fields, meadows, woods and coastlines to collect all sorts of new edible delicacies such as snails, frogs and sea urchins. They also cut off the tails of bulls, followed wild boars around to find a buried type of fungus and even force-fed geese in order to fatten their livers to unholy sizes. After receiving all these fresh staple foods, the *chefs de cuisine* then used them to prepare intricate dishes to be served to the growing number of so-called *gourmets* in their numerous food temples, which could be found all over the great cities as well as smaller towns and even villages around the land.

And when *Les Occidentaux* weren't indulging in the culinary wonders provided by their lands and their *chefs*, they would often wander the countryside, marvelling at the almost otherworldly beauty and serenity of its vastly differing landscapes, which could turn even the most hardened warrior into a romantic troubadour in search of love and beauty.

Fortunately for them, such beauty and love could not only be found in nature, but also in the members of the tribe's fairer sex – no doubt a side effect of *Mona's* own voluptuousness – who soon became iconic and coveted by men throughout the known world.

With so much beauty all around, it was only a matter of time before the weaker sex took up pen and brush to write poems in praise of women and nature, and to draw, sketch, and paint them "*like one of those French girls*", in the fervent hope of capturing the essence of their beauty for posterity.

Already early on, the men of the western tribe had begun to recognise the beauty of their female companions and soon discovered that the sound of their language had a similarly positive effect on potential future wives as the actual words themselves. As a result, many male members of the tribe soon excelled at charming, beguiling, and seducing the stronger sex, who mostly allowed the mating rituals to proceed with grace.



Indulging in all the finer things in life, the western tribesmen and -women soon became *maîtres* of all the fine arts, from the confection of delicious, sweet delicacies and the preparation of taste-bud-orgasmic *haute cuisine* to the fashioning of elegant *haute couture*, the creation of masterful paintings, sculptures, and architecture to unsurpassed viticulture and the professional baking of crescent-shaped breakfast rolls.

The elegance and refinement that pervaded the entire social life of the tribe finally, and *sans grande surprise*, manifested itself also in the language of these sophisticated people. And visitors from all four corners of the sky came to comment with delight on *cette belle langue*, comparing its smoothness in their praise even to the velvety skin of *une belle femme*.

WELL, AND THEN THERE WAS THE THIRD TRIBE. These folks had settled smack-dab in the middle of the continent and had spread out over a vast territory, reaching from the storm-beaten coasts of the North Sea to the wind-swept snowy mountaintops in the Southern Alps, with many, many, many dense forests and vast open plains in between.

Unlike the other two tribes, the peoples of this central tribe, who called themselves „*Zentrumsstamm*“, i.e. “centre tribe”, were initially not so much a unified tribe but more of a loose confederation of smaller tribes sharing certain traditions, stories, history, and a common language. But while their lands were fertile – stretching from the plains in the north to the hills and mountains in the south, crisscrossed by many wide and narrow rivers –, *Sonnenschein*, their Goddess of Sunshine and Favourable Weather, often lost her battles in the sky with *Scheißwetter*, the God of Shitty Weather, and his disciples, the gods of *Donner* (Thunder), *Regen* (Rain), *Hagel* (Hail), *Schnee* (Snow), and *Nebel* (Mist).

In addition, much of the *Zentrumsstamm*’s territory was originally covered by ginormous trees that grew together in dense forests, so that the tribe’s men and women often had to wrest their fertile fields from the hands of *Wurzelmann*, the God of Deep Roots, and from the trees’ iron-hard trunks, (no god), before they could plant their crops and raise their cattle.

In addition, for many centuries the individual central continental sub-tribes were repeatedly and relentlessly pitted against each other by their leaders, forced to fight bloody and brutal wars over land, faiths, riches, and power.

The years went by, and these harsh natural conditions and man-made trials and tribulations began to forge a certain type of mind in this

scattered collection of sub-tribes. Disillusion, nihilism, and the sheer stubbornness to overcome any hardships by simply carrying on, no matter what, culminated in a cross-tribal shift towards stoicism, coupled with a good dose of cynicism and sarcasm. Which is by no means to say that they didn't abundantly enjoy the produce of their lands. These people never lost their zest for life and laughter and happily enjoyed with all their hearts the rich gifts that the fertile land brought to their tables.

In the westerly territory of the tribe, they excelled at producing fine white wine, while in the south they brewed the strongest and tastiest beers. And all over the land, the central tribe's bakers became masters of baking a wide variety of breads, rolls, pastries, and pretzel – from bacon-and-onion bread to potato bread, black beer rolls and beetroot bread, poppy-seed strudel and steamed dumplings, bread cherry casseroles and cheese pretzel pastries (topped with melted cheese), and from matcha croissants to chilli chocolate bread and the occasional seasonal pumpkin rolls.

As a people who had become quite inventive out of pure necessity, the *Zentrumsstamm* also came up with countless culinary variations of a pork-based diet. For instance, their butchers stuffed minced pork into cleaned sheep intestines for the cook to then grill them, and the people would eat these so-called „Würste“ with oven-fresh bread rolls and medium-hot mustard. And they invented the „Schnitzel“.

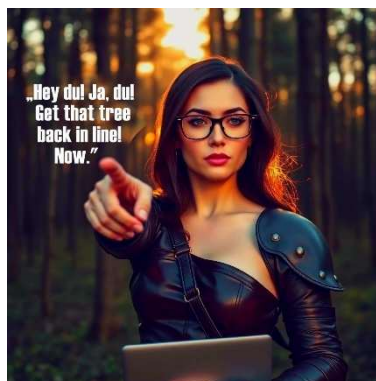
During most of the tribes history, however, the food on the wooden tables of the common people was rather sparse and bland, consisting mainly of porridge made from oats, millet, barley or rye, as well as of peas, beans, and lentils. Before the introduction of potatoes after 1500 AD, the main course ingredients for lunch and dinner meals were often cabbage, turnips, parsnips, onions, and leeks.

This healthy diet was washed down with „Dünnbier“, (Thin Beer), a daily drink with a low alcohol content drunk even by children, because water was often unclean. While some cities all over Europe during the High Middle Ages in the 10th to 12th centuries actually repaired some of their Roman aqueducts, thus ensuring a relatively stable supply of potable water, other cities, like Paris or Frankfurt, were far longer dependent on river and well water, which was often not “clean” in today's sense.

In short, it wasn't an easy life for most members of the dozens of small, medium-sized, and large national territories into which the *Zentrumstamm* was forced to divide itself for most of its history.

It is „kein Wunder“ therefore that this challenging environment not only forged a kind of people with no-nonsense minds, but that these living conditions also began to shape the unique traits of the sub-tribes' shared language.

Out of necessity, and presumably to a certain degree also by deliberate design, the people of the *Zentrumsstamm* ultimately decided to prioritise detail over decoration, nuance over nicety and precision over prettiness in their language.



In doing so, however, the language's large community also abandoned any pretensions that their language might ever win the hearts and admiration of foreign visitors. Instead, they chose to assign a unique and precise meaning to the different inflections of individual letters and syllables.

Willing to pay the price for ugliness, our central continental tribe then perfected this transmission of additional information through intonation and inflection, hard-to-hear pitch changes and almost imperceptible micropauses – culminating in a language that foreigners from the north, south, east, and west of the globe unanimously judged to be perhaps the coarsest and most unmelodious tongue they ever had the misfortune to hear.

While this alone would already have been enough to shatter the confidence of any less hard-headed tribe – but not this one – these same foreigners then also commented with horror on the terribly complicated and ridiculously nitpicky grammar of the central tribe's lingo. However, the tribespeople couldn't care less and stuck with their extra-nerdy language throughout history, right up to the present day. And all spoke happily ever after.

THE END.

(P.S. Of course, this is all just a theory. So, back right off, linguists and historians with a penchant for nitpicking on the internet. Much obliged.)

While the finer historical details may still be open to debate, (to say the least), the core message of this fairy tale nevertheless remains firmly grounded: German is a “precision language”, and this fact is also reflected in its pronunciation rules.

But what does this mean now in detail and in practice? Well, time to strap in and get ready to unearth the well-kept secrets of German pronunciation, the mystery of intonations, the nuances of German inflection, and the sometimes deadly, (alright, not quite, but certainly precarious), traps of German accentuations.

Just one last thing that might be useful to know before you start straining your vocal cords: German shares many of the same barbed tonality hooks with its Germanic cousins Dutch, Danish, Flemish, Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic, and yes, to a certain extent also with its slightly more distant relative English. So, if you already speak one or more of these languages fluently, you may find that your previous stress training means that you're less likely to torture your throat.

However, if your mother tongue is Latin-derived, you'd better stock up on some throat lozenges. And with that happy thought in mind, let's dive in.

Life-Altering Pitches and Pauses

First, a quick question for you: How tone-deaf do you think you are? Would you say you're as bad as famously inept amateur singers like Paris Hilton, James Franco or Kelly Osbourne? Or do you even reach the same heights of musical illiteracy as the American “Diva of False Notes”

and “Queen of Dissonance”, *Florence Foster Jenkins* (1868–1944)?

Let's hope, for the sake of your friends at your next karaoke night, that you can answer these last two questions firmly in the negative and that you have at least an average ear for harmony and dissonance. Because this would mean that you can also differentiate between different vocal changes, pitches and speech inflections. A fundamental prerequisite for conversing in German – and this not only (but also) for distinguishing between an “O”- and an “Ö”-sound.

Without this minimum requirement of a reasonably sensitive ear, however, the next part of this chapter may well pass you by like an *ICE* (*InterCity Express*) train whizzing through your local station at 300 km/h on a moonless night. But for the sake of argument, let's assume that you have a good ear for nuance. And let's further assume that you are aware of the fact that the term “tone-deaf” can refer to someone born without a “musical ear as well as to someone who displays a marked lack of intuitive empathy — in other words, someone who simply “can't read the room”.

Now, if you fulfil all these prerequisites, you will quickly discover that there is hardly any other language in which these two meanings of the term “tone-deaf” overlap as much as they do in German – and to varying lesser degrees also in its European linguistic cousins.

Hence, it's not an exaggeration to claim that in German the slightest change in the stress of a letter or syllable can transform a phrase from relaxed agreement to urgent pleading, from pronounced disinterest to eager attention, or from a friendly suggestion to a harsh command. And, as you will see, in extreme cases such shifts in tonality can even turn the meaning of a word completely upside down, with far-reaching consequences.

“That's a bold claim,” you might be thinking now. *“And, as everyone knows, bold claims require bold evidence.”*

And you'd be right, of course.

“Anyway,” you might then continue, *“my language does exactly the same thing. In fact, every language does that!”*

Well, perhaps, perhaps not. Make up your own mind afterwards, I'd suggest. But now please keep mum for a moment, because here comes the “bold evidence” you requested.

So, let's start on easy mode and take the ubiquitous German word „*Bitte*”. Chances are, of course, that you are already familiar with this term, either through linguistic osmosis during your time in Germany or because you learnt early on at language school that „*bitte*” is the German equivalent of “please”.

But naturally, it isn't quite that simple. Depending on the emphasis placed on different parts of this two-syllable word by changes in pitch, vowel length and hardening of consonants, the meaning of „*bitte*” changes considerably, often deviating entirely from its original connotation. This is why, depending on syllable and letter inflection, you will get the following distinctly different interpretations of the word:

Table: The Ridiculously Many Meanings of „Bitte“

German	English
Bitte?	Pardon?
Bitte?	Yes, would you please?
Bitte!?	Are you stupid or what?
Bitte?	Seriously?
Bitte!	Pretty please!
Bitte!	Now, for the last time!
Bitte!	Oh, come on!
Bitte.	You're welcome.
Bitte.	Take a seat.
Bitte.	After you.
Bitte!	God, you're useless!
Bitte!	There you go!
Bitte.	Sure, go for it.
Bitte.	Yes, please.
Bitte, bitte!	Please do / don't!
Bitte...?	Yes, I did sleep with your sister. But I still love you. Can't we move past this?



As mentioned above, to varying degrees German's cousins of English, Dutch, Flemish, and the Scandinavian languages can claim similar subtleties of intonation, while Italian surpasses German even in

its variety of uses of the „Bitte“-equivalent of *“prego”*. On the other hand, the Italian language also knows specific expressions for some situations in which you'd mainly use „Bitte“ in German, for instance:

- **“Per piacere?”** = “Please?”; “I ask you.”
- **“Come?”** = [ˈkɔːmɛ], “Pardon?”
- **“Prego”** = “You're welcome”; “Please”; “Excuse me?”; “Go for it”; ...
- **“Eccoli qua”** = “There you go.”
- **“Insomma!”** = “I mean, really!”
- **“Per cortesia!”** = “If you please!”

Just like the Italians with *“prego”*, so do German-speakers not only express a wide variety of meanings with the single word „Bitte“, but also understand the different meanings based on their specific intonations. (Admittedly, though, this may not apply to the last „Bitte“ on the above list – although, there is always a non-zero chance, of course.)

But now on to the “heavy hitters”, where German leaves his “bros” English, Dutch, and Flemish as well as his Scandinavian “buddies” Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic thoroughly in the dust. With the first example below certainly being the undisputed champion in any roster of examples of “bold evidence” for the importance of correct

German intonation.

So, here it is, the one German word that can change its meaning more drastically than any other verb, simply depending on where the stress is placed on its syllables.



Looks like two completely identical sentences, no? And yet, by using the sentence on top, where you put the emphasis in the word „**umfahren**“ on the root verb, i.e., „umfahren“, you express a strict order to your chauffeur to “drive around the children!”. („Achtung! Die Kinder umfahren!“ = “Watch out! Drive around the children!”).

When you utter the sentence below, however, where you place your emphasis on the first syllable, „umfahren“, you are giving your driver the unequivocal command to “run over the children!”. („Hey, komm, lass uns die Kinder umfahren!“ = “Hey, come on, let’s knock these kids down!”).

By the way, words like this are called “Janus-words”, after the Roman god of beginnings and endings who had two faces, looking forwards and backwards, thus earning himself also the epithets *Geminus* (“the Double”) and *Bifrons* (“the Two-Faced”).

And yes, Romance languages like French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish or Romanian can boast a limited number of *Janus-words* as well, especially in the areas of “guest/host” (*hôte*; *ospite*; *huésped*; *gazdă*), “renting/letting” (*alquilar*; *alugar*; *affittare*), and “learning/teaching” (*apprendre*; *învăța*; *aprender alt.*). However, they all change their meaning depending on context – not on intonation, i.e., syllable-stresses.

English also has quite a lot of these so-called “*contronyms*”, words with opposite meanings depending on the context. For instance, “to dust” = “to remove dust” or “to sprinkle with dust”; or “to sanction” = “to approve” or “to punish”; and “to cleave” = “to split” or “to adhere”. But again, the meaning depends on context, not emphasis.

Dutch and Flemish, on the other hand, usually use different prefixes to make a clear distinction between closely related words, for example “*omrijden*” = “to take a detour” / “to drive around” in the sense of avoiding, and “*omverrijden*” = “to run over”.

The North Germanic languages also tend to form clearer compounds, like Swedish, where “*köra om*” means “to overtake” while “*köra över*” means “to run over”. In Danish, people say “*køre udenom*” for “to drive around” and “*køre ned*” for “to run over”. Here, the two meanings – which in German are packed into the same word „*umfahren*”

– become separated by different particles. Icelandic is particularly precise in this regard, where they say “*aka hjá*” for “to drive past / to drive around” and “*aka yfir*” for “to run over”.

But while „*umfahren*” is certainly the most outrageous example, it is not the only “*Janus*”-verb in German that changes its meaning solely by stressing different parts of the word. Here are some other examples:

- „*übersetzen*” – When stressed like this: „*übersetzen*”, it means “to translate something into another language”, and it is an inseparable verb, e.g. „*Ich übersetze das Buch*” = “I translate the book”. However, stressed like this: „*übersetzen*”, it becomes a very specific term meaning: “to take something or someone to the other side of the river or channel by ferry/boat”, and it becomes a separable verb, e.g. „*Ich setze über den Fluss*” = “I cross the river (by boat)”



- „*umstellen*” – When stressing the first syllable, i.e., „*umstellen*”, you mean “to rearrange something” or “to place it differently”, for instance if you want to reorientate your bed according to Feng Shui rules. That’s a separable verb then, e.g. „*Ich stelle mein Bett und meinen Schrank um*” = “I rearrange my bed and my wardrobe”.

But if you instead say „*umstellen*”, stressing the root verb, you are usually a commander on the battlefield ordering your troops to “surround something/someone”. In this case, you’d probably mean “to encircle” the reconnaissance team of the enemy army. Then, it becomes an inseparable verb, like in the sentence: „*Geben Sie auf, Sie sind umstellt!*” = “Give up, you're surrounded!”

- „*unterstellen*” – With the first syllable stressed, i.e., „*unterstellen*”, you want “to place something underneath something and to bring it to safety”. Usually, Germans use this word in a specific situation, namely when they are surprised by a sudden rainfall and look for an overhanging roof or an awning where they can quickly „*unterstellen*” themselves. Literally, it then means: “to stand yourself under”. This is a separable verb, like in the sentence: „*Es regnet. Ich stelle mich bei der Ladenmarkise dort unter.*” = “It's raining. I'll stand under the shop awning over there”.

However, the word’s meaning changes drastically when you emphasize the root verb by saying „*unterstellen*”. Because then you are talking about “insinuating something about a person” or “to accuse someone without proof of some misdeed”. This is an inseparable verb, like in the sentence: „*Was unterstellst du mir!?*” = “What are you implying about me?”

Furthermore, you also have a third meaning of this word,

pronounced in the same way as in the second definition, i.e. „unterstellen“, but meaning instead: “to subordinate someone to someone or something”, like when a Colonel has to remind a Captain one more time: „*Herr Hauptmann, muss ich Sie nochmals daran erinnern, dass Sie mir unterstellt sind!?*” = “Captain, must I remind you once again that you are subordinate to me!?”

- „durchschauen” – By putting an emphasis on the first syllable, (which can also serve on its own as a preposition, then meaning “through”), thus pronouncing the word like this: „durchschauen”, you indicate that someone is “looking through something”. This is a separable verb and thus used like this: „*Erst schaue ich durch das Fenster und dann schaue ich durch das Fernglas in das Schlafzimmer meiner schönen Nachbarin*”. = “First I look through the window, then I look through the binoculars into my beautiful neighbour's bedroom”, (you lecher).

When instead you're stressing the root verb, i.e., “durchschauen”, then it also has the meaning of “to see through” – however, only in a certain way, because in this case you're seeing through the lies or deceits of a person, that is, you see their true character and intentions, e.g. „*Ich durchschaue dich!*” – “I see right through you!”

Less often, this second meaning of this inseparable verb is also used to indicate that you “got it”, that you understand a difficult task, puzzle, or problem. E.g. „*Ich hab' die Materie für die Physik-Prüfung endlich durchschaut!*” = “I've finally understood the material for the physics exam!”

- „durchsetzen” – Accentuate the root verb, „durchsetzen”, and you talk about “permeating something with something else”, like permeating a fabric with colour or permeating your cooky dough with raisins, (you fool). This is an inseparable verb, like in: „*Die Kekse sind mit Rosinen durchsetzt*” = “The biscuits are studded with raisins”.

However, when instead you stress the first syllable, i.e. “durchsetzen”, then you “assert something”, e.g. your opinion, your demand, or yourself against nagging Aunty Melinda. For example: „*Ich setze mich gegen Tante Melinda durch!*” = “I'm standing up to Aunt Melinda!”

- „übergehen” – If you say, „*Mein Freund will mich immer übergehen, wenn wir in der Gruppe diskutieren*”, then you use the term as an inseparable verb to mean: „My friend always wants to ‘ignore me / to pass me over’, when we discuss in a group”.

However, used as a separable verb, you may say: „*Das alte Jahr geht klanglos in das neue über*”, stating that: “The old year is quietly ‘transitioning’ or ‘merging’ into the new one.”

You see, correct German intonation can indeed be a matter of life or death – hypothetically, at least. So, before you dismiss the subtleties of German intonation next time, pause for a few seconds and think of all the innocent German children on the streets right now, who are unaware of

the constant mortal danger they face just because some foreign visitors might mispronounce a word while giving their taxi driver an order. Such potential tragedies ... And all because you thought to ignore the correct pronunciation of a word. You callous monster.

But seriously now. This extremely unlikely example of potentially flattened children hopefully makes it clear that incorrect syllable or letter accentuations, omissions, or lack of emphasis can rapidly result in misunderstandings, whether minor or major.

Unfortunately, though, differentiated syllable stresses are only one piece of the German pronunciation puzzle. Equally important are the so-called micropauses – the very short pauses you insert between syllables or words while speaking; often just a quick breath in a fraction of a second. (In contrast to macro pauses, which are longer, conscious breaks, e.g. between sentences or thoughts). When micropauses appear between the individual syllables of a word, they are also called “*syllable boundaries*”.

In English, a micropause is typically inserted wherever a comma, semicolon or full stop would appear in writing. Just like in German, where the same thing happens. So far, so easy. However, due to the numerous variations in pronouns across the four grammatical cases as well as the direct and indirect articles and dozens of adjective-, noun-, and verb-endings — not to mention the countless compound nouns, verbs, and adjectives — German-speakers must pay far closer attention to the precise placement of *syllable boundaries* within words as well as micropauses between them than speakers of many other languages.

For example, tiny gaps exist also between the individual parts of compound nouns; these micropauses are usually even shorter than those between single words. They’re so minuscule, in fact, that they’re more felt than heard through micro-inflections, but they’re still noticeable to a German-speaking listener. As an ardent scholar of German phraseology, you will therefore never pronounce a compound word “all in one go”, i.e. rushing through the syllables as if an *ICE* train is thundering through your local station at midnight at 300 km/h, (this time in the other direction). Instead, you need to allow each individual word and syllable of a compound its own tiny micropause.

Now, let's up the ante another notch. It is usually comparatively easy to recognise the individual parts of a compound word and place your micropauses accordingly. However, it's a different matter entirely to maintain the same discipline and precision with syllable boundaries and micropauses when syllables can be either the last part of word A or the first part of adjacent word B.

In written German there's no problem, of course. When spoken, however, the length of your micropause can make all the difference. German shares this trait with many other languages, and their native speakers can surely provide similar examples to the one below, which shows what can happen if you move the micropause by just one syllable.



The sentence on the left reads: „*Wir beenden diese Lektion*“, (~Veer be'and'en dee'se lek'tsion) which translates to: “We're finishing this lesson”. A phrase that is typically uttered by teachers all over the world when they end their lesson, already looking forward to the spiked coffee in the staff room and safe in the knowledge that their pupils are happily rushing home.

In comparison, the sentence on the right reads: „*Wir beenden die Selektion*“, meaning: “We're terminating the selection.” And, as you'll probably agree, that's not a pleasant sentence in any language, and certainly not in German.

So, if you move your micropause between „*diese*” and „*Lektion*”, you'd merely be saying what any teacher would say after making it through another lesson with the dreaded Class 3A. On the other hand, micro-pausing between the syllables „*die-*” and „*Se-*” would instantly transform you either into a callous scientist completing the selection of his latest batch of lab rats – or someone with far darker intentions.

Warning! Swallowing Letters can lead to Circumcision

Now we come to the last and most important piece of the German intonation-jigsaw, which supersedes even the accurate use of differentiated syllable-stresses and -boundaries and carefully placed micropauses.

First, though, I'll let you in on a little secret. “Anonymous sources” close to the German-teaching community have credibly revealed that there appears to exist an almost timeless tendency among new German-students to frequently omit or “swallow” last letters and entire endings of German words and don't give a damn about the consequences of their reckless negligence.

Only after having been cornered in their language schools' kitchenettes and after having been relentlessly pressed under threat of toilet-and coffee-break cancellation did an undisclosed number of mercilessly interrogated German-students finally divulge the true reasons behind such persistent obstinance.

After their desperate pleas for being allowed to explain themselves in English had been thoroughly denied, the trapped little mice confessed sobbingly that they committed the crime of word-endings-omission either because they were plain and simple too lazy to bother, (lower percentage; higher penalty), or that they felt trapped in a vice-like grip of uncertainty and indecision in the face of the countless grammatical forms and endings of German adjectives, nouns, verbs, pronouns, and

articles, (higher percentage; lower penalty).

A fictional scenario? Well, who knows. But what certainly isn't a made-up story, but the naked truth is that many students from the latter group follow the motto: *"Better say nothing than the wrong thing"*.

Many decided for themselves that this little "trick" of simply falling silent or mumbling incomprehensibly at a German word's ending would be a viable option for low-key comfortably wiggling through their daily life in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. *"And anyway, ev-er-y-bo-dy in Germany speaks English anyway!"*, right?

Well, to be fair, cutting corners is an obvious idea and one that anyone would come up with in similar situations. After all, the Turkish in Germany have made it something of their trademark to use only one definite article (usually „die“) when speaking in German – and they also get away with it. *"So why not just leave out these damn word endings and cut corners?"*, many German-students consequently ask themselves. In fact, some of them even get so good at it that they have turned the "chewing and swallowing" of German word-endings almost into a fine art.

Unfortunately for these mumbling-artists, and as you have probably already noticed, the German language-beast is neither lenient nor forgiving when it comes to pronunciation. As such, it doesn't suffer mumblers and grumblers lightly – And no, not *"ev-er-y-bo-dy"* speaks English in Germany, (in fact, about 43% don't speak or understand much more than "yes", "no", and "toilet").



And while the Turko-German habit of simply ignoring the different German gender articles and grammatical cases has a long tradition and is now almost expected, omitting gender- and case-defining word endings is an entirely different grammatical calibre with which to shoot yourself in the foot.

Conveniently "forgetting" to pronounce German word endings or routinely "swallowing" end-syllables just doesn't cut it, sorry to say. By ignoring the Golden Rule of correct German pronunciation, mumblers will only make their speech (at least partially) incomprehensible. And if someone now claims, *"Come on, we do that all the time in my mother tongue!"*, then, well, good for them. Welcome to Germany and enjoy.

A common objection to this strict regime, or rather an excuse that some students use to justify their actions, is that *"my German-speaking counterpart will surely somehow be able to work out what I'm trying to say!"*.

Sure, they usually will. The decisive word being *"somehow"*. Put bluntly, anyone who thinks like this is an egoist who has no problem burdening their conversation partner with all the mental gymnastics and tedious work involved in a conversation. While these students are happily

chatting away in semi-comprehensible German, their German conversation partner needs to constantly guess, rearrange, interpret and fix their sentences in their mind. After five minutes at the latest, you can bet that they'll either turn to someone else to talk to or simply go out into the garden to water the squirrels.

Another frequently heard comment is: *“Germans shouldn’t make such a fuss over the odd letter or ending. They’re just narrow-minded and xenophobic!”*

True, some Germans are narrow-minded. And a certain minority is also somewhat or even extremely xenophobic, depending on how you define the term. All this, however, has nothing to do with the way most Germans will act when they have to listen to your longer monologue in “broken” German during your new German friend’s BBQ-garden party.

Most of the German guests from all walks of life that you will encounter will likely just continue to nod and smile politely. However, their eyes will soon take on an unfocused thousand-yard stare and eventually they will start looking around furtively for someone else to talk to. Others again will start shaking their head slightly after some time, while their initial smile slowly transforms into a frown.

Some will initially ask you: *„Wie bitte?“* (“Pardon?”) after every second sentence, before quickly switching to the brisker *„Was?“* (“What?”) and will finally correct your mistakes under their breath. Then they’ll deliberately spill red wine on their summer dress, excuse themselves, and head to the bathroom to never come back. And one in a hundred will simply nod and smile at you before crouching down to play with the thirsty squirrels around their feet.

But why will they all react in this way, instead of being “foreigner-friendly” and “open-minded” conversation partners, who listen avidly to your grammatical mistakes and smile through the resulting gaps in your conversation? Well, here we inevitably return to the fundamental principle of the German language: “Transferring the maximum amount of information with the minimum amount of effort”.

In other words, you need precision in pronunciation when one letter at the end of a word can mean the difference between the squirrels either starting to run onto the dinner table (*“auf den Esstisch”*) or are already running along it (*“auf dem Esstisch”*).

Okay, this is a comparatively harmless example. But what if the omission of a single letter at the end of a word suddenly causes your conversation partner to draw a shocked and horrified face, because you have apparently just unwittingly confessed your dark and bloodthirsty fantasy of forcibly circumcising all conservative German men?

“Now wait a second!”, you might interject at this point. *“This just sounds too exaggerated. You mean, I forget to pronounce one single letter and poof! – A simple sentence turns into such a bloodthirsty fantasy!? No way, José!”*

Uhm, yes way, sorry to say. Cast your glance at the example below and then ask yourself, whether calling the potential outcome of this letter-omission “grim” is an understatement or even lets you visibly flinch – well, at least if you are an uncircumcised male and haven’t planned to get your

little friend's protective beanie cut off anytime soon.

So, the two identical images below show almost identical headlines. But only one appeared in the German tabloid *BILD* during the global Corona pandemic (2020 – 2023).

The second image is shown with the original headline as it appeared in the paper. The top image, however, presents a doctored headline, with the letter “r” photoshopped out at the end of the second word. Now, the interesting part comes with the translations beneath each image, revealing the very different meanings of the two headlines.



Whether you quietly approve of forced circumcisions of politically right-leaning and unvaccinated German men or whether you oppose such a strangely specific and quite radical punishment for not getting “the jab” – that’s of course up to you. You do you. However, you can be sure that uncircumcised conservative German men everywhere would be overjoyed to learn that their little beanie has narrowly escaped the scalpel by a hair’s breadth only thanks to the little letter “r” at the end of the word *Ungeimpfter*, (ˈʊnˈɡeˈeɪmfˈtɐ).

In the face of such a drastic change in meaning, caused by the careless omission of one single letter, certain questions naturally arise, such as: “*Why is this a thing? What is going on with this mad German grammar?*” and, of course, “*Are you out of your effing minds, you crazy Germans!?*”

Well, the answer to the first two questions is simply: Of course this is “a thing”, because it is once again all down to the overarching philosophy of the German language: “*Maximum information with minimum effort*”. Which in consequence also provides the answer to the third question. No.

Sorry, what? You're not satisfied with this short answer? Allright, then why don't we take the headline apart piece by piece, starting by dissecting the terminology of each word in the sentence.

- a) In German, the term **Rechte** (~rech'te) can be a proper plural noun meaning “legal rights”. But it can *also* be a declined adjective meaning “right-wing”. (Part of the confusion ensues from the fact that here „Rechte” is the first word in the sentence and therefore is written with a capital “R”. While all nouns are spelled with a capital first letter in German, adjectives and all other word-types are not – unless they are the first word in a sentence. So, in this case, the word „Rechte” could be a noun or an adjective, depending on the rest of the sentence.)
- b) The word **Ungeimpfte/r** is a substantivated adjective, (aka a noun, thus with a capital first letter), meaning “unvaccinated [people]”.
- c) The word **werden** is a verb that means, “to become”, or “will [be]”.
- d) The word **beschnitten** (~beh'shnitt'en) is the past participle of the verb „beschneiden”, which can either mean “to curtail” or “to circumcise”, (a double meaning that accounts for the rest of the confusion.)

The Original Headline

Now that this is clear, let's turn our attention to the ominous letter “r”. To make it as short as possible, (but as long as necessary), the “r” at the end of the word „Ungeimpfter” (as in the original headline) indicates that the word here is in the *Genitiv*, the German grammatical case used exclusively to express “belonging”, “possession” or “ownership” (as in “the legal rights of the unvaccinated [people]”), except you don't need the equivalent of the English “of” in the genitive case in German, since the genitive ending (and/or the article) of the word already has the meaning of “of”.

So, a brain in German mode will automatically look for the “thing” that the unvaccinated {people} “own” or “possess”. Conveniently, there is only one “thing” in the headline that could be “owned”: The “legal rights” (of the unvaccinated [people]). All taken together, this headline tells the reader therefore that the government is going to “curtail the legal rights of the unvaccinated”. Shocker, I know.

The Doctored Headline

But why will deleting the letter “r” from „Ungeimpfter” make your (potentially) darkest fantasies come true? Well, without the “r” at the end, the noun „Ungeimpfte” is now in the grammatical plural nominative case, (the “basic” case, whose primary function it is to simply identify the subject, i.e., the person or thing that’s the “acting part” in a sentence).

A brain's German operating system now automatically recognises the word „Rechte” not as a noun but as a descriptive adjective referring to the only noun left, namely „Ungeimpfte”, and concludes that the only logically possible meaning must be “right-wing unvaccinated [people]”.

At the same time, the change of the word „*Rechte*“ from a noun into an adjective also requires the logical shift of the meaning of the verb „*beschnitten*“ from "to be cut" to "to be circumcised", since the verb (the "action") can now only refer to the only noun left, which is, of course, „*Ungeimpfte*“. A brain's German OS will henceforth interpret the verb „*beschnitten*“ in the only way logically possible when applied to persons, i.e. in its meaning of "circumcised".

And just like that, the headline now declares alarmingly that the government is about to circumcise all unvaccinated people (well, men) who hold conservative political beliefs. So, as you can see, there is a finely tuned method to the apparent madness of German grammar and its subsequent pronunciation.

But don't worry if you're feeling a bit confused about the whole thing with *Nominativ*, *Genitiv* and the other grammatical cases. Even the most seasoned German language learners will admit to having grappled with the Four Horsemen of the "Grammatocalypse" for a good while.

At the moment, the most important thing for you to take away from this headline-hoax about former Chancellor Angela Merkel's "sinister circumcision plans" is that you will need to install an alarm system in your German-language brain that will immediately start shrieking whenever you lazily or timidly omit a letter or sound at the end of a German word. Because, as you've now seen, the German language loves to dish out immediate consequences for sloppy pronunciation.

And naturally, this doesn't only apply to omitted letter-sounds but also to the slurred or unclear pronunciation of entire words or syllables and endings in general — especially if they sound similar to another syllable or letter.

Imagine, for example, you're boarding your holiday flight with your friends, and you're greeted by the purser and the pilot at the door. You'd then whisper to your seat neighbour: „*Ich fliege auf den Piloten!*“ ("I fancy that pilot!"), which would earn you a knowing grin from your BFF.

However, if you'd say instead: „*Ich fliege auf dem Piloten!*“ ("I'm flying on this pilot!"), it would get you instead a confused look by your ex-BFF, (who assumes you've lost too many braincells), and would brand you the odd one out for the rest of the holiday.

Or let's say, you are out for a forest walk with some of your friends and turn to them to let them know: „*Ganz schön schwül hier!*“, meaning "Pretty humid here!", thus making an innocuous comment about the humidity in the air.

However, if you'd turn around and say instead: „*Ganz schön schwul hier!*“, then you'd just let your friends know that you find your entire outing and surrounding "Pretty gay!", clearly disapproving of the homoerotic vibes in the air.

The Single Sounds: “Move your Mouth, *Mensch!*”



All this said, it would be understandable if you'd now say: *“OK, proper pronunciation is important. But what if I simply can't produce these outlandish German sounds that resemble a cat mating with a snake on a pile of scrap metal?”*

Well, thankfully, that's an easy one. As you know, every

human being is born with the same tools for producing vocal sounds: lips, tongue, palate, teeth, and vocal cords. Assuming you are a human being, this means that with a little practice, you have all the tools necessary to produce the strange sounds at the heart of spoken German.

Sure, some German-students may be shocked by their first ear-full of native Germans talking in German with each other and, after overcoming their initial shock, may decide to "preserve their dignity" by refusing to make any of those "embarrassing sounds" or "ridiculous mouth movements" when speaking German. However, these aesthetically inclined individuals should be reminded that ultimately, *“Resistance is futile”*, (quote: *Borg 4-of-9 of Unimatrix Zero*).

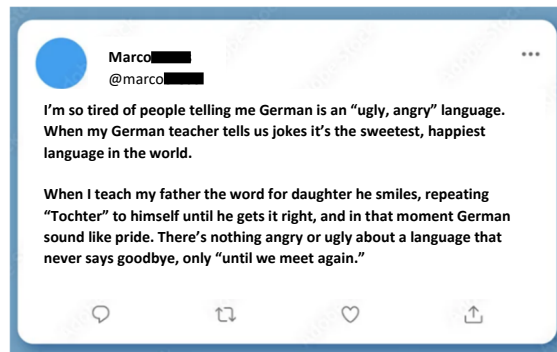
In fact, learning German and then trying to evade the core elements of spoken German is as illogical as signing up for a diving course and then refusing to go into the water. It's simply daft, *Mensch!* (i.e. “man!”, “stupid!”, or “dude!”).

As jarring as it may be, aesthetes must simply come to terms with the fact that German is, and always will be, somewhat of an “opera language”. Just as opera singers often need to open their mouths wide, move their lips in sometimes comical ways and over-pronounce certain sounds, proper German-speakers often have to strain their facial muscles more than speakers of other European languages and emphasise certain sounds more strongly than might seem “necessary” to native speakers of other languages.

But for those who are still on the fence about this matter, it may be helpful to remember that around 100 million people in the world are never embarrassed to speak German. They open their mouths wider than just to fit a Pumpkin Spice Latte straw between their lips, and they are not ashamed to hiss like an irritated cobra who got stepped on its tail or to bellow like a dragon who just discovered a dwarf invasion in its treasure cave.

In other words, what sounds like a living nightmare to you that is growling from the darkest pits of hell straight into your ear is just birdsong on a sunny Sunday morning to any German-speaker — provided the words are pronounced correctly.

But don't take my word for it. Instead, maybe this post from the social media platform Twitter™ (now X™) convinces you, whose author beautifully defends the misunderstood true nature of the “Spoken German Language”:



Nonetheless, around this point in the discussion, usually some German-student who has visited more than one federal state in Germany and has read up on German regional dialects, will inevitably pipe up to ask the killer question, the “final boss” in the battle between “proper pronunciation” and “cutting corners to avoid sounding German”.

So, he or she will go: *“Hang on a minute! And what about all those ‘lazy’ German dialects? The ones that replace all the hard consonants with soft ones, for example, and tend to drop entire syllables or even words seemingly at random. Why can’t we speak like that and still be understood?”*

And granted, that’s a good question. The answer to it is a bit longer and actually twofold – and you’re not going to like either part very much, I’m afraid.

So, why indeed should you first learn how to move your tongue, lips, and vocal cords properly in Standard High German before you may allow your mouth a well-deserved rest by learning how to slur your words in a chosen dialect?

The first section of the answer is divided into three parts. For one, contrary to a common misconception, also dialects have clearly defined pronunciation rules and aren’t just a bunch of words pronounced at random. Learning a German dialect with all its intricate rules and specific sounds will therefore be harder, not easier, than learning standard German.

For another, any half-hearted attempts to ingratiate yourself with the locals by poorly imitating their dialect can easily backfire, since you may quickly be perceived as someone who is trying to take the piss out of the natives.

Finally, speaking a dialect in a modern German business environment is still often considered a major *faux pas*, likely to quickly label you as less educated, unprofessional, and even dumb. Yes, that’s a “dialectist” sentiment, but hey, it is what it is.

The second part of the answer to why you can’t simply talk in a “lazy” dialect relates to another common misconception. People often believe that dialects are the precursors of Standard High German, as if dialects were somehow the “dumbed down” earlier versions of modern High German that don’t demand the same high standards of pronunciation precision and grammatical correctness.

Unfortunately for all short-cut-seekers, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Modern standard German (High German) did not develop from a single dialect but evolved as a compromise language from

various Central German and Upper German varieties, having been helped along by Martin Luther, the Chancery languages, Philipp von Zesen, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to name but a few.

Furthermore, dialects kept developing in parallel and are therefore not merely older or simpler forms of High German but have the same roots in older stages of the language, e.g. Old High German, Middle High German, and Early New High German. Which means, dialects and standard High German have common ancestors, but dialects are not “incomplete precursors” of High German.

From this it is easily deduced that naturally dialects also have their own phonetic and grammatical developments, with many dialects having features that Standard High German never adopted – for example the Bavarian „*mia san*” instead of „*wir sind*” (“we are”) or the Alemannic „*Chind*” instead of „*Kind*” (“child”). And because High German exhibits numerous standardisations and “compromises” that aren’t found in any individual dialect, learning a dialect also often means to start from scratch without relying on already internalised High German rules or pronunciations.

In a nutshell, dialects spoken today are by no means “old-fashioned versions” of standard High German, but much rather contemporary forms of the language and just as modern as Standard High German. As different forms of the same language family, German dialects are therefore just as easy or hard to learn as Standard High German.

So, best look at German dialects rather as the refined essences of more than two thousand years of continuous linguistic development, comparable to high-proof moonshine that each German dialect tribe has carefully distilled to produce its own unique dialect flavour, derived from the rich pulp of history. Hence, before you start to take a hearty gulp from one of these tongue-twisting concoctions, you may want to first lay the groundwork and familiarise yourself with its individual ingredients and recipes, then slowly work your way up with increasingly potent doses, until you can stomach, as well as regurgitate, your chosen hefty brew of, let’s say, Bavarian, Swabian, Hessian, or Saxon.

The German Sounds for Sounding German

Now that you know why learning proper pronunciation is essential to speaking German, the next logical step is, of course, to find out how you can master the correct pronunciation of these hellishly coarse sounds that make up a good portion of the spoken German language.

The answer to this question can be summed up in three simple words: First, practice. Second, practice. And third, yes, practice.

Your daily life in Austria, Switzerland or Germany should therefore be filled with listening to spoken German whenever you get the chance. Whether that means leaving the TV on in the background while you iron your jeans with proper creases, listening to the radio or a podcast with half an ear on your way to work, or keeping your ears peeled for conversations between German-speakers when you are out and about.



For example, you could eavesdrop on the conversation of the two older ladies in front of you in the queue at the local bakery. Or you could discreetly observe the expert use of German insults by the arguing couple at the next table in your favourite restaurant. Or you could discreetly listen to the gaggle of teenagers on the bus bragging about their latest amorous conquests while eloquently deflecting

any inquisitive follow-up questions.

Wherever you may start your eavesdropping missions, though, don't worry if you don't understand all the German words and phrases, or even anything at all, (at least not at first). Because that's not your initial goal. All you will want to be doing is exposing your newly developing grey “German” cells to the sounds of the German language and programming your brain to recognise and imitate these sounds.

Once you're back at home or in your car or walking along the riverbanks in your city, take the time to practise your German pronunciation in solitude, imitating the sounds you've just picked up from the chattering old ladies, the arguing couple, or the fibbing teenagers, until you feel comfortable with all the croaks, hisses, whooshes, and growls that will eventually make you sound truly German.

Alright, now let's get down to practical business. Since this isn't an audio book, podcast or YouTube™ video with voice samples, what you'll find below is a comprehensive written list of German vowels, umlauts and consonants, along with the English approximation of the vocal sound each letter makes in German. Fortunately for all students of German, and unlike the *ghoti*-prone English language, each German letter and letter combination produces only one specific sound, which remains the same regardless of where you encounter the letter(s) in a word.

The same is true for the second table below, listing every relevant German two- or three-letter combination. You can use these tables as a starting point, although they won't replace your mission to eavesdrop on the two gossiping old ladies in the bakery, of course. However, they should be enough to get you started. So, close the door and start articulating.

Table: The German Vowels

German Vowel	Spoken sound approx. like the English:
A	open A like in Mars
E	sonorous long E like in Esther
I	long E-sound like in Bee
O	open O like in Hotel
U	long O-sound like in Moon
Ä	nasal AI-sound like in Fair
Ö	nasal O-sound like in Work
Ü	weird UI-sound like in Muir

Table: The German Consonants

Consonant	"Name"	Spoken sound approx. like the English:
B	<i>Beh</i>	short B like in Bubble
C	<i>Ts-eh</i>	mostly in combination CK or CH ¹
D	<i>Deh</i>	short D like in Duck
F	<i>Eff</i>	short F like in Fire
G	<i>Geh</i>	soft G like in Garden
H	<i>Haah</i>	soft H like in Help ("silent" when inside a word)
J	<i>Yott</i>	either like "Y" (Yacht) or like "J" (Journalist) ²
K	<i>Kaah</i>	hard K like in Kerosine
L	<i>Ell</i>	soft L like in Love
M	<i>Emm</i>	soft M like in Madame
N	<i>Enn</i>	hard N like in November
P	<i>Peh</i>	hard P like in Pencil
Q	<i>Koo</i>	only in the combination QU ³
R	<i>Err</i>	hard R like in Rembrandt
S	<i>Ess</i>	sharp S like in Sun or soft S like in House
T	<i>Teh</i>	hard T like in Temple
V	<i>Fau</i>	soft F like in Fish or Photo ⁴
W	<i>Vehh</i>	soft V like in Valley ⁵
X	<i>E-ks</i>	sharp X like in Max or Xerxes
Y	<i>Üpsilon</i>	either like German Ü or hard Y ⁶
Z	<i>Zzzett</i>	very sharp Z like in That'sss (no soft S-sound!) ⁷

1 – See the list of letter-combinations below.

2 – J is either spoken like a hard Y or (in foreign words, e.g. 'Journalist') like a soft J.

3 – Q only appears with U and makes a sound like the English K+V combined.

4 – The German V always (!) makes an F-sound (except in Latin words, then like Engl. W).

5 – The German W always (!) makes the English V-sound.

6 – Y is rare and pronounced just like in the foreign words it usually shows up in.

7 – Z in German makes always (!) a very sharp sibilant/hissing sound, not an S-sound!

The Weird German Letters Ä, Ö, Ü

Naturally, you have noticed the letters Ä (ä), Ö (ö), and Ü (ü) with their two little dots in the vowels-list above. In German, (as well as in English), these letters are called *Umlaut*, or *Umlaute* in German plural.

Umlaute show up in a good number of German words, not only as a normal part of the word, like in „Tür“, („door“), „fühlen“, („to feel“), or „schön“, („nice“, „beautiful“), but often also as a part of a plural-indication, for instance, „der Arzt“ – „die Ärzte“, („the doctor“ – „the doctors“), or as a subjunctive-indication, e.g. „hatte“ – „hätte“, („had“ – „would have“).

Sometimes, the two little dots even drastically change the meaning of a word that remains otherwise identical, for example, „schwül“ – „schwul“, ([~shvuil – shvool]; „humid“ – „gay“), or „schon“ – „schön“, ([~shohn – shoie'n]; „already“ – „beautiful“).

In full disclosure, the obvious importance of these double-dots makes the correct pronunciation of the *Umlaute* – in clear discriminability to their un-dotted vowel-siblings – a prerequisite for intelligible speech in

German.

After all, your mastery of the correct enunciation of these very German letters makes all the difference between either hurriedly hollering to your waiting partner at the door that you will be joining him or her in just a second, by shouting: „Ja, ich komme schon!“, (“I’m coming in a moment!”) or on the other hand to unambiguously and emphatically inform the same partner that you are having a beautiful orgasm right now, by yelling: „Ich komme schön!“ (“I’m coming beautifully!” – But hey, nothing terribly wrong with that, of course. You do you.)



However, to help you avoid these little “misunderstandings”, here is a rudimentary guide to producing the correct sounds of the three *Umlaute*.

For an “Ä”-sound, open your mouth wide enough to place a medium-sized meatball between your teeth, then wail in the back of your oral cavity like a toddler after you’ve taken away his medium-sized meatball.



For an “Ö”-sound, purse your lips almost to the point where you could start whistling, then open your vocal cords and push out air while trying to sound like a confused goat.

For an “Ü”-sound, purse your lips slightly, (but not as much as for an Ö-sound, though), then restrict your vocal cords half-way and try to imitate the sound of disgust made by a typical Desperate Housewife upon finding a drooled-on medium-sized meatball in her vegan salad.

I hope this helps. And if not, go and ask a native German-speaker to practise with you. Chances are, they’ll be delighted to help. – No, seriously, just ask!

The Ominous German Letter ß

Moving on to the weirdest of all German letters, the “ß”. Called a “sharp S”, („scharfes S”), or „S-Zett”, (Ess-Zed), this letter only exists in lower case, since there are no nouns, (which are all written with an upper case first letter in German), or any other word-type for that matter that starts with an “ß”.

Incidentally, the „Eidgenossen”, (the “Oath-Confederates”, a nickname for the Swiss), in Switzerland decided as early as 1934 to abolish the “ß” altogether and replace it invariably with the letter combination “ss”. In Germany and Austria, on the other hand, it was not until the

orthographic reform of 1996 that the use of "ß" in the German vocabulary was curtailed at least to some extent.

Wisely, however, the letter was not completely phased out in these two countries, as it plays a rather important role in the correct pronunciation of German. You see, the grammatical "ss-or-ß" rule states that the "ß" is retained and not changed to "ss" if the vowel (a, e, i, o, u, ä, ö, ü) is spoken long before the s-sound. That's why in Austria and Germany you still write „Fuß“, (“foot”), „groß“, (“big”, “tall”), „Gruß“, (“greeting”), or „Straße“, (“street”), since you pronounce the vowel before the “ß” in these words in a long-stretched manner.

The Swiss decision to blatantly banish the “ß” from their alpine homeland may seem like a welcome simplification at first glance, but a closer look reveals this to be a rather flawed concept, because



by banishing the only viable alternative to the “ss” from their mountain fortress, the Swiss have ended up with the constant uncertainty of whether to pronounce the vowel before the “s” or “ss” in a long and drawn-out way or in a short and quick way. Of course, native Swiss are taught the correct pronunciation of the various words at school, but the fact remains that the expatriation of the letter "ß" was not only illogical, but also rather unfair to all would-be German-speakers.

Take the word „Fluss“ (“river”), for instance, which was spelled „Fluß“ prior to the German 1996 Orthographic Reform. Since it is spoken with a short U-vowel, the reformers came to the logical conclusion that this word, as well as all other words written with an “ß” but spoken with a short vowel preceding the S-sound, should naturally be spelled with a double-S instead. Which is why „Fluss” is written in this way today, since it is spoken with a short U-sound.

The same logic in reverse applies to those words that are pronounced with a long vowel in front of an “ß”, meaning that they have kept their “ß”, because a change to a double-S would incorrectly indicate that the preceding vowel is enunciated in a short way. Therefore, the word „Fuß“ (“foot”), pronounced with a long U-sound, (like in “moose”), is still written with an “ß” in Austria and Germany. (So, the rule is: “ss” = short-spoken vowel, “ß” = long-spoken vowel).

Incidentally, it is often jokingly remarked that it seems strange that of all the countless possibilities they had to do so, the Swiss chose to abandon their neutrality only once, and that was by siding with the "SS". – („Hey, *isch guet*, *Eidgenossen*.” Relax, it’s just a joke.)

German Letter-Combinations: “Oi, *Doitschland!*”

Alright, enough joking around and back to German pronunciation. Now, as strict as German usually appears to be when it comes to its rules, you would think that the dictum “one letter = one sound” would be just as firmly and unshakably anchored in the language as the hard “CH”-sound is

an integral part of the word „*Sprache*“ (“language”).

And you would be right – in principle. Yes, single German letters do indeed have one specific sound, with only minor exceptions concerning distinct variations. For instance, when a letter-sound is slightly clipped or stooped at the end of a word, (e.g., the so-called “*Schwa*”-sound, symbolised by the phonetic sign [ə]), or when it comes to the afore mentioned long or short enunciation of a vowel depending on subsequent single- or double-consonants.

However, there is one major exception to the rule that has not yet been mentioned. And that’s the curious case of the “fixed German letter combinations”. These combinations consist of two (or occasionally three) letters, each producing their own unique sound. But thanks to the straightforward nature of German, all vocal sounds produced by these combinations also remain always the same, no matter where you encounter them.

To conclude this chapter, below you will find a table with all the relevant German letter combinations, along with notable single German letter sounds and their approximate English equivalents. So, oil up your pipes and don't forget to move your mouth, *Mensch*!

Table: Notable Sounds of German Letters and Letter-Combinations

Letter / Combination	Approx. English Sound	How to remember	Example: Written vs. Spoken (Glossary below)
EU	OI	The „ <u>O</u> i, mate!“-EU	Europa / Oi’ropa
ÄU	OI	The „ <u>O</u> ister“-ÄU	Mäuse / Moi’sə
-E	-EH ¹	The „Schwa“ [ə] end-E	Flasche / Fla’sh’ə
-IE-	-EE-	The Honeybee-IE	Tier / Tear
-EI-	-AY-	The <u>E</u> ye-EI	Meister / M’eye’ster
Z	-TSSS	The It’sss-Z	Zahl / Tsss’ahl
-TION	TSS-EE-ON ²	The Na’tsee’on	Nation / Na-tss’ee’on
SS	SS	The Grass-SS	Wasser / Va’sser
SCH	SH-	The Sharon-SCH	Schule / Shoe’lə
ST-/SP-	SHT-/SHP- ³	The S+T or +P	Stuhl / Sh’tool
CK	K	The Hard-K CK	Stück / Stui’k
CH	CHH ⁴	The Cat-Hiss-CH	Licht / Lee’cht
CH	CHrr ⁵	The Throat-Clear CH	Achtung / Ach’toong
-CHS-	X ⁶	The <u>A</u> xe-CHS	Achse / Ax’ə
V	F ⁷	The <u>E</u> ffing V	Vogel / Foa’gel
W	V ⁸	The <u>V</u> alley-W	Winter / Vinter
PS-	PSS- ⁹	The <u>P</u> sych-PS	Psycho / P’sycho
PF-	PFF- ⁹	The <u>P</u> ferd-PF	Pflaster / Pfff’laster
PH	F ¹⁰	The <u>P</u> hrase-PH	Photo / Foto

R	RRR ¹¹	The Rrr olling R	Raum / Rr 'aoum
J	Y	The Y acht-J	Ja / Yah
-H-	[-] ¹²	The Unheard H	Fahr stuhl / Far 'shtool
-Y-	(Ü) ¹³	The Umlaut Y	Hyper / Hüper

1 – Many German words end with an “-e”. This “-e” is never silent! It always makes the sound of a half-clipped “eh” or [ə], the so-called *Schwa-Laut* (schwa-sound) at the end of a word.

2 – A few words in German contain the letter-combination “-tion”. Other than in English, where it is spoken with a soft “-sh’n”, in German this combination always makes a hard-hissing “tsss’eee-’oon” sound.

3 – When an “S” at the beginning of a word is followed by a “t” or a “p”, this “S” makes the same sound as a German “SCH-”, i.e., the English “SH”-sound.

4 – To produce the German soft “CH”-sound, raise your tongue halfway in your mouth, keep the tip down, press the middle against your upper back teeth, press some air around it and stretch your lips like in a smile. You should then sound like a softly hissing cat.

5 – You make the German hard “CH”-sound in your throat in the same way in which you’d clear your upper throat from some mucus, by forcing the air out through constricted vocal cords in a soft burst. You should then sound like a cat regurgitating a hairball.

6 – When you see the combination “-CHS-”, the sound will be that of an English “X”.

7 – One of the most common pronunciation mistakes by German- and English-speakers alike is their mutual misinterpretation of the letter “V”. While German-speakers usually pronounce the letter “V” in English like the English “W”, English-speakers on the other hand often forget that the German “V” is pronounced like an “F”. The only exception here are Latin words in German, such as *Vase*, (vase), or *Velociraptor*. With 99% of all German V-words, however, the “V” is pronounced like an “F”. Which is why the German car-manufacturer *Volkswagen* is pronounced “Folks-Vagen” and not “Wolgs-Uagen”.

8 – The other big pronunciation mistake made by German- and English-speakers alike regards the letter “W”. When speaking English, Germans often pronounce this letter like the English letter “V”, while native English-speakers on the other hand tend to pronounce the German “W” exactly like in their native tongue. However, the German “W” is spoken like the English “V”, which is also why the German car-manufacturer *Volkswagen* isn’t pronounced “Wolgs-Uagen” but “Folks-Vagen”.

9 – The German letter-combinations “PF”- and “PS”- have two letters, not one. And since there is, with one exception, no silent letter in German, you need to pronounce the “P” in these combinations. While German kids and lazy German-speakers admittedly often omit the “P” in words like *Pferd*, (horse), or *Pflaster*, (sticking plaster), there is no way around making the correct “PS”-sound in *Psychologe*, (psychologist), or its related *Psycho*-words, since omitting the “P” here just makes you sound like a *Psycho*, (“Psücho”!).

10 – Like in English, in German the letter-combination “PH” is also spoken like an “F”. It can often be found in the “old” spelling of words like *Delphin* or *Photographie*, which are nowadays mostly written with an “F”, (*Delfin*, *Fotografie*). (Side note: The two different ways of spelling of the German male first names *Stefan*/*Stephan*, popular with Generation X, still deeply divide members of both spelling ‘tribes’, and spelling a *Stefan*’s/*Stephan*’s name ‘wrong’ can quickly lead to a drop in room temperature).

11 – While British English-speakers have the tendency to “swallow” their “R”s, (e.g., “wo’ah” for “water”), American English-speakers, particularly in the southern U.S.A, prefer instead to first backflip and then “swallow” their tongue when pronouncing their “R”s, (e.g., “Amurrrrica!”). In comparison, a German “R” is instead produced in the back of your

That Damn German Language!

throat without any help of the tongue, (and thus, it also isn't the Spanish tongue-vibrating "R"). To create a proper German rolling "R", simply make your uvula vibrate by pressing some air at it. Don't exaggerate, though, otherwise you sound like some failed Austrian arts-student turned failed German dictator from the previous century.

12 – If not at the beginning of a word, where it makes a distinct "H"-sound like in "Hey!", the letter "H" is actually the only silent letter in the German alphabet and usually shows up after a vowel to indicate that this vowel is spoken particularly long.

13 – If you find a "Y" not at the beginning but inside a German word, (which is rare but possible), the "Y" is always pronounced like the Umlaut Ü. On the other hand, if a word begins with a "Y", (which is only the case with foreign words like Yacht, Yak, Yeti, Yoga, Yuppie, Yucca, and Yin und Yang), the "Y" is spoken like in English.

Side Note: Native English speakers often have difficulties distinguishing between the very different sounds made by the two letter-combinations below.

- I E -	-EE-	The Honey bee -IE	<i>Tier / Tear</i>
- E I -	-EYE-	The <u>Ey</u> e-EI	<i>Meister / M'eye'ster</i>

So that this confusion doesn't happen to you, here's a little mnemonic rhyme:

I before E – "Be free, Honeybee!" / E before I – "Aye! My eye, Captain Bligh!"



The 8 Most Important German Pronunciation Rules

1. **Every letter in a word makes a sound** – particularly the **endings**!
2. **Vowels** before a *single* consonant are pronounced **LONG**.
3. **Vowels** before *double* consonants (ss, ff, tt, etc.) are pronounced **SHORT**.
4. An **H** after a vowel or umlaut forces you to pronounce this vowel **LONG**.
5. 🇪🇸 **For Spanish-Speakers:** The sounds for **B** and for **W** are distinctly **different**.
6. 🇬🇧 **For English-Speakers:** The **W** is **always** pronounced like an English **V**.
7. 🇬🇧 **For English Speakers:** The **V** is (almost) **always** pronounced like an **F**.
8. 🇬🇧 **For English Speakers:** There is **no (!) TH-sound** in German! When you encounter the letter-combination TH, it is always spoken like a **T**!

Glossary

Europa – Europe. Die Mäuse – mice. Die Flasche – bottle. Das Tier – animal. Der Meister – master. Die Zahl – number. Die Station – station. Das Wasser – water. Die Schule – school. Der Stuhl – chair. Das Stück – piece. Das Licht – light. Die Achtung – Attention. Die Achse – axle. Der Vogel – bird. Der Winter – winter. Der Pfeffer – pepper. Das Pflaster – band aid. Der Raum – room, space. Ja – yes. Der Fahrstuhl – lift, elevator.

Das **Streichholzschächtelchen** – matchbox.



German Dialects – Greetings from Babylon

***“A dialect does not allow a language of its own,
but a voice of one’s own.”***

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, (1874 - 1929), Austrian lyricist and dramatist



Moin, Gude, Tach and Hallo there! Back again? Excellent. Then let's jump right in and take a trip down memory lane. So, have you ever found yourself on a rainy afternoon in a snug little pub somewhere in the United Kingdom and got to chat with the locals at the bar about English dialects? If so, then odds are that you probably didn't even finish your first pint before you had learned all about Scottish, (*"Glaswegian is actually an alien language, innit!"*), as well as all about Liverpoolian Scouse, the Essex Brummie, Newcastle's Geordie, and the many other British dialects spoken on the Isle.

Or maybe you had a similar conversation one night with a group of American friends in a sports bar somewhere in the U.S. If so, they probably shared not only their beer pitcher with you, but also their complete knowledge of the 24 to 30 major dialects spoken in their *"uuuge country"*, starting with the various New England dialects (*"In Boston, they don't even know how to pronounce an 'R'!"*), and not ending with New Yorker lingo, Miami English or Hoi Toider English from Chesapeake Bay, all the way to the infamous Texas brawl.

You could try the same exercise with Italians, Spaniards, French, Chinese, or any other nationality, and they too would almost certainly launch into a lengthy lecture about the unique dialects of their language, while probably also mentioning that at least one of those dialects sounds so extremely strange that even the natives from the next valley over don't understand a word of it.

Predictably, German is no exception when it comes to harbouring a large number of dialects, including some that serve as a great example for the weirdness of human language in general and the German vernacular in particular.

However, you probably know what's coming next. After all, it can never be that simple and straightforward with the German beast, no? Which is why, if you take a closer look at the whole dialect story, you will soon discover a specific and decisive circumstance that sets German and

its dialects apart from other countries such as the United Kingdom, Spain, France or the United States.

The crucial point is that the European countries just mentioned (and yes, Britain is still part of Europe, no matter how many *Brexits* they vote for), have already been united for several centuries now, (with one of them even proudly incorporating this fact into its nation's "royal" name), and therefore have been centralistically run from London, Paris or Madrid respectively for what seems like an eternity.

As for the United States, well, they were never divided into fully autonomous separate states or regions to begin with but had their highest central authority governing them from Washington D.C., (or for a short time in the 1860s partially from Richmond, Virginia), since their inception.

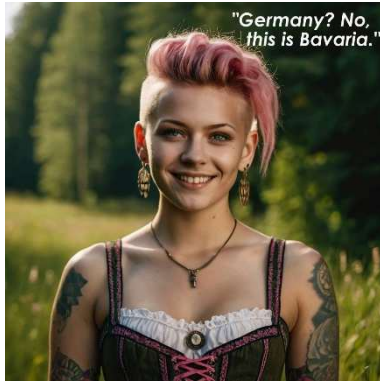
Today, these countries celebrate their long history as unified nations like prides of wolves rejoicing in their long-established cohesive social entities – while Germany sits over there under the acacia tree all on its own, fully aware that it is not only a different breed of wolf, but a different species altogether.

See, for most of the history of its own language, the country you know today as Germany didn't even exist – let alone as a centralised political entity. Instead, most of the approximately 300 "sovereign" states that made up the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation between 962 and 1806 AD fought countless wars, large and small, against each other over the course of almost a millennium, each fiercely intent on preserving its own brand of government, currency, customs, traditions and, of course, its individual flavour of German, also known as regional dialect.

If you contrast these nearly 1,000 years of regionalism, particularism, and constant competition with the paltry 150 years of actual German nationhood, it is hardly astonishing that regional patriotism and local pride still play a much stronger role in Germany than in most of the early-on centralized nations, and that these sentiments usually outweigh even German national patriotism – except during the Football World Cup and the European Championship, but that's a matter for a later chapter. [See chapter: Football – The other German 'Religion']

As early on as by the High Middle Ages (1050 – 1250 AD), the German-speaking peoples had begun to develop a rather defiant pride in their own little political and cultural entities, which only grew further over the centuries, as it was passed down and embellished from generation to generation.

By the time a true German nation-state was finally proclaimed in 1871, this fierce regionalism had long since become part of the respective locals' DNA. So much so, in fact, that even during the two World Wars – following (historically) hot on the heels of the founding of the second *Reich* and fought under a unifying "German banner" – many German soldiers and civilians alike continued to identify first of all with their regional heritage and only secondly with their nation, i.e. this relatively new entity also known as Germany.



Against the background of a millennium-long fragmentation and a mere 150-plus years of a German nation state – including forty-plus years of a division between East- and West-Germany and subsequently a mere thirty-plus years of a re-unified, sovereign Federal Republic of Germany – it becomes rather easy to understand why today you can still find local patriotism on prominent display in

almost every German city, town, and village.

You will find this sentiment most visibly displayed during annual regional festive periods, when folks suddenly wear colourful traditional costumes, serve peculiar local delicacies, sing the age-old songs of their forefathers, follow weird traditional customs, and proudly speak and sing in their local dialect. And while you will rarely encounter such dainty historical costumes and traditional folkdances in the streets of Germany's big cities – except perhaps for *München*, where you might actually spot some Bavarians in *Lederhosen* – you will nonetheless find an abundance of born-and-bred *Frankfurter*, *Münchener*, *Kölner*, *Hamburger*, or *Berliner*, (as the cities' natives are called in the German grammatical nominative plural case, i.e., without the English "s" at the end), who will love to shower you with examples of local dialect-terms and stories from their city's long history whenever you show the slightest interest.



Now, to be clear, nobody wants to deny the fact that natives of other cities like, let's say, Bristol in Gloucestershire, UK, Lyon in the French Auvergne, Aarhus in Danish Jutland, or Boston in Massachusetts, U.S.A, will want to claim at least the same level of local patriotism as the average German. But it's important to remember that Bristol, for example, was declared an English county by *King Edward III* in 1373 AD. And that Lyon became part of the kingdom of France as early as 1312 AD, that Aarhus has been under the rule of the Danish kings in Copenhagen since the 15th century AD, and that Boston, founded in 1630, has been part of the United States since the country's founding in 1784.

In comparison, whether they were born in the 1300s, 1500s, or 1700s, German-speaking people continued to find their overlords and rulers not in the glorious capital of a centralized nation, but rather in some looming castle overlooking their small town or village, or alternatively (and if they were lucky) in the ornate bishop's palace built in the best part of town or the impressive town hall of their city council.

At a time when the *Lyonnais* (i.e., the citizens of Lyon) had already been able to turn to Paris for guidance and protection for several centuries, (and since 1635 AD also to the *Académie française* for advice on the correct spelling of "Lyonnais"), an ordinary German from the city of

Magdeburg in present-day Saxony-Anhalt could not even travel around his local region without crossing the borders of no less than seven different countries. To be precise, these were the Principality of *Anhalt*, the County of *Anhalt-Aschersleben*, the Principality of *Anhalt-Bernburg*, the Duchy of *Anhalt-Dessau*, the Principality of *Anhalt-Harzgerode*, the Duchy of *Anhalt-Köthen*, and the Principality of *Anhalt-Zerbst*.

In short, while the British have long since sung "*God save the King*" and the French proudly proclaimed "*Vive la France*," the average German-speaking citizen up until 1870 would have still yelled „*Lang lebe das Herzogtum Braunschweig-Grubenhagen!*“, (“Long live the Dukedom of Braunschweig-Grubenhagen!”) – or something similarly pathetic.



"Okay, but that was in the Middle Ages," you might interject. "Surely things must have become more coherent in later times, right?"

I guess that depends a lot on your definition of "later". If you define "later" as the year in which Scotland won its first international rugby union match against England 1-0 and the Civil Rights Act was signed in the U.S. and the first astrophysics organization was founded in Rome, then yes, things did become more coherent in "later times".

More precisely, it was only in the year in which all these events came to pass, in 1871, when almost all German-speaking territories were finally united for the first time under one German banner. Forged by the "Iron Chancellor" *Otto von Bismarck*, this newly formed nation became known as the German Empire, the Second Reich, or simply Germany. But to get the full picture, it's probably best to provide you first with a quick overview of the fate of the German-speaking peoples throughout the centuries, starting right at the beginning. So, brace yourself, because

Warning! German History Incoming!

Yes, that's right, more tales from the past, I'm afraid. (Unless, of course, you're a history buff, in which case you're welcome).

As with the language of most other nations, also Germany's historic past and its present-day dialects are intricately and inextricably intertwined. So, just sit back, grab a nice cup of tea or coffee or a glass of wine or beer and enjoy the journey through one of the most tumultuous histories of any European country, starting with the round about eight hundred years of fragmentation and scattered regionalism that was

The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation

This immense patchwork of nations that was the First German Empire lasted a staggering 844 years, beginning with the coronation of *Otto I* by the Pope in Rome in 962 AD and ending after 82 emperors, (with 16 from the House of Habsburg or Habsburg-Lorraine), in 1806 after *Napoleon Bonaparte* and his *Grande Armée* had partially conquered the

empire.

During its existence, and particularly in the early modern period between the 16th and 18th century, the *Reich* consisted of approximately 300-350 Imperial Estates, of which around 100 were ecclesiastical territories (bishoprics, archbishoprics and imperial abbeys), roughly 200 were secular territories (duchies, principalities and counties), and 50–60 were free imperial cities. However, it is important to note that these entities were not sovereign in the modern sense. While they all had their own laws, courts and taxes, as part of the Holy Roman Empire they did not possess full foreign or military sovereignty but were bound by Imperial law, Imperial courts, and Imperial authority.



It was only after the „*Westfälische Frieden*“ (“Peace of Westphalia”), which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, that the individual Imperial Estates had their independence significantly beefed up by the so-called “*ius foederationis*”, the right of the Estates to conclude their own alliances and treaties.

However, just over 150 years later, the Empire began to show the first clear signs of disintegration. A decisive turning point came with the mediatisation-regulation of the „*Reichsdeputationshauptschluss*“, (“Reich Deputation Main Resolution”) in 1803. This resolution decreed that many states previously directly subordinate to the Empire would lose their direct subordination, and with it their statehood.

You see, *Kaiser Franz II.*, last Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (between 1792–1806), urgently needed to reorganise his empire on a fundamental level after the French Revolutionary armies had occupied the left bank of the Rhine from 1794 on and had stripped the old imperial administrations effectively of their power. Subsequently, the *Treaty of Lunéville* of 1801 left the Holy Roman Empire no choice but to renounce all territories to the left of the Rhine in favour of France.

Not least due to demands for compensation by the former royal rulers of the territories lost in this way – including *Kurtrier*, parts of *Kurköln*, the Palatinate (*Kurpfalz*), *Jülich*, a part of *Kleve* and numerous small ecclesiastical and secular states – Kaiser Franz II saw no other way but to factually dissolve the old order of the *Reich* and completely reshuffle the deck. As a result of this so-called “Mediatisation” of 1803, the direct subordination to the Empire was abolished for Imperial knightships, many small principalities and almost all Imperial cities, who were incorporated into larger states such as Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden, Prussia, and Hesse.

As if that weren’t already enough upheaval, *Kaiser Franz’s* “big reshuffling” of the empire also took aim at the Churches with the so-called “Secularisation”, the radical dissolution of almost all ecclesiastical territories like bishoprics, archbishoprics, and Imperial abbeys. Their possessions were unceremoniously transferred to secular princes who had lost territory on the left bank of the Rhine, but who now gained even more

territory on the right bank. The ecclesiastical princes, i.e. archbishops and bishops, on the other hand, didn't fare that well and were mostly completely dispossessed. In the end, the former 300 Imperial estates had shrunk down to 40 states, and of the previous 50 Imperial cities, a mere 6 survived with their imperial status intact.

Well, at least for the next three years, that is. Because already in 1806, the ultimate end of the *Reich* came in the shape of the „*Rheinbundakt*“ (“Rhenish Confederation Act”). In July of this year, 16 German princes took their states under their arms and left the Empire, instead joining together to form the Rhenish Confederation (*Rheinbund*), with none other than *Napoleon Bonaparte* as their official protector.

With this “betrayal”, the Empire was de facto constitutionally broken, politically gutted and militarily incapable of action. On the 6th of August 1806, Emperor Franz II. laid down the Roman-German Imperial crown, released all Imperial Estates from their duties and declared the Empire dissolved, formally ending the *Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation* after almost eight and a half centuries.



However, while the dissolution of the *Reich* proved permanent, Bonaparte's iron grip on the Germanic territory did not – even though at first it did not look like this. See, back in September 1805, after Napoleon had begun to lead his Grande Armée in person in the *Third Coalition War*, his troops crossed the Rhine, won the Campaign at *Ulm*, (where 30,000 Austrian troops surrendered in October), and proceeded to occupy large parts of southern Germany. Perhaps his greatest victory then came in December of the same year, when he defeated the coalition armies from Austria and Russia at *Austerlitz* in the Netherlands.

It was after the decisive French victory at Austerlitz that Bavaria, Württemberg and Baden, among others, left the Empire and initiated the *Rheinbund* (Rhenish Confederation) half a year later, subordinating themselves to Napoleon. While the renegade states became their own kingdoms or grand duchies, for the Empire this meant that large parts of its “heartland” to the right of the Rhine were permanently lost, and with them the *Reich's* capacity to act as a political and military entity.

With a large part of “the Germans” seemingly either subjugated or subordinated to him in the *Rheinbund*, next Napoleon turned his eyes towards Russia. However, as you'll know if you've paid attention in history lessons, the Napoleonic army's Russian campaign of 1812 culminated in a catastrophic defeat. And because karma has a penchant for irony, at the time Napoleon's brutally decimated Grande Armée had consisted largely of German contingents from the *Rheinbund*.

Russia had proven that Napoleon wasn't invincible. One of the first French “allies” who smelled a rat in this regard was the young and upcoming state of Prussia, who terminated its not entirely voluntary

alliance with France in February of 1813. Austria, who initially felt compelled to remain loyal and cooperative towards France after its defeat at Austerlitz (1805), openly changed sides in summer of 1813 and became one of Napoleon's main opponents, while most members of the Rhenish Confederation still hesitated, unsure at first on which side their bread was buttered. However, at least some of them defected later in the same year and joined the fight for freedom against the French in the „*Befreiungskriege*“ (“*Wars of Liberation*”), between 1813 and 1815.

Now a new coalition consisting of Prussia, Austria, Russia, Sweden and others united against the Grande Armée and its auxiliary troops, forcing the decision on German territory in the *Battle of Leipzig* on the 16.-19. of October 1813, also known as the „*Völkerschlacht*“, i.e., the “Battle of the Nations”. (Incidentally, you can still visit the impressive Monument to the “Battle of the Nations” in *Probstheida* near Leipzig.)

Only one year later, the coalition forces marched into Paris and Napoleon abdicated for the first time on the 6th of April 1814. The ex-emperor of France was exiled to Elba, a small island in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Tuscany and was even allowed to call himself ‘ruler of Elba’ and to retain a small court and a bodyguard.

But that was obviously not enough for the 1.68 m tall Corsican. In 1815, he returned to France and began his “Reign of the Hundred Days”. Doing what he did best, he quickly assembled an army and faced the coalition forces one last time on 18 June 1815 at *Waterloo* in a battle that became – well, his personal Waterloo. After his defeat, the broken military genius was sent into British exile on St Helena, a small island in the middle of the Southern Atlantic, where he died on the 5th of May 1821 (aged 51), most probably of stomach cancer. (By the way, according to scientific research, there is no convincing evidence of deliberate arsenic poisoning.)



The German Confederation

In the meantime, back in Europe, the victors of the “Battle of the Nations” decided at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 not to resurrect the “Holy Patchwork Empire of the German Nation” but to form instead a new political entity, called the German Confederation. This successor to the Holy Roman Empire reduced the number of German states to “only” 39 individual political estates, ranging from the Austrian Empire to the Electorate of Hesse, from Prussia to Bavaria, from Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach to Frankfurt am Main, and from Hamburg to Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Lippe-Detmold.

The Second German Empire

It would then take 56 years plus an ultimately failed German Revolution in 1848 with a short-lived democratic German Parliament in

Frankfurt and an ongoing rise of German nationalism as well as the Prussian victory over Austria in the “*German War*” of 1866, before *Prussian Prime Minister (and Foreign Minister) Otto von Bismarck* asked *King Wilhelm of Prussia*, (the future *Emperor Wilhelm I*), whether he was prepared to become German Emperor.

However, at the time Wilhelm refused the offer, since he considered the timing too early and feared resistance from the German princes. So, Bismarck had to go and wage also the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and win it in record time before Wilhelm, now also politely pressured by *King Ludwig II of Bavaria*, (yes, the allegedly crazy monarch who built the fairy-tale castle of *Neuschweinstein*), accepted the imperial title.



On January 1st, 1871, Wilhelm was crowned German Emperor, and the Second German Empire was proclaimed in no less a place than the ‘Hall of Mirrors’ at the *Palace of Versailles* near Paris. (And should you now suspect that this choice of location was a barely concealed sideswipe to rub their defeat in the recent Franco-Prussian War in the French’s moustachioed faces, well, then you’re probably right.)

With the creation of this new empire, the number of autonomous political entities was further reduced, and the 2nd *Reich* now consisted of 19 founding members, with Prussia as the undisputed leader, while another seven states soon joined in a second phase, including the kingdom of Bavaria and the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, bringing the final number of member states to 26.

In 1888, the so-called „*Dreikaiserjahr*“, (“Year of the Three Emperors”), a young *Wilhelm II* then succeeded his recently deceased grandfather *Wilhelm I* as well as his father *Frederick III*, who had reigned for only 99 days before he died of cancer at the age of 56.

Alas, as is so often the case with 29-year-old megalomaniacal children who are suddenly given a large empire as an early Christmas present, Wilhelm II, grandson of British *Queen Victoria*, soon set his sights on being on a par with his two cousins and greatest rivals, *George V, King of the United Kingdom*, and *Nicholas II, Emperor of All Russia*.

After demanding a “place in the sun” (“*Ein Platz an der Sonne*”) to be on an equal footing with the other colonial powers, “Willy Two” and his burgeoning empire quickly began establishing German colonies in Africa, most notably on the territory of present-day Namibia, as well as on several islands in Southeast Asia, including the colony of German New Guinea, a part of present-day Papua New Guinea.

And everything seemed to be going splendidly for Emperor Willy, (that is, if you ignore the atrocities committed by German military and colonists against the indigenous people in the new colonies), until the sweltering summer of 1914, when a new crisis suddenly arose in the Balkans that would not only thwart Willy’s grand plans for a worldwide German empire but that also would change the face of the world forever.

To summarize the events leading up to World War I as briefly and concisely as possible without provoking armchair historians to turn up with torches and pitchforks: Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, (heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne), in “occupied” Bosnia by the Serbian secret society *Black Hand* and the subsequent mobilization of the Russian Empire's army in support of Serbia (now threatened by a vengeful Austro-Hungary), German Emperor Wilhelm II decided to side with his Austro-Hungarian ally.

Fearing a Russian attack from the east, but even more fearful of a two-front war, the German Empire pre-emptively invaded France via a quick and uninvited diversion through Belgium, which in turn irked Brussels' British allies who then shipped over the channel to set things straight. And before anyone could finish saying „*Friedensverhandlungen*“, (“peace negotiations”), the fuse had burned down to fully ignite the so-called “War to end all wars,” better known today as *World War I* or the *Great War*. Four years and millions of deaths later, the year 1918 saw not only the end of the horrific carnage, but also, in a rare case of ironic justice, the end of the less than 50-year-old German Empire, overthrown by the spirits that Willy had previously summoned, („*Die Geister, die ich rief ...*”).



The German November Revolution of 1918, led by unpaid, disillusioned, war-wounded, and malnourished German sailors and soldiers, swept away the remnants of *Kaiser Wilhelm II's* second *Reich*. And because he didn't want to share the fate of his late cousin Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, who was shot along with his entire family by communist revolutionaries, Wilhelm II secretly slipped away into exile in the Netherlands on November 10, 1918, sealing the end of the monarchy in Germany forever.

The Weimar Republic

Out went the last German monarch, in came the first promising endeavour of a fully-fledged democracy on German soil with the Weimar Republic (*Weimarer Republik*). Proclaimed on November 9, 1918, one day before Emperor Willy hastily retreated to a tiny castle in a small Dutch municipality, the new republic quickly replaced the kingdoms, duchies, and grand duchies of the perished Empire with the new 17 states of Anhalt, Baden, Bavaria, Brunswick, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Lippe, Lübeck, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Oldenburg, Prussia, Saxony, Schaumburg-Lippe, Thuringia, and Württemberg.

At first, the new republic experienced a period of blooming prosperity and new-found freedoms in a time that has been enshrined to this day in the monicker of “The Golden Twenties”. Unfortunately, however, this apparent prosperity was built on brittle feet of clay.

As it happens so often with first attempts, also the constitution of the democratic Weimar Republic soon proved to be decisively flawed,

leading in turn to a succession of short-lived governments, civil unrest, and the radicalisation of fringe political groups, with one such radical splinter group, called the *Nationsozialistische Arbeiterpartei*, or *NSdAP* for short, (soon commonly known as the *Nazis*), quickly gaining public support.

However, while in Hamburg, Berlin, Munich and other large cities the It-crowd of Dandies and Flappers were still letting the bubbly flow in abundance and dancing the 'Charlston' to 'Yes Sir, That's my Baby', hyperinflation began to escalate in mid-1922, and by late 1923 the value of the German Mark (or *Goldmark*, abbreviated as „*ℳ*“), had plummeted out of all proportions. For instance, in January 1923, a loaf of bread had cost around 250 Mark. Only three months later, in April 1923, the price had risen to around 4,000 *ℳ*. And by the end of the same year, in November 1923, the price had already reached the astronomical level of 200 billion *ℳ*, (billion with a "B") for a single loaf of bread.



Then, in 1929, when the Great Depression and the stock market crash also hit Germany, soon followed by severe mass unemployment, the already weak democratic bulwarks of the Weimar Republic didn't so much crack as catastrophically crumble to dust on several fronts at once.

As a result, by the early 1930s, Germany was reeling from large-scale bloody battles between Communists, Socialists, Nazis, and other political groups in the streets of Berlin and other German cities, while an overburdened and underprepared government only hastened its own descent into irrelevance. With a growing public desire for a "strong leader" and without any constitutional provision for a legal bulwark to prevent anti-democratic parties from exploiting the very democracy they had sworn to abolish, the tragic death of the Weimar Republic was finally sealed on January 30, 1933, when a certain Adolf Hitler became the democratically elected Reich Chancellor of Germany.

The Third Reich

In the years between 1933 and 1939, the now ruling *Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSdAP)*, the Nazi Party, maintained the structure of the existing German states by name only.

Already in March 1933, Nazi commissioners were appointed to take control of state governments, while democratically elected state parliaments were dissolved and reconstituted based on the *Reichstag* election results (heavily favouring the Nazis). In April 1933, the *Reich* Governors Law (*Reichsstatthaltergesetz*) created centrally appointed governors in each state who answered directly to Hitler and the central government and could dismiss state governments and override state laws.

One year later, the Law on the Reconstruction of the *Reich* (January 1934) formally abolished state sovereignty altogether by dissolving state parliaments and transferring all legislative powers to the central *Reich* government, while the *Reichsrat* (the federal upper chamber) was abolished. From this point on, Germany was effectively a

centralized dictatorship, not a federal state. What Germans from that time remember are therefore not so much the federal states as the so-called „*Gaue*“ (districts), led by „*Gauleitern*“, (district leaders) whose spheres of influence often overlapped geographically with former states, but who were purely party officials, not federal representatives. Pre-1938, there were 38 *Gaue* in Germany, from Berlin to Hannover-Nord and Hannover-Süd to Pommern, Ostpreußen, and Württemberg-Hohenzollern. After the annexation of Austria („*der Anschluss*“) in 1938, *Österreich* was reorganized into 7 *Reichsgaue*, amongst them Wien (Vienna), Kärnten and Salzburg, while further expansions before and during World War II resulted in the creation of the *Gaue* Danzig-Westpreußen, Wartheland, Sudetenland, and Westmark.

Apparently, however, these aggressively, if not militantly, acquired additions to the "Greater German Reich" didn't satisfy the ravenous appetite for land and power that consumed Hitler and his minions. Following their own insane logic, the clique of mad megalomaniacs in charge of Nazi-Germany henceforth decided to invade, conquer, and subjugate their European neighbours, beginning with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.



After some initial successes in Europe and North Africa, the German forces soon suffered their first major setbacks, and by the time they lost the *Battle of Stalingrad* in the winter of 1942-43, the tide had turned decisively against the Nazis.

By 1941, the Americans had joined their European allies, and over the next brief but horrendous four years, Nazi-Germany and its remaining allies were relentlessly pushed back on all fronts, until literally to their own doorsteps.

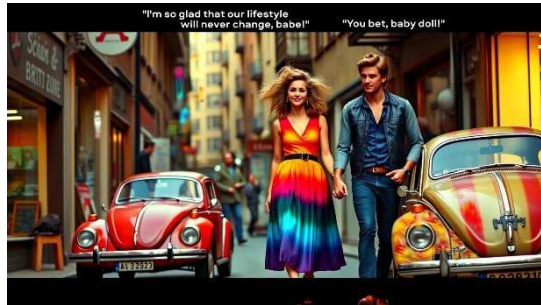
On April 30, 1945, after Berlin finally fell to the Soviets, Hitler first shot his dog Blondie while his newly-wedded wife Eva Braun took poison, before he popped a poison capsule in his mouth and shot himself in the head. (Adolf's one good deed – only twelve years too late.)

The signature of Colonel General *Alfred Jodl*, Chief of the *Wehrmacht* Command Staff, then sealed the unconditional surrender of all German troops on May 7, 1945, officially ending World War II in Europe and twelve horrendous years of the "Thousand Year Reich".

The Federal Republic of Germany

The Allied victors then debated Germany's future for four years, until the western part of the country finally began its second, much better thought-out attempt at democracy with the signing of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz* = the German Constitution), in the new capital of Bonn (on the river Rhine and as far away from the inner-German border with communist East-Germany as possible), on May 23, 1949. This established the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) under the auspices of the Western allies, i.e., the United States, Great Britain, and France.

For the next 40 years, the BRD now consisted of the eleven states of Bayern, Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Niedersachsen, Hamburg, Bremen, Schleswig-Holstein, Württemberg-Hohenzollern, Württemberg-Baden, and Baden, with the latter three being merged into one federal state, Baden-Württemberg, in 1952. The Saarland joined the Federal Republic in 1957, while West-Berlin had its own special status.



The German Democratic Republic

Just five months after the conception of the *Bundesrepublik*, the Soviet-controlled puppet-politicians of neighbouring Eastern Germany founded the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR*) on October 7, 1949, blissfully unaware that their so-called “socialist unitary state” would not live to see its 41st birthday.



And indeed, when the Peaceful Revolution („*Friedliche Revolution*“) in East-Germany in 1989 became clearly unstoppable, the old grey men at the top of the *DDR*-regime quickly threw their arms up in the air and either fled to Chile in South America – namely, Erich Honecker, second and second-to-last dictator and General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (*SED*) (1971-1989) and wife Margot, Minister of People’s Education of the GDR (1963-1989) – or

were arrested and subsequently charged with manslaughter and co-responsibility for the killings of the many *DDR*-citizens who had tried to escape the totalitarian regime by attempting to cross the “death strip”, („*Todesstreifen*“), at the inner-German border – e.g. Egon Krenz, last General Secretary of the *SED* (1989), convicted in 1997 to 6.5 years (and released early after 4 years) in prison for manslaughter due to his co-responsibility for the “shoot-to-kill” border policy.

According to a detailed 2017 study, 327 human beings died directly at the „*Antikapitalistischen Schutzwall*“ (“anti-capitalist protection wall”), the inner-German border without the Berlin Wall and sea escape attempts, as a result of the border regime. Furthermore, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft 13. August* cited figures suggesting 957 total victims at the inner-German border – including the Berlin Wall, sea escape attempts and other routes, while broader research estimates up to 1,100 deaths, including less certain cases.

When it comes to the division of the country into sub-areas, the GDR chose a different path than its “enemy-brother” in the West by abolishing all federal states (*Länder*) early on in 1952 and replacing them with a centralized administrative system, dividing the country into the 14

Bezirke (districts) of Rostock, Schwerin, Neubrandenburg, Potsdam, Frankfurt (Oder), Cottbus, Magdeburg, Halle, Erfurt, Gera, Suhl, Leipzig, Dresden and Karl-Marx-Stadt (today: Chemnitz) plus East Berlin, which had a special status and functioned like a 15th district.

The rationale behind this measure was to eliminate federalism, which the communist regime considered “bourgeois” and inefficient, and to concentrate power in the centre with the Marxist-Leninist party *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED) in East-Berlin. *Bezirke* had no autonomy, no independent constitutions (in contrast to the federal states in West-Germany), and neither elected regional governments with real power nor any fiscal sovereignty. Instead, the main function of a *Bezirk* was to implement decisions from the Council of Ministers and the SED leadership in East-Berlin. Ultimately, however, even this strategy of the regime proved no match for the people and their Peaceful Revolution.

The united and sovereign Federal Republic of Germany

What followed after the grey old men had finally been blown away were intense negotiations between the West German government and the East German opposition leaders-turned-politicians, as well



as many more intense talks with and between leaders in Washington, London, Moscow, and Paris. At the end, the Unification Treaty was finally signed on October 3, 1990, sealing not only the reunification of Germany but also the founding of the new Federal Republic of Germany. The new country now has 16 states, consisting of the 11 "old" states of former West Germany plus five new states on the territory of the former GDR: Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony.

And this is the current state of affairs in the Federal Republic of Germany in the third decade of the 21st century:

With roughly 357,000 km², Germany is the largest country in Western Europe and with a population of around 83.6 million people also the most populous country in the European Union (EU). About 23 % of all Germans were over 65 in the 2020s, while only around 1.39 children were born per woman, putting the rate significantly below replacement level.

The *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* in the 2020s could boast a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of around €4.3 trillion (nominal), making Germany one of the top 3 largest economies in the world, only behind the U.S. and China. The country's large industrial base, particularly in the areas of automotive, machinery and chemicals, contributed to a GDP per capita of an approx. average of €45,500.

After decades of low to minimal interest and investment in Germany's military, the *Bundeswehr* experienced a major boost in financial and political support in the wake of the Ukraine-conflict. In 2025-2026, the *Heer* [~hair] (= Army), *Marine* [~ma'ree'ne] (= Navy), *Luftwaffe*

[~looft'vaffe] (= Air Force) and Cyber/Information Command together amounted to a strength of 180,000–184,000 soldiers (plus around 80,000 civilians), with an additional 860,000 reserves (2025 cohort).

In 2024, Germany's military spending amounted to around €77.6 billion (\$88.5 billion), making it the fourth-largest spender on the planet after the U.S., China and Russia. The following year, spending increased to €86.49 billion, including €24.06 billion from a new special fund for the *Bundeswehr*. A large portion of this funding had been allocated to expanding the size of the country's armed forces, primarily in response to NATO capability expectations and security concerns. According to German government planning documents and ministry statements at the time, the *Bundeswehr's* target strength was expected to reach around 260,000 active soldiers by 2035, up from approximately 182,000 in the period 2025–2026. So, while the *Bundeswehr* is rightfully constrained by historical and constitutional norms, emphasizing defence under parliamentary control, Germany in the mid-2020s nonetheless aimed to be one of Europe's most capable conventional military powers within the framework of its NATO commitments.

Regarding a different political area, the famous German social safety nets, including healthcare, pensions and unemployment insurance, also remained extensive in the 2020s but faced mounting pressure due to an ageing population and accompanying cost increases. And finally, for the first time in decades, Germany also found itself facing a paradox that challenged its self-image as a model labour market: a rising unemployment even as employers struggled with a chronic shortage of skilled workers in all 16 federal states.

German Pride and Prejudice

Now, let's quickly recap and check the different divisions of the "Germanic territory" throughout its history. So, first there was the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation with up to 300 states that lasted for roughly 800 years. Next came the German Federation with 39 states, followed by the German Empire, (the "2nd Reich"), with 26 states. Then there was the Weimar Republic with 17 states. At its greatest extent, Nazi Germany had 49 so-called *Gaue*. Following World War II, West-Germany then consisted of 11 states while the GDR was divided into 15 *Bezirke* including East-Berlin. And finally, after the reunification with East-Germany in 1990, the number of federal states in the united Federal Republic went back up to 16.

If you'd take all these entities together, this will add up to around 473 differently shaped political units experienced by the German-speaking peoples throughout the last 1,180 years.

In the same time span, England had been united since its effective political unification under *Aethelstan* in 927 AD. France had been a single country since the high medieval centralisation at around 1200 AD. And Spain found its footing as a single nation around the year 1492 AD and the end of the 'Reconquista'. In contrast, Germany had only become a nation state in 1871 – and just to illustrate how late the Germans really came to the party, this formation of the German nation state occurred not in some distant historical period but in the same decade as the construction of the first Internal combustion engine prototypes, the idea of centralized

electricity grids and as Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. In other words, at the same time when Germany rang the doorbell downstairs and asked to be let into the party with the bottle of wine it had brought, Britain was long since fooling around with India and Hong Kong in the upstairs bedroom, while France was smoking joints with a young United States in the garden.

German Pride

But what does all this have to do with the German language and its vast variety of dialects? Well, over the centuries and with rulers, borders, and forms of government constantly changing at the sudden drop of a prince's or emperor's head, it was largely the people's regional culture, tradition and dialect that provided them with a certain sense of stability and safety, making it naturally important and valuable to the respective commoners in each region. Furthermore, speaking the same dialect had some nifty practical advantages, too.

In times of war, revolution and political upheaval, for instance, dialects were often a surefire way to check out strangers. Hence, when you were on your way to the next village or town to sell your handmade leather undergarments and unexpectedly bumped into some suspicious figure hobbling in the direction of your homestead, employing your local dialect was an easy-to-use litmus-test, (albeit not always a reliable one), in order to figure out if the hunchbacked stranger in the black robe posed a potential threat to your folks back home or if he was simply the village weirdo from two villages down the cart track who garbled in the same unintelligible dialect as you and your kinfolk did – and thus was "one of you".



Today, we still like to use phrases like "*s/he speaks my language*" or "*we speak the same language*", where we don't refer to the linguistic communication system per se anymore, but instead want to express that someone's opinion lines up with our own, that we're part of the same "tribe" with the same values, likes and dislikes.

Regarding dialects, though, this sentiment can still be taken more literally. For instance, a simple „*Na, geht's da guad?*“ (“Hey, are you doing well?”) in the Bavarian dialect, and the answer of „*Basst scho, und da söwa?*“, (“All good, and yourself?”), in the same local tongue is all that's needed to establish a mutual feeling of kinship, even if the very different outward appearances of the two parties would suggest otherwise at first glance.

The original and once unambiguous meaning of "speaking the same language" in its literal sense may have lost its original significance as a distinguishing factor between "us" and "them". But you can still find regional pockets in Germany where the deliberate use of the local dialect serves as a distinct signifier of a person's particular political leanings and

camp.

Again, this is especially true in Bavaria, where speaking in dialect tends to identify the speaker as a more conservative person who stands for the preservation of traditional Bavarian values. These include the recognition of the importance of the Catholic Church as well as an approval of the continued dominance of the exclusively Bavarian conservative political party CSU, ruling Bavaria uninterrupted since 1957.

Speaking the Bavarian language also means e.g. that you are very likely supporting the strict adherence to the *Reinheitsgebot* (Beer Purity Law), of 1516 AD, which limits the ingredients for beer to hops, barley, water and yeast and still serves as the basis for today's "beer law" in Germany, which defines German beer as "a pure natural product".

So, it turns out that speaking a dialect also entails a whole rattail of unspoken attitudes and positions that you should be aware of before you adopt one.

Interlude: The German Flag – And its Peculiar Absence

The fact that people attach so much importance to their local or regional dialects, heritage and traditions also goes some way towards explaining the often remarked on fact that you don't see many black, red, and gold German flags in public spaces in German towns and cities – let alone in private front yards, where you might spot the occasional city- or region flag but almost never the Federal Flag, (*Bundesflagge*), as the Black-Red-Golden banner is officially called.



And this, although the origins of the German flag could hardly be more "noble". Its history goes back to the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon and his Grande Armée in 1813 – 1814, when volunteer fighters formed the Lützow Free Corps („*Lützower Jäger*"), who wore makeshift uniforms, consisting of black dyed coats (to standardise the colour of the coats, which initially came in all shapes and hues), as well as red facings on collars and cuffs and golden brass buttons.



Germany.

Already in 1815, democratic movements and students, especially the Jena Students' Union, paid tribute to the heroic volunteers of the „*Lützower Jäger*" ("Lützow Hunters") and adopted their colours. Less than half a century later, by the Revolution of 1848, the colours were then officially chosen by the Frankfurt Parliament, the first freely elected all-German assembly, as the flag of a free, democratic, and unified

Germany. From 1871 until 1919, during the *Kaiserreich*, the German national flag then turned "Black-White-Red", while the Weimar Republik, (1919 –

1933), changed the colours (back) to “Black-Red-Gold” („*Schwarz-Rot-Gold*”) as the symbol for parliamentary democracy. A sentiment that, to nobody’s great surprise, the Nazis didn’t fancy at all, which is why they immediately banned the German „*Tricolor*” and replaced it first with “Black-White-Red” and later, in 1935, with the swastika flag.

After the second World War, the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany returned to the values of parliamentary democracy and with it also to the „*Schwarz-Rot-Gold*” of the „*Bundesflagge*”. On the other side of the border, the “German Democratic Republic” opted for the same colours, only adding a compass, a hammer and a wreath of ears of corn to it. And since the reunification in 1990, the sovereign new *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* also flies the same „*Tricolor*” as its democratic predecessors from 1848, 1919, and 1949.

Different eras have interpreted the Black, Red, and Gold differently, but the enduring, broadly accepted symbolism is that Black stands for overcoming oppression and the “night of servitude”, Red represents the struggle and sacrifice for freedom, and Gold symbolises the dawn of liberty and a bright future. Or as a common poetic phrasing from the 19th century summarises it: „*Durch Nacht und Blut zur Freiheit*”, (“Through darkness and blood to freedom”).

So, why don’t you see more Black, Red, and Gold in Germany’s streets nowadays, although the „*Tricolor*” has such a noble history and symbolism? Well, in part this is due to a rather simplistic reason. Often, local authorities will only fork out money for one *Bundesflagge*-flagpole for the town hall and are otherwise far more interested in promoting their own region or town, not least for touristic reasons. And since people are usually primarily “loyal” to their federal state, region, city, town, or village anyway, locals rarely complain and instead are quite content to see the 800-year-old banner of their former kingdom-turned-region on lampposts, pubs, and in their allotment gardens, rather than the (historically) quite “new” flag of a country that gained full sovereignty only in 1990.

But to be entirely honest, that’s only the smaller part of the overall-reason for this uniquely German reluctance to display the nation’s colours proudly in the public space. And surely, you’ve already guessed what’s coming now. So, let’s not beat about the bush any longer and talk about the brown elephant in the room, who tends to appear whenever the conversation turns to German history and national pride.



Now, as you know, apart from the centuries-old fragmentation of the German-speaking population, there is one other, much shorter period in Germany’s past which has nonetheless permanently and thoroughly eradicated national patriotism from the German mind.

In brief, the situation in Germany in the 2020s presents itself like

this: On the one hand, there aren't many "old school" Nazis (or even their spiritual sons and daughters) left in Germany who openly admire Hitler and dream of a "Fourth Reich", moulded from the same form template as 'Dolfi's' "Thousand Year Reich".

On the other hand, however, neo-fascist, far-right groups and particularly one political party, the *AfD* (*Alternative für Deutschland*), gain ever more momentum and support, especially in eastern Germany.

Fortunately, according to *Tagesschau*, the German main TV-news programme, a solid 42.8% of respondents still say it is important to them to actively keep the memory of Nazi crimes and of their victims alive.

Unfortunately, however, according to the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, 38.1% strongly agree or somewhat agree that "it is time to draw a line under the matter", thus echoing the neo-fascist calls to bury the darkest and most inhumane era of their country, thus following the sentiment of a former leader of the *AfD* party, Alexander Gauland, who once said in all seriousness: „*Hitler und die Nazis sind nur ein Vogelschiss in über 1.000 Jahren erfolgreicher deutscher Geschichte.*“, ("Hitler and the Nazis are just a speck of bird droppings in over 1,000 years of successful German history.").

On the other hand, according to a 2023 survey of the magazine *Stern* and the survey institute *Forsa*, 73% of Germans believe it to be the right decision for other political parties to rule out any coalition with the *AfD* in parliament.

In any case, it's good to know that the German school system and numerous NGOs, associations, and voluntary educators keep reminding young Germans of the unforgivable atrocities committed by their own nationals who might have been their own grandparents or great-grandparents.

Many Germans in each new generation still follow the solemn oath of „*Nie wieder!*“ ("Never again!") and publicly speak out against fascism. Hundreds of thousands of Germans also frequently take to the streets of most German cities, (especially at weekends when you are doing your weekly shopping, so plan accordingly), to demonstrate against racism, fascism and political violence. This commitment to constantly look back on and reappraise Germany's darkest period in history has ensured that German citizens have developed a cross-generational aversion to anything that appears nationalistic, overly patriotic or exceptionalist.



Visitors and expats in Germany who are used to their own country's carefree national pride being openly and unreservedly expressed – with flags flying everywhere, from front porches to post offices and lampposts and proudly displayed at airports, stadiums and government buildings – may therefore find the absence of the Black, Red and Gold in German public life rather peculiar. However, from a German perspective, such displays seem more like a suspicious sign of unthinking churlishness, thuggish chauvinism, or even outright historical amnesia. Therefore, it is generally considered inappropriate to display the German

flag in a "proud" manner in public without a valid reason, e.g. on the 3rd of October, (the German national holiday), or during football World Cups and European Championships.

Which naturally raises the question: What is left for the average German to be proud of, when any expression of national pride is to some extent "tainted"? Why, their local heritage, of course. This is why you will rarely get a dispassionate simple answer when you ask a German, "Where are you from?" Most replies will instead be surprisingly enthusiastic and full of regional pride. Alternatively, you might even be asked in return: "Why, can't you tell by my accent?"

Incidentally, the average German can usually answer this question with ease in the affirmative, since, next to taking pride in their own dialect, they are also well versed in recognising "rivalling" regional accents, especially unmistakable ones like homely Bavarian, slurred Hessian, lilting Swabian, the cheeky Berlin vernacular or the cuspidal Hamburg dialect. (And yes, even when speaking Standard High German, a hint of an accent is usually recognisable in even the most ardent *Hochdeutsch* speaker – unless they are from Hannover, of course, where people famously and peculiarly have no accent at all.)

German Prejudice

This brings us neatly to the second half of the titular German "Pride and Prejudice". Because, as you know, whenever there is a set of distinctly diverse groups, you won't have to wait long before competitions, animosities, and preferences inevitably arise. Naturally, the same also applies to German dialects, where at one end of the spectrum a small number of dialects enjoy widespread affection, while a larger group of idioms in midfield are more or less neutrally regarded. At the other end of the gamut, however, you will find an illustrious clique of almost universally disliked, if not even despised regional tongue twirls that form the hunchbacked branch of the German dialect family-tree.

A Deep Dive into German Dialects

To release the already giddy wildcat out of the bag, let's see what the statisticians at Statista found out in 2008 when they asked 1,820 German adults: "*Which German dialect do you dislike the most?*" (And to reassure you, little has changed since then. Well, nothing at all, to be honest.)

To make it short, the undisputed "winner" of the trophy for the most "hunchbacked" and unpopular German dialect turns out to be – to the surprise of not a single German – the Saxon dialect (*Sächsisch*) with an impressive 54% of all votes. A "victory" that the Saxon Lion, the heraldic animal of Saxony, may see with a certain disgruntlement.

The second place in this unpopularity contest was then shared by



Bairisch (Bavarian) and *Berlinerisch* (Berlin dialect), both with 21% dislike votes, followed in fourth place by *Schwäbisch* (Swabian) with 17% dislike.

In midfield behind this breakaway group of undesirables, the figures for the reluctant pursuers dropped to 12% for *Thüringisch* (Thuringian), 11% for *Hessisch* (Hessian), 9% for *Ost-Preussisch* (East-Prussian), and 8% for *Norddeutsches Platt*, ("Low German", spoken in northern Germany and along the North and Baltic Sea coasts).

The rest of the field levelled off at the 4-6% mark, with *Westfälisch* (Westphalian) providing the taillight with only 2% dislike-votes. However, such low dislike-numbers have presumably little to do with the dialect's popularity and more with the fact that most Germans simply have no clue what these lesser-known dialects are, let alone what they sound like.

But now let's take a closer look at four of the most recognisable German dialects that trigger rather strong emotions in many Germans, starting with the uncontested top dog of

Sächsisch



The hands-down "winner" of the afore-mentioned survey is just as widely known as it is generally disliked, if not actually loathed. And before you're going to yell now: "*Discrimination of East German minorities!*", there are in fact several good reasons for this common feeling that many Germans in other regions harbour for the Saxon dialect.

The first reason is that *Sächsisch* just sounds freaking weird. Seriously, just go on YouTube™ and search for a video with „*Sächsischer Dialekt*“ and listen to it for a minute. After that, you'll understand why it turns every Saxon-speaker in the eyes of other Germans into a cross between a village bumpkin and a babbling toddler.

Take for example the verb „*forhohnebibln*“, [~for'hone'bee'beln], („*verhohnepiepeeln*“ in Standard High German), which is used to describe the act of “mockingly teasing someone in friendly banter”. Actually, a great word – but in Saxon dialect it sounds to non-Saxon ears more like a toddler trying to tell you that they urgently need the toilet, (because of the [bee'beln]-part, which, when spoken quick, comes close to the German Kiddy-word for “pee”, i.e. „*Pipi*“). Or take the word „*Dämmse*“, [~dämmse], a uniquely Saxon term for “the hardly bearable summer heat that makes you feel uncomfortably sweaty”, that sounds to Germans from other regions like a bumpkin with too much spit in his mouth attempting to greet a „*Damse!*” or „*Dame!*” [~dah'me].

Then there is the (in)famous „*Eiforbibbsch!*“, [~eye'for'bibsh], that finds its Standard High German equivalent in the exclamation „*Na sowas!*“, which translates inadequately into English as "Well, would you look at that!" For any German-speaker outside of Saxony, however, it sounds more like a little girl with a lollipop in her mouth babbling in delight upon

seeing a small bird.

But if you find all of this rather sweet and endearing so far, then you will certainly love the next Saxon term of, „*Diggnisch!*“, [ˈdickˈnish!]. While completely incomprehensible to other Germans, the term makes total sense to Saxons, who will know that you mean with it “a stubborn blockhead who insists on his opinion even in the face of clear facts to the contrary”. However, when Germans from other regions hear this word pronounced, they will frequently assume that the poor Saxon-speaker was stung on the tongue by a wasp.

Also worthy of special mention is the name „*Modschegiebschen*“ [ˌmɔdˈshehˈgeebˈʃen], which is what Saxons call nature's little symbol of happiness, the ladybug – while the rest of Germany calls the little red and black-dotted beetle of the Holy Mary a „*Marienkäfer*“, [ˌmaˈreenˈkehˈfɛr].

However, Germans in former West Germany hear the first part of this Saxon term and immediately think of „*Matsch*“, the German word for “mud”, “sludge”, or “slobber”. Furthermore, the second part of the term sounds like the imperative form of „*geben*“, (“to give”), i.e. the order „*Gieb!*“ (“Give!”), which is somehow inexplicably followed by the diminutive ending „*-chen*“. Making the entire word a strangely cute request to give Saxon speakers their mud right away.

Lastly but certainly not least, there is also the flabbergasting Saxon expression of „*bomforzionös*“, [ˌbɔmmˈfɔrˈzeəˈnɔəs] – (no kidding!). This truly unique term is used to describe something that is “great”, or “almost too pompously amazing”, or simply “fantastic” – and is guaranteed to trigger unrestrained giggles from other Germans, in particular from children. The reason: The syllable „*-forz-*” has a very similar sound to the word „*Furz*”, which means “fart” in German, while the syllable „*bom-*” is reminiscent of the word „*Bombe*”, i.e. “a bomb” – and the child who doesn't giggle at the idea of a “fart bomb” is yet to be born.

So, while the distinctly noticeable Saxon dialect looks rather cute on paper – an impression that is somewhat dispelled upon hearing it, to be sure – the second reason for the 54% dislike of *Sächsisch* has rather less to do with its endearing, slightly off-kilter “bumpkin- and toddler-speech pattern” and its curious vocabulary. On the contrary, this next reason is, unfortunately, deadly serious, as it deals with the fact that the Saxon dialect is still closely associated with the ruling class of communist despots and their henchmen during the forty years of East-German dictatorship.

For some reason, an above-average number of political functionaries, „*Volkspolizei*“-officers, „*Stasi*” secret agents and other state lackeys hailed from the Saxon region of former „*Ost-Deutschland*“. This has not only left a lasting mark on how *Sächsisch* is perceived by people in the former „*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*“ („*DDR*“) but has also entered the collective consciousness of former West-Germany via television and radio. As you know, people have a long memory when it comes to injustices they have endured or even just witnessed.



Anyway, the final compelling justification for *Sächsisch* being deservedly the most disliked dialect in Germany is of a more contemporary nature. You see, in the decades since German reunification in 1990, the rest of Germany had to watch with growing unease how a disproportionately large part of the population in the Free State of Saxony worked diligently and with a steadily growing willingness to use violence on propelling themselves further and further into the right-wing, ultra-nationalist corner, thus earning themselves the well-deserved reputation of a far-right stronghold of blatant racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and anti-democratic ideologies.

As you might imagine, such a pervasive anti-constitutional attitude hardly endears the *Sachsen* (as well as the similarly inclined *Thüringer* and *Sachsen-Anhaltiner*s) to the rest of the Federal Republic. This ongoing state of affairs will come as no surprise to anyone in Germany – except perhaps to some Saxons who still live mentally in the „*Tal der Ahnungslosen*“ (“Valley of the Clueless”), as the *Dresden-Elbe Valley Basin* in the „*DDR*“ was mockingly nicknamed, due to the fact that during the communist regime, West-German television and radio were extremely difficult or even impossible to receive in this East-German area.

But in all fairness, one must admit that the Saxon dialect can at times sound indeed rather friendly and disarming. This applies in particular, if you’re a great fan of slurred and rounded consonants – a speciality of *Sächsisch* as evidenced by the famous Saxon dialect rule: „*De Weeschn besieschn de Hardn*“, which translates to, „*Die Weichen besiegen die Harten*“ in Standard High German and to, “The soft ones win over the hard ones” in English.

In practice and in accordance with this unwritten rule, this means that in *Sächsisch* all hard consonants are consistently replaced by their softer counterparts. For example, a hard “P” becomes a soft “B”, a hard “T” is pronounced like a soft “D”, a hard “K” is replaced by a “G”, and the word-ending “-IG” is pronounced like a soft “-ISCH”.

So, take forty years of communist dictatorship and the violent oppression and repression of 16 million East German citizens (1949-1990), throw that into a large cauldron, then add to that the openly ultra-nationalist and anti-democratic tendencies of recent decades, next take a large pinch of „*Jammer-Ossis*“, those whiny East Germans who like to complain into every microphone they can find, season the whole thing with the peculiar expressions and pronunciation of the Saxon dialect and finally stir the mixture vigorously since 1990 – and you might get a rough idea of why Saxon is deservedly at the top of the list of the most unpopular dialects.

What’s particularly jarring in this context is the conspicuous contrast between that seemingly innocent and almost child-like softness of the Saxon dialect on the one side, and the absolute inhumane and barbaric cruelties that many speakers of the very same dialect have inflicted on their own people over decades.

However, don't let thoughts of automatic machine gun devices at the inner-German border or executions by a shot to the back of the head in the *Stasi*'s gloomy interrogation cellars spoil your fun. After all, that's water under the bridge, and the fact that many of these former snitchers

and executioners of the regime are still walking around freely in Germany today shouldn't bother us either. Of course.

Instead, rather have some innocent fun with some Saxon-speakers. For instance, when you find yourself in Leipzig or in beautiful Dresden, take time out of your busy schedule and take a seat in one of the many local Cafés. Once the waitress or waiter has arrived at your table, proceed by ordering a “weak coffee”, i.e., „*Einen schwachen Kaffee, bitte.*” [~Äy'nan shvach'an Kaffay beette]. (Hang on, it'll make sense in a minute.)

At this point, there is a high probability that the waiter or waitress already knows what you are getting at. But don't let yourself be irritated or distracted. Instead, ask him or her politely what a “weak coffee” is called in Saxony. And if the waitress or waiter is in a good mood, she or he will then smile and say in a broad Saxon dialect: „*Nu, Bliemschengaffee, nadürlisch!*”, [~Noo, bleem'shen'gaffeh, na'deer'lish], which translates to “Well, little-flower-coffee, of course!”.

Apart from the word's inherent phonetic cuteness and overall “roundness”, „*Bliemschengaffee*” possesses also this delightful diminutive form that is expressed by the „-(s)*chen*” ending. This, combined with the child-like long [æ]-sound in „*Bliemschen*” as well as with the soft [sh]-sound that replaces the more hissing “soft” [ch]-sound, will all contribute to the overall and immediate impression of a cute, endearing and harmless giggling-inducing Saxon-speaker. Well, that is until you recall how the first communist dictator of the GDR, Leipzig-born Walter Ulbricht, proclaimed in his slight (since always deliberately suppressed) Saxon accent on 15 June 1961 that, „*Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu bauen!*”, (“Nobody has the intention to build a wall!”)

Less than two months later, on 13 August 1961, construction of the Berlin Wall began. This “anti-capitalist defence wall” and its accompanying “death Strip” then cost the lives of at least 140 so-called “fugitives from the Republic” and divided the city for the next 28 years.

But hey! Instead of dwelling on the divided and divisive past, let's turn our attention instead rather to something that unites many Germans – namely, their shared dislike of the next dialect on the list, the (in)famous

Bairisch



With 21% of the votes each, the two runners-up in the dialect unpopularity contest — *Bairisch* (Bavarian) and the Berlin dialect — both deserve their shared second place more because of the two “tribes” that flaunt these dialects so proudly to innocent outsiders visiting the beautiful Bavarian landscape or the exciting streets of Berlin and less because of the sound of the two dialects themselves.

So, come along on a closer inspection of the Free State of Bavaria, (*Freistaat Bayern*, the second of three German federal states that afford themselves the special designation “Free” – the other two being Saxony

and Thuringia), and find out more about the not overly positive reputation it and its dialect have gained in the other states of the Federal Republic.

Let it be said in advance, though, that nobody would deny the fact that modern-day Bavaria is indubitably the richest and most prosperous of all German federal states and home to world-class companies such as BMW™, Adidas™, Puma™, Siemens™, Audi™ and MAN™. Additionally, Bavaria can also proudly claim to have the most competitive education system in Germany, supposedly thanks to the CSU (*Christlich-Soziale Union*) party, which has governed the state continuously since 1957.

And that's all great and good – (well, except perhaps for the 60-plus years of one-party rule) – if only the Bavarians wouldn't incessantly brag about their achievements and constantly demand special recognition and treatment in all kinds of federal political matters. Not a day goes by without the incumbent CSU minister president or another Bavarian politician appearing on a talk show, in a newspaper interview or on the evening news to boast about the "superiority" of Bavarian culture and politics. Some CSU-politicians of the highest rank also like to constantly point out Bavaria's economic success and to remind the rest of Germany that Bavaria is in fact a veritable heavenly paradise on earth that provides endless milk and honey for the blessed Bavarian people, all thanks to God's benevolence, (who "must be a Bavarian", as the Bavarians never tire of pointing out). At the same time, they make it unequivocally clear that the entire "rest" of the Federal Republic is nothing more than a festering pile of garbage and blazing dumpster fire whose only hope of salvation obviously lies in unreservedly adopting Bavarian values and politics.

This mentality is also frequently displayed by many conservative Bavarian citizens, who are not shy about expressing their pride in "Bavarian exceptionalism" whenever they're visiting or even just talking about other federal states, whether in beer gardens or as guests on national TV talk shows. Consequently, many Germans in other parts of the Federal Republic have understandably become somewhat allergic to this attitude and have begun to associate the Bavarian dialect with this mentality of "Bavaria superior". (Except, of course, when it comes to the waitresses in Bavarian beer gardens. They are basically angels on earth.)

So, now that we have dealt with the non-linguistic reasons for the unpopularity of the Bavarian accent, let's shift our focus to the Bavarian dialect itself.

The first thing that catches the eye when you dive below the surface is that *Bairisch* still remains one of the most widely spoken German dialects in the German-speaking world. Around 12 million people speak it in Lower and Upper Bavaria, parts of Franconia, the Swabian regions east of the River Lech and most of Austria and South Tyrol in Italy. However, the number of active speakers has been dwindling in recent decades, which is why in 2009 the UNESCO included *Bairisch* in its 'Atlas of Endangered Languages'.

"Languages?", you may ask in bewilderment if you haven't been paying attention earlier on. "*I thought we were talking about dialects?*"

Alright, while that's generally true, we need to make an exception here, since contrary to popular belief, Bavarian is not actually a dialect of Standard High German but has been classified by the 'International Organisation for Standardisation' as a language in its own right. A fact that

might become slightly easier to digest once you learn that the linguistic gap between Bavarian and Standard High German is in fact measurably greater than the differences between entirely separate languages like for example Danish and Norwegian or Czech and Slovak.

However, delving deeper into the finer details of the individual vocal sounds of the Bavarian vernacular would certainly go beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, one noteworthy example of Bavarian pronunciation should be mentioned here: The language's shift away from the Standard High German vowel combinations [ai] and [ei], both pronounced like the English “eye” – for instance in the German word „*Heimat*” [high'maht], meaning “home”, “homeland” or “the place where your heart lies” – and towards the Bavarian pronunciation of [oa], pronounced like the English “board”. This turns the pronunciation of the German word for “the place where your soul can rest” into „*Hoamat*” [~whore'maht] in Bavarian.

Another example for this shift can famously be found in the Bavarian pronunciation of the dialect's term for a “squirrel tail”, which in Standard High German is an „*Eichhörnchenschwanz*”. In Bavarian dialect, however, the cute little animal with the bushy tail is known as an „*Eichkatze*” (“oak cat”), in contrast to the High German „*Eichhörnchen*”, i.e., “oak hornlet” – although the “-hornlet”-part, („-*hörnchen*”), is more likely to have derived from the Greek word “*oura*” for “tail” than from any non-existent “small horn”.



The Bavarian dialect turns the „*Eichkatze*” then into an „*Oachkatzel*”. And since the Bavarian word for “tail” is not the High German word „*Schwanz*” but instead the older German expression „*Schweif*”, the Bavarian dialect word for the bushy appendix becomes „*Schwoaf*”. Together, this results in the *Bairisch* word for a squirrel's tail, i.e., „*Oachkoatzelschwoaf*”. (And now say that quickly three times in a row.)

So, *Bairisch* might insult the eardrums of some non-Bavarian Germans, but to be honest, the dialect is actually quite endearing. If only one could say the same about many of its speakers.

Alright, next up we have the other second place winner, the infamous

Berlinerisch



This is, of course, the dialect of Germany's capital Berlin; and disliked by many Germans for yet another reason – apart from its cadence, which certainly isn't always easy on the ears to begin with. However, most of the resentment that *Berlinerisch* sparks outside Berlin has more to do with the legendary Berlin attitude of cheeky "arrogance", which, to be honest, also often shows itself close to the surface in the spoken dialect

itself.

In other words, while the impression of the often-displayed Bavarian "superiority" complex may (well-meaningly) be attributed to self-assumed bragging rights as well as to the decibel level of the average Bavarian speaker's voice and the authentic Bavarian attitude of „*Mia san mia!*“ ("We are who we are!"), the smug arrogance of the average Berliner is an altogether different breed of mangy alley cat.

In fact, when it comes to cultural, social, political and financial matters, Berlin and Bavaria couldn't be further apart and tend to glare at each other menacingly from the two opposite sides of the Milky Way.

Mind you, this isn't (only) because Berlin was once the capital of *Preussen* (Prussia), aka the eternal archenemy of *Bayern*. Although, this animosity still lives on in the Bavarian insult of „*Saupreiß!*“ [~sow'price!], ("Sow-/Pig-Prussian!"), which Bavarians like to use to deride anyone living north of the „*Weißwurst-Äquator*“ – the "white sausage equator", a jocular term for an imaginary cultural border between Bavaria and the rest of Germany, which is optionally drawn either along the *Donau* (Danube) or along the 49th parallel north of Ingolstadt or a hundred kilometres around Munich. Pro-Tip: You'll notice that you have crossed the "equator" when you see people having breakfast with boiled white sausages, sweet mustard and a large glass of wheat beer.

Being at home in a city to the far north-east of this "natural" German sausage-divide, former West-Berliners presumably would have been grateful, if their own, very real border, the "*Berliner Mauer*", ("Berlin Wall"), which encircled West-Berlin until 1990, would have consisted merely of a penchant for or aversion to „*Weißwürsten*“ and some Bavarian exceptionalism. However, in reality West-Berliners had had to live their lives almost completely isolated from "mainland" West-Germany for almost 30 years during the Cold War, between 1961 and 1989.

Almost like the fictional Mars colonies depicted in many Science-Fiction books, series and movies, the entrenched exclave of West-Berlin, located deep behind enemy lines and frequently left to its own devices, developed its very own kind of culture that distinguished itself in many small and some big ways from the societal norms prevalent in West-Germany – that "fabled place" that was a very long and arduous car-ride on one of the few concession roads away, if you didn't have the nerves for an even more stressful train journey or the money for an expensive flight.

Due to the Cold War, West-Berlin became also in terms of West-German domestic policy a “special case”. For instance, the city soon became a safe haven for all those young West-German men who were not prepared or willing to “defend their fatherland” with a military-issue rifle and uniform in the „*Bundeswehr*“ (“German army”) – especially when everyone had heard the (false) myth that “a *Bundeswehr* soldier would have an average survival time of 19 minutes in the event of a Soviet attack”.

See, the city’s special status within the structure of the West German Republic also meant that West-Berliners did not have to serve in the army – a loophole that enjoyed great popularity among young West German men who would rather spend 12-18 months exploring the fabled Berlin nightlife than crawling through the mud with full assault gear.

Once they had found a cheap flat in Prenzlauer Berg or a cheap room in a shared flat in Kreuzberg (both unthinkable nowadays), the rookie Berliners would then mix and mingle, live, laugh, and lounge with Berliner students and couch revolutionaries, with chefs, artists, musicians, advertisers, theatre directors, actresses and actors, authors, spies, saboteurs and diplomats in any of the countless bars, restaurants, pubs and other amusement establishments to drink, discuss and dance the nights away, savouring the permanent lifting of the curfew in West-Berlin to the last drop. (Incidentally, the abolition of the curfew in Berlin, which came into force in 1949, is still in place to this day and applies to the entire city.)

When the German reunification came along in 1990 and the now unified Berlin became the new capital of Germany, (and hence took over from Bonn on the Rhine) – and even after the city had become the new seat of the federal government and of the most important political institutions in 1999 – the now reunified city still remained mainly a closed biotope. With one decisive difference: Now there were far more politicians, lobbyists, and journalists in the mix.

Modern-day Berlin, shaped by the decades after WW II, remains to this day a place where many things are done differently and where the boundaries of good and bad taste, of so-called decency and individual craziness as well as of “good” and “bad” decisions are frequently considerably more broadly defined than in the rest of the Republic.

And part of this package is also that typical Berlin smugness and “natural arrogance” that shines through in the city’s dialect. An attitude which by no means has its roots in the city-state’s financial wealth, which doesn’t exist anyway, nor in some imaginary thriving economy. No, Berlin draws its self-confidence almost exclusively from the city’s unofficial yet world-renowned status as Europe’s largest social and cultural outdoor laboratory.

Top this off with Berlin’s long-standing special role in German history of which you can find silent witnesses everywhere, from the weathered façades of the city’s magnificent townhouses to the dust and dirt of its ramshackle outer districts to the hyper-modern skyscrapers and the impressive new government buildings in the city centre.

Berlin seems to constantly whisper to you at every turn that it has seen it all, survived the worst and yet is still standing and evolving; a vibrant, chaotic, poor, harsh, open-hearted, rich, absent-minded and

powerful city that will keep pulsating no matter what the world throws at it.

Berlin's former Lord Mayor *Klaus Wowereit* (SPD) – also known as the “Champagne and Party Mayor” – governed this “survival artist” of a chaotic city from 2001 until 2014 and encapsulated the quintessential Berliner cockiness in his instantly iconic phrase: „*Berlin ist arm aber sexy!*” (“Berlin is poor but sexy!”). A great slogan for a city that had been the underdog for much of the previous century when half of its population lived on a landlocked democratic island surrounded by a mortal communist enemy.

However, the perception of Berlin as an “oddball place”, where students, spies, artists and political activists of all persuasions were having a never-ending party, changed in the eyes of the world when the city



became the capital of a re-unified Germany. For non-Germans, the old picture was transformed into the mirage of a “no-nonsense” capital of the largest European economy and the most populous country in Western Europe – while at the same time, Berlin's self-perception as a chaotic, creative and slightly eccentric “older diva” remained largely unchanged.

The chaotic ineptitude of Berlin, which often leaves other Germans and international observers baffled, found its perfect example in the infamous botching of the construction of the new Berlin Airport BER, which lasted an astonishing 14 years (2006–2020). Countless technical and administrative failures ultimately resulted in an explosion of total costs, rising from an initial estimate of €2 billion to a final total of €7.3 billion. And it soon became irrefutably clear that this was not an isolated incident, but rather the result of a fundamentally flawed system. It therefore didn't take long until Berlin proved this point once more impressively in 2021.

In this year, the federal elections for the new German parliament went as smoothly as could be expected in a well-functioning democracy – with one notable exception. In Berlin, 5,000 ballot papers were not issued despite there being enough available. 1,608 votes were invalid because voters were given the wrong ballot papers. Seventy-three polling stations had to be temporarily closed due to missing ballot papers. And voting continued in many polling stations until well after 6 pm, when all voting must officially end. In fact, in 344 polling stations, voting went on until 7 pm, in 74 until 8 pm and in six until between 8 pm and 8:56 pm.

Two years, much finger-pointing and blame-shifting later, the Federal Constitutional Court finally ruled in December 2023 that the 2021 general election had to be repeated at 455 of Berlin's 2,257 polling stations due to numerous administrative failures and improper proceedings. The results of this awkward “by-election” cost the Liberal Democrats (FDP) ultimately one seat in the city's parliament. (So, no big loss there. But still a monumental blunder.)

And yet, despite such actually inexcusable national and international embarrassments as well as some other Berlin tomfooleries of less epic proportions, the rest of Germany would probably still forgive Berliners their occasional monumental hick-ups and blusters. After all, it is a huge city with almost four million inhabitants and “chaos” has been Berlin’s middle name ever since it had become the capital of Prussia.

(While its actual name of *Berlin* incidentally comes from a Slavic terminological root, commonly reconstructed as “*berl-*” or “*birl-*” and believed to mean “swamp”, “bog,” or “marsh”. The suffix “*-in*”, on the other hand, is a common Slavic toponymic ending, meaning something like “place of ...” or “place at ...”. The result after glueing the two word-parts together makes in fact a lot of sense, since historically, Berlin was built on marshy, low-lying ground along the Spree River. So, quite literally, *Berlin* is “The Place of/at the Swamp”, or in short, “Swamp town”.)

But back to the present, where many Germans react rather irritably and unfriendly to everything that comes out of Berlin, including the city’s dialect. One of the main reasons for this is that to folks from Hamburg, München, Köln or Frankfurt, the Berlin way to talk will often appear to be just as cheeky and “IDGAF-y” as the attitude of most Berliners towards their city’s numerous blunders.

To Germans outside of the capital, it can often seem as if many Berliners focus predominantly on the “*sexy*”-part of “champagne”-mayor Klaus Wowereit’s famous sentence, while nonchalantly ignoring their responsibility for the “*poor*”-part. Not only that, but the general Berlin-vibe seems to be to actually embrace Berlin’s gnawed-at look and inept bureaucracy as necessary fertile grounds for the city’s chaotic creativity, (which might well be true). By having changed the original slightly from “*poor but sexy*” to “*poor is sexy*” in their minds, Berlin’s citizens, ranging from the political left to the right, seem genuinely content with their lot and happy to fling the middle finger to the rest of Germany.

Ultimately, it is assumedly a combination of several specific circumstances that perhaps have gone to Berlin’s head. For one you have the city’s exceptional history and its role as Germany’s “natural” capital. Additionally, there’s Berlin’s unique vibe as Germany’s creative “anything-goes” location, and then of course the sheer size of the city-state, making it the by far largest German city, with 3.9 million inhabitants spread over 892 square kilometres. Finally, there’s also the undeniable fact that Berlin is the only German city that most people outside of the country can name off the top of their head. All this together creates a potent mix that’s exuding an aura of exceptionality and a “better-than-thou” attitude which particularly irritates conservative Bavarians, but often the rest of Germany, too.

And yet, throughout the generation, Berliners have cheekily embraced their special status and downright cultivated the typical “*Who gives a shit? I certainly don’t*” Berlin-mentality. A mindset that is also reflected in the famously snotty Berlin dialect – and neither posture nor dialect can be found anywhere else in such concentrated form as in Berlin taxi drivers.

Anyone who has taken more than two taxis in Berlin will probably already have made the acquaintance of the city's distinctive brand of humour, delivered by native taxi drivers in their unmistakable dialect. A humour that often seems less like a "joke" and more like brutally direct honesty, emerging seemingly out of nowhere and without provocation.

Undoubtedly, the German capital has a unique wit that has long been synonymous with Berlin and even earned its own nickname: the famous „*Berliner Schnauze*“. If you know that „*Schnauze*“ is the German term for an animal's mouth, but also an idiom for rude speech, you will quickly realise that this sobriquet is in fact more of a hidden warning than just a nickname.

Yet, despite the cutting nature of such mockery, little to no malice is generally intended when a Berliner "takes the piss". Rude jokes, impolite behaviour and brutal bluntness are all par for the course, and typical Berliners consider them no more than light-hearted banter. So, just think of it as a show of their affection, only in a rather peculiar way.



Okay, so perhaps you've already noticed in your own country that the stereotypical attributes of a region's people tend to correspond somewhat eerily to the sound of their dialect. In Germany, for instance, the cosy congeniality of Bavarian culture is reflected in the warm, soft and rounded pronunciation of *Bairisch*. Meanwhile, Swabians' speech patterns, featuring a tendency towards diminutives and avoidance of hard consonants, reflect their inoffensiveness and innocent busyness. The Hamburg and northern German dialects, on the other hand, are clipped and stripped of redundancies, reflecting their speakers' general demureness. And the slow and slurred Hessian dialect reflects the Hessians' laid-back approach to life. It is therefore only logical that also the cheekiness and chaotic rebelliousness of Berliners would be similarly reflected in their dialect's pronunciation.

One of the more obvious examples that proves this point is the Berlin dialect's prominent tendency of downright anarchically reversing the common Standard High German letter-sounds into their opposites. For instance, Berliners like to turn the soft "CH"-sound of Standard High German into a hard "K"-sound, thus pronouncing e.g. the word „*Ich*“, (first person singular "I"), spoken with a soft "CH", instead as „*Ick*“ [ˈɛk] or „*Icke*“ with a short "I"- and a hard "K"-sound, like in the English "trick".

Moreover, *Berlinerisch* also goes happily against the grain of Standard High German by introducing long-stretched vowels where *Standard Hochdeutsch* dictates decidedly short-spoken vowels. In this way, the Standard High German „*ein*“, (= "a, an, one" – pronounced like [ˈɛɪn]), instead becomes [ɛɦn], pronounced like a long-stretched version of the English "EN"-combination" or as if a Texan would stretch the word "train" to its limits.

The Berlin dialect also likes to boil down the specific sounds of German vowel-combinations into just one vowel-sound, with the best-known case here being the Berliner enunciation of the word „*auch*“,

(English: “also”), where in Standard High German the “AU”-part is spoken like the English syllable “-OU-”, like in “house”, (followed by the hard, throaty German [ch]-sound). Berliners, on the other hand, replace the [au]-sound with a long-stretched and open German [ɔh]-sound and instead say „*ooch*”, a bit like in the English “Horse”, only longer, and followed again by the throat-cleaning German [ch].

In the same vein, no genuine Berliner will pronounce the word „*Berliner*” as it is written and how it should therefore also be enunciated, of course. Instead, native sons and daughters of the city will turn both “ER”-combinations in the word into single [a]-sounds and thus announce their origin by proudly stating, „*Ich bin een Baling!*”, while at the same time looking you unabashedly in the eye as if daring you to comment on their heritage or dialect with some flippant remark. Which you don’t, of course. Instead, you rather jump into a taxi to BER and hop on the next flight to FRA, Germany’s largest airport, to experience the more relaxed dialect of

Hessisch



A specimen from the midfield of the “nasty dialects”-survey and one that belongs to the handful of German dialects that most Germans can name off the top of their head, which include *Bairisch*, *Berlinerisch*, *Sächsisch*, *Hessisch*, *Hamburgerisch*, *Schwäbisch*, *Fränkisch* and as the “exotic” cherries on top also *Wienerisch*, the Vienna dialect in Austria, and the Swiss-German dialect of *Schwyzerdütsch*.

Expats and tourists arriving on long-distance flights from outside the European Union will generally have a good chance to encounter Hessian as their first German dialect after touching down on German soil, since most intercontinental flights are bound for FRA, Germany’s largest airport in Frankfurt am Main in the state of *Hessen*. (That’s right, the federal state of Hesse is written with an “n” at the end in German. And yes, the full name of the city is *Frankfurt am Main*, i.e., “Frankfurt on the river Main”. And no, the river’s name “*der Main*” is in no way related to the English word “main” and is pronounced [~mine].)

Since Germany is situated right in the centre of Europe and *Hessen* lies smack-dab in the middle of Germany, it’s hard to get more into the thick of Europe than in Frankfurt am Main, the home of the European Central Bank (ECB) and financial capital of Germany. Here, you find the seat of Germany’s largest airport as well as the *Frankfurter Hauptbahnhof* (Central Station) one of the biggest European railroad-hubs, (and unfortunately also the centre of the Frankfurt drug-scene).

Drivers will instead encounter the *Frankfurter Kreuz* (Frankfurt interchange), the cloverleaf *Autobahn* junction that is one of Europe’s busiest road junctions with an average of 335,000 vehicles per day. But even if you’re sitting snugly at home in New York, Edinburgh, Kuala Lumpur, or Buenos Aires, chances are that you’ll be travelling virtually through Frankfurt am Main, since the city is also one of Europe’s key

internet hubs and home to DE-CIX (German Commercial Internet Exchange), the world's largest internet exchange-point in terms of data throughput.

Its central location in Europe, its robust financial sector, excellent infrastructure and dependable power supply make the city an ideal location for data centres. Many global cloud providers, telecom companies and content networks connect here and have established Frankfurt as the backbone of much of Europe's worldwide internet traffic.

In any case, should your path lead you to Frankfurt by car, train, or river boat, keep your eyes open for the Frankfurt skyscraper skyline, the only cityscape in Germany that will greet you already from afar. Twenty of Germany's twenty-two skyscrapers – including architectural highlights like the Commerzbank Tower, Four 1-4, the Main Tower, the Trade Fair Tower (*Messturm*), the Western Harbour (*Westhafen*) Tower, One Forty West or the Trianon – will form the backdrop for your journey across the lush green landscapes of the federal state of *Hessen*.

Dominated by rural areas with lots of nature and agriculture and speckled with smaller cities, towns, and villages, most of *Hessen* remains a German fairy tale-land to this day. Which also means that if you are looking for the economic, cultural, and technological hotspots in *Hessen*, you'll need to get your behind to the south of the state, or more precisely to the *Rhein-Main Gebiet*, (Rhine-Main Area), with Frankfurt at the heart of this bustling hubbub.

Predictably therefore, expats who work in the fields of IT, business, finance, economics, equity trade, or banking are prone to put their professional roots down in *Bankfurt*, (as Frankfurt is also deservedly nicknamed). After all, here you find the European headquarters of nearly all relevant banks, including the ECB, stock trading companies and credit institutions from all over the world.

However, no matter how prominently the many skyscrapers may dominate the skyline of *Mainhattan*, (another self-explanatory nickname for the city on the river *Main*), and regardless of how ubiquitous the suits and business-costumes of modern money-makers may appear in the city's streets during workdays – the genuine Frankfurt that exists beyond the shadows of the glass-and-steel towers makes for an entirely more multi-faceted, colourful, and hands-on living experience.

In the numerous city districts surrounding the city's centre like individual towns and villages that are seamlessly blending into each other, the native Frankfurt citizenry remains only marginally concerned with the doings and dealings of the "suits" in their towers. Instead, the colourful mix of 178 nationalities who make up Frankfurt's multicultural population just goes about their daily business, which ranges from advertisers to apple wine producers, from barbers to beer brewers, and from market-stall keepers to museum curators.

And to get to the point: A good part of those locals happily converses in the Hessian dialect – albeit in its specific Frankfurt variation. This means that your experience of the Hessian dialect will be tinged by the typical *Frankfurterisch* (or *Frankfodderisch*, as the natives say) accent.

In fact, there is no such thing as a single homogeneous Hessian dialect, since over the centuries, every Hessian region has developed its

own local dialect-variant. However, since you are presumably getting most intimately acquainted with the people and streets of Frankfurt while in *Hessen*, the following focuses mainly on the *Main-Metropole*, [~mine-metro'pole'ə], (yet another nickname for the Hessian metropolis).

So, first the good news for all monolingual English-speakers coming to Frankfurt: Many Frankfurters, (the natives, not the sausage), who are living and working in the inner-city hotspots are in fact well versed in the English language, due to decades of daily dealings with bankers and other expats from all four corners of the sky. That's why you will hear English spoken in shops and at market-stalls, at the barber, at the Döner corner shop and in restaurants just as well as in the many brothels and sex-shops adorning the *Bahnhofsviertel*, (main station district), which is situated at the feet of the sun-sparkling glass towers housing many of its best costumers.

The scene will change quite drastically, however, as soon as you leave this inner English-speaking circle at the heart of the city and enter the "real" Frankfurt, where any attempts to converse in English are frequently met with a polite shoulder-shrug or an unintelligible answer in broad Hessian dialect.

So then, what can you expect to hear from Hessian dialect-speakers in the city where sour-tasting apple wine, (called „Äbbelwoi“, [~ebb'l'vɔi], in dialect), is just as much a part of local culture as champagne and wine is in France?

Well, to start with, subjective opinions on the nature of *Hessisch* vary widely and depend largely on who you're asking. Aficionados of the Hessian dialect will describe it as one of the most laid-back and relaxed dialects in Germany, which reflects an almost Southern-France type of laissez-faire serenity. Hessian-haters on the other hand will say that the dialect is clearly the laziest and most annoyingly slurred and mumbled option to speak German they have ever had the displeasure to be assaulted by.

And to be fair, both opinions have their merits. Where you stand personally on this matter depends mainly on your position regarding Hessian's proclivity for rigorously rounding off any sharp pronunciation-edges, thus creating the unmistakable mumbled-slurred Hessian sound you will come to either love or hate.

Take for example the soft [ch]-sound in Standard High German, like in the word „*Milch*“, ("milk"). For the typical Hessian, the silky smoothness of this softly breathed letter-combination still requires far too much effort, so they will default right away to the only sound that is similar enough but demands even less exertion, which is the German [sch]-sound, (English: [sh]-sound). Consequentially, Hessians pronounce the white liquid you pour over your cornflakes instead as „*Milsch*“, [~mill'sh].

Strangely enough, though, the other version of the German "CH"-letter combination which is far more harshly spoken in the back of your throat, thus resembling our by now famous hairball-regurgitating cat, retains its hard pronunciation in Hessian. Presumably, because German doesn't offer any alternative sound that would need even less effort.

The same slackness is also demonstrated by Hessians whenever

Standard High German demands an accentuated, hard and clipped pronunciation of consonants like “K”, “P”, or “T”, which will immediately be attenuated.

Consequently, a hard [k]- or [ck]- sound like in „*gucken*“, (“to look”), turns automatically into a soft [g]-sound, and the phrase „*Guck mal!*“, (“Look here!” or “Come take a look!”), escapes Hessian lips as, „*Guggema!*“, [ˈɡʊɡəˈma], losing on its way not only the word-separation but also shedding the apparently superfluous “L”-ending of „*mal!*“, (meaning “once” or “just”).

Similarly, the Standard High German word „*Perlenkette*“, (“pearl necklace”), turns into the Hessian „*Berlegedde*“, with the plosive “P”- and “T”- sounds transforming into soft “B”- and “D”-pronunciations. This shift from “T” to “D” can also be observed in the Hessian variation of the standard German greeting of „*Guten Morgen*“, (“Good morning”). Here, Hessians additionally omit the end-“N” of both words, swallow the “R” in „*Morgen*“, and turn the second “G” into a soft “SCH”, producing the typical Hessian salutation of „*Gude Mosche*“, [ˈɡʊdəˈmɔʃə].

But the institutionalised laziness of Hessian (or „*Frankfodderisch*“) doesn’t end here. While several German dialects like to omit the last letter(s) of a word whenever grammatically possible, Hessian goes one step further and habitually leaves out entire words or sentence-parts whenever they are not absolutely essential for transmitting the core message.

Native Hessians will cut every possible corner just to avoid overexerting themselves – so, it’s only logical that even the Standard High German greeting of „*Guten Tag*“, ([ˈɡʊtənˈtak]; “good day”), becomes the perfectly adequate Hessian greeting of „*Gude!*“ [ˈɡʊdə], which Hessians usually use with anyone except higher-ups or total strangers – and often even then.

Famously, Frankfurters, (nope, still not the sausages), insist that the reverse-translation of the greeting „*Gude!*“ back into Standard High German would result in the polite greeting of: „*Guten Tag, guter Herr*“ or „*gute Frau*“, (i.e. “Good day, good sir”, or “good lady”).

What they don’t tell you, however, is that different inflections of the word „*Gude*“ can considerably alter its meaning. For instance, if Bernd meets his mate Frank at the farmer’s market and greets him with „*Guuude?*“ by stretching the [u]-sound and raising the inflection at the end of the word to turn it into a question, he is actually asking Frank: “Hey mate, good to see you, how’re you doing? All good?”

On the other hand, if Frank hops over to his favourite kiosk to buy a packet of cigarettes and here bumps into the usual three suspects drinking beer from the bottle at the kiosk-counter, he’ll just give them a quick and unaccentuated „*Gude*“ combined with a miniscule nod, indicating, “Hey, we know each other in passing. Hope you’re doing fine, no need for further conversations.”

Finally, there is also the greeting’s overly chatty variation of, „*Ei Gude, wie?*“, [ˈɛɪ ɡʊdəˈvɛː], that can be found on many a Frankfurt tourist T-shirt or coffee mug, and which comes closest to an actual formal greeting. Here, the term „*Ei*“, (related to the English “Hi!”), takes the place

of “hello” or “good day”, while „*Gude*” is addressing others as “good sir/good lady”, and „*wie?*”, (the German question word for “how?”), asks, “How are you doing on this fine day?”

Frankfurters, (no, still the people), usually reserve this excessively polite greeting for encounters with their favourite pub-landlord, barista, or flower shop proprietor as well as potential customers, clients, and acquaintances, if they are genuinely interested in their well-being.

(Yes, in stark contrast to the English set phrase “How are you?”, which is merely a greeting disguised as a rhetorical question, the German greeting of „*Wie geht's?*”, [ˌvɛː gətəs], i.e., “How is it going?”, indicates most of the time that the asking person is genuinely interested in the addressed person’s current circumstances. The answers to this inquiry can then range from a short „*Super!*”, [ˌsʊpʰɐr]; or „*Gut!*”, [ˌɡʊt]; all the way to a detailed account of the addressed person’s recent gallbladder-operation or a step-by-step retelling of their second daughter’s third wedding.)

Anyway, specific vowel-stretches, consonant-shifts, and sound-omissions are of course not the only identifiable characteristics of a dialect. The other major linguistic part that distinguishes any proper dialect comes in the form of the various designations, or “names” that are given to the same everyday objects in different dialects and regions.

The Frankfurt dialect is no exception in this regard and has developed its own plethora of local terms for many items over the centuries. Particularly one short historical period bears responsibility for the most noticeable “foreign” footprints in the local Frankfurt dialect.

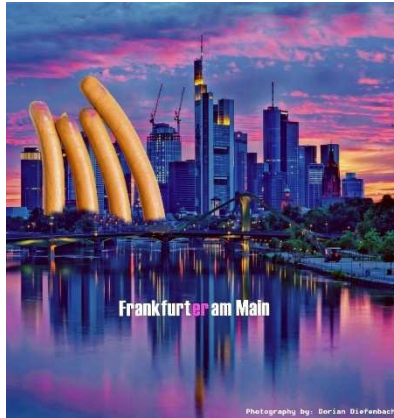
This period came to pass when the city fell to Napoleon’s *Grande Armée* during the ambitious Corsican’s conquest of the Holy Roman Empire, when Frankfurt was made to experience three years, (1810 – 1813), of intense political domination by the French occupational forces. Despite the political and military animosities, however, Frankfurt’s population appeared to have quickly come to terms with their occupiers from across the Rhine and soon began rubbing shoulders with Napoleon’s stadtholders in the elegant salons of Frankfurt’s bourgeois nobility as well as in the many apple wine joints, brothels, and pubs frequented by French soldiers and the common Frankfurt folk alike.



This coin- and power-driven fraternisation soon led the Frankfurters to not only take up the relaxed French lifestyle, but also to adopt some of the French vernacular. Today, several French terms for everyday objects still feature prominently in Frankfurt's local vocabulary, with the two most noticable examples for the absorption of French words into *Frankfurterisch* being the terms „*Portemonnaie*” and „*Trottoir*”.

Hence, where Germans in other regions use the common term „*Geldbörse*” or „*Brieftasche*” for a “wallet”, Frankfurters, (No, still not the sausages!), will instead put their money into a „*Portemonnaie*” and pronounce it [ˌpɔdˈmaːnɐ]. And when Kölner, Hannoveraner, or Berliner

parents admonish their children to stay on the „*Bürgersteig*“ [~burger'shtaig] or „*Gehweg*“ so that they don't get hit by a car, Frankfurter parents instead tell their little whirlwinds to keep on the „*Trottoir*“, while pronouncing it [~trodde'va] and hoping that their heedless hurricanes will for once stay on the pavement or sidewalk – many of which had already seen generations of children running on them long before Columbus first set sail.



Okay, fine, you finally did it. Since it seems that you're unwilling to let go of the subject, here's exclusively for you a brief elaboration on the vexed topic that almost every Frankfurt resident is confronted with at least once whenever they reveal their place of origin. So, let's talk about the tiresome "confusion" that apparently surrounds the citizens of FFM, (as the city's name is commonly abbreviated), on the one hand and

those delicious sausages bearing the same name on the other.

First of all, let's establish the facts: The original „*Frankfurter Würstchen*“, ("Frankfurt small sausages"), or „*Frankfurter*" for short, come in the shape and form of a thin, cooked sausage, heated in hot (but not boiling) water for around eight minutes. A true „*Frankfurter*" is made from pure pork meat in a sheep's small intestine and attains its unique flavour from a special smoking process at low temperatures. Traditionally, you eat „*Frankfurter*" with mustard or horseradish and freshly baked bread.

Importantly, the sausage's name has been legally protected since 1929, with the provision that the designation „*Frankfurter*" may only be used for sausages coming from the Frankfurt area. In contrast, what is called a „*Frankfurter*" in English or American English usually denotes the altogether different sausage of „*Wiener Würstchen*" ("Vienna sausage").

Now, of course, people born in Frankfurt or living in the city for a copious amount of time are also called „*Frankfurter*". However, and to be clear once and for all, the joke of "mistaking" Frankfurt natives for their sausages is nowadays about as dead as the pig that provided the meat for your last „*Frankfurter*".

The only comparison that Frankfurters sometimes allow is the distinction between „*Eschte Frankfodder*", i.e., "real Frankfurters" and „*Aageplackte*", [~Ah'ge'pluck'tə], a traditional Frankfurt expression that can be benevolently translated to "newcomers" or "non-natives" – or more directly to "transplants".

Incidentally, cheeky tongues like to joke that you will only lose your status as an „*Aageplackte*" when you start to complain about the high rents in the city and the general conditions in the area around the main railway station, when you have fallen in love with the taste of „*Äbbelwoi*", and when you no longer get lost in the underground transport- and shopping-hub of the *Hauptwache* B-level beneath the city centre. Which means that it's entirely up to you how quickly you will assimilate into the local Frankfurt culture and, of course, how fast you desensitise your taste buds to „*Äbbelwoi*".

And that concludes our exploration of some of the most notable German dialects and the communities where they are common parlance. After all this, you might now perhaps worry a bit that all the hours you put in to learn Standard High German were in vain – since apparently “German” is in reality an umbrella term for dozens of different languages and dialects that no visitor has any chance to ever understand.

Well, sure, the part with the dozens of different dialects is certainly true. However, you can rest assured that wherever you will find yourself in Germany — be it in the equanimous atmosphere of Leipzig in Saxony, among the salty air and humour of Hamburg, in the creative chaos of Berlin, amidst the jovial mood of Munich, or in the international hustle and bustle of Frankfurt am Main — the locals will do their very best to understand you and your newly acquired High German. With one small caveat: You may find that their given answers in their local German dialect will sometimes be a little hard to understand.

But don’t worry, nobody will expect you to learn or speak the local dialect. Still, if you’re an expat who wants to put down roots in Germany and if you’ve got over your initial amusement whenever you hear natives speak in their dialect, you may find it actually quite useful to pick up a few dialect terms yourself. After all, knowing certain words in dialect can make your everyday life in your German town or city just that little bit easier – and that’s not only when you want to buy bread rolls.

Picture glossary

1 – Sächsisch (Saxon): „*Eiforbibbsch! De Dämmse is nüsche zu ertraggn.*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Na sowas, die Hitze ist ja nicht zum Aushalten.“ – English: „Good grief, the heat is unbearable.“

2 – Sächsisch (Saxon): „*Eiforbibbsch, en Modschegiebschen.*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Na sowas, ein Marienkäfer.“ – English: „Would you look at that, a ladybug.“

3 – Bairisch (Bavarian) – „*Kumm, auf oam Zug!*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Komm, in einem Zug!“ – English: „Come on, down the hatch in one gulp!“

4 – Bairisch (Bavarian) – „*So, ho ma no a Bier!*“ – Hochdeutsch: „So, hol mir noch ein Bier!“ – English: „So, and now fetch me another beer!“

5 – Berlinerisch (Berlin dialect) – „*Ich bin een Balina!*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Ich bin ein Berliner!“ – English: „I am a Berliner!“

6 – Berlinerisch (Berlin dialect): „*Na Du, keene Haare uff’m Kopp, aba ‘n Kamm inner Tasche, wa!*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Na Du, keine Haare auf dem Kopf aber einen Kamm in der Tasche, was!“ – English: „Look at you, no hair on your head but a comb in your pocket, what!“ – Explanation: „Look at you, little phoney!“

7 – Hessisch (Hessian): „*Kumm, mer drinke e Bembel Äbbelwoi!*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Komm, wir trinken einen Krug Apfelwein!“ – English: „Come on, we drink a jug of apple wine!“

8 – Hessisch (Hessian): „*Ei Gude, wie?*“ – Hochdeutsch: „Hallo guter Mann, wie geht’s?“ – English: „Hello there, good sir, how are you doing?“



A German Bread Roll isn't a Bread Roll isn't a Bread Roll.

Did you know that if you want to hear the most perfectly pronounced Standard High German in all of Germany, including German media, you just need to switch on the *Tagesschau* [ˈtaˈɡesˈʃau], the main news programme

at 8:00 pm every evening on the ARD? Germany's largest public TV channel gives you the daily opportunity to enjoy the professional *Tagesschau* presenters' perfectly pronounced, dialect-free Standard High German.

Alternatively, you can always visit the city of *Hannover*, (with two “n” in German) – the capital of the state of *Niedersachsen* (Lower Saxony) and famously the only German city without a noticeable dialect.



However, you will soon discover that a significant proportion of German intellectuals, creative professionals, managers and white-collar workers in other German cities also proudly claim to speak Standard High German without a dialect. In fact, most German “professionals” tend to consider themselves to be on the same level as *Tagesschau* newsreaders, or at least on par with Hanoverians when it comes to “flawless” German.

Of course, such self-proclaimed *Hochdeutsch*-speakers often don't realise that their version of High German still has a long way to go before it would be considered impeccable. For one that's due to the almost imperceptible dialect inflections, glottal stops, and ending omissions that most Germans display without even realising. For another, and for us more importantly here, their respective dialect will inadvertently shine through whenever they use any of the many regional exclamations, greetings, and standard phrases and specific local designations for everyday objects which differ considerably from region to region.

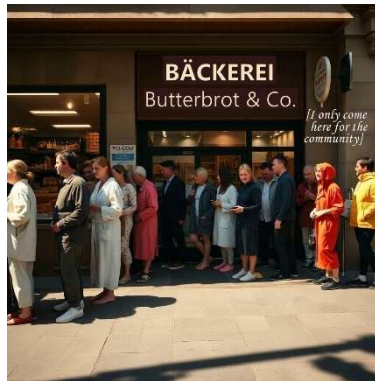
The most famous example for this astounding diversity of names for the same object in different parts of the country comes in the unassuming shape of the „*Brötchen*“, [ˈbrœtˈʃən]. Which is not only the diminutive form of the word „*Brot*“, (“bread”), meaning “small bread”, but incidentally also Germany's most beloved breakfast item.

Germans simply love their freshly baked bread rolls, typically made from wheat- or rye flour or a mixture of different flour-types. Baked during the night by your bakery around the corner, it is then usually enjoyed in the morning with a spread of butter and either with all kinds of jam or Nutella™ for those with a sweet tooth, or with a slice of cheese, ham, or salami, if you're more the salty type.

During the more relaxed and extensive Sunday morning breakfast, many Germans also don't want to miss out on an additional boiled egg together with their crispy „*Brötchen*“, which can either be a singular bread roll, („*das Brötchen*“), or a plurality of rolls, („*die Brötchen*“). The extent to which Germans favour their „*Frühstücksbrötchen*“ ([ˈfrueˈstueksˈbrœtˈʃən], (“breakfast bread roll”), can be observed on any given Sunday morning, when Germans can be seen queuing in long lines outside their local bakery.

Often dressed in casual jogging attire or even pyjamas, bathrobes and slippers, they wait patiently for their turn to buy a paper bag filled with fresh „Brötchen“ for their relaxed „Sonntagsfrühstück“. (And yes, despite the fact that most German shops are indeed closed on the seventh day of the week, bakeries are usually open on Sundays, albeit with reduced opening hours.)

At the latest when you’ve developed the German habit of enjoying lavish Sunday morning breakfasts with your significant other, or when you have started to regularly meet up with your German friends for lazy Saturday morning brunches in your kitchen, you too will have become an active part of this „Brötchen“-tradition – and thus also of the weekend-queue at the bakery. In that case, don't let the grumpy faces of the other „Brötchenholer“ (“bread roll fetchers”) put you off. Just remember that Germans in general don't engage in meaningless small talk or friendly smiles with strangers, and they certainly don't on an early Sunday morning.



But let’s get back to you. So, here you are now, patiently standing in line during your first „Brötchen“-fetching mission in Germany. Finally, you’ve made it to the top of the line and stand at the bakery counter, facing the sales assistant who greets you with a brisk „Guten Morgen. Was darf’s sein?“ (“Good morning. What will it be?”). And suddenly it hits you: How should you actually call the bread rolls you’re about to order?

Now, as a recognisable expat or visitor, (no shame in that), the assistant will probably let you off the hook if you use the generic Standard High German term and order „Vier Brötchen, bitte.“, (“Four bread rolls, please.”). And this will also perfectly suffice if you live in a larger city or in an area where the actual term „Brötchen“ is the generally accepted name.

However, things may look a bit different if you find yourself instead in a bakery beyond the boundaries of most large urban centres, for instance in a tiny mountain village in the Bavarian Alps, or in a dreamy medieval-like town somewhere along the Palatinate Wine Route, or in an old-established bakery in the district of *Märkisches Viertel* in Berlin.

Here, the rustic baker, or his wife, or son, or daughter, might in fact react with a slight frown upon hearing this uncommon generic term. Moreover, it isn’t unheard of that a baker or assistant will simply pretend not to understand a request for „Brötchen“ – either out of spite and misguided local pride, (seeing it as their “God-ordained duty” to educate you on the correct vocabulary used in their neck of the woods), or because they genuinely haven’t used this generic term in years.



Since „*Brötchen*“ are so close to the Germans’ heart and because they are just as ubiquitous in Germany as the corner shop bakeries where they are made and sold, these bread rolls and their manifold regional denotations serve as living proof for the centuries of German fragmentation as well as an indicator for the extent to which regional heritage and tradition are still an integral part of life in modern-day

Germany. Hence, should you encounter a baker who insists on your use of the locally common name for your small breakfast bread, don’t take it personal and just go with the flow, knowing that also Germans often have no idea what a „*Brötchen*“ is called beyond their own region.

But of course, the proof lies in the pudding, as the British say. So, let’s dive into the dough of the matter and visit the German regions with the most prominent alternative local names for the baked national treasure.

As is the case with almost all standard name-nouns in modern German, also the generic term „*Brötchen*“ has found its way into general use in some regions like Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Nordrhein-Westfalen as well as northern Rheinland-Pfalz, northern Sachsen-Anhalt and parts of Niedersachsen, Hessen, and Brandenburg. In these areas you can safely use the Standard High German term, partly because the name is actually the most obvious one – after all, a „*Brötchen*“ looks like a small (as indicated by the „-chen“ ending) loaf of bread – and partly because earlier dialect names have gone out of fashion here.

One dialect term for the bread roll that hasn’t gone out of fashion but is instead the probably best-known dialect-term nationwide is „*die Semmel*“, which is used in Thüringen, southern Sachsen-Anhalt, Sachsen, and most famously in Bayern. Here, tradition-conscious natives will in fact only accept this term when you order for instance the typical Bavarian snack of „*Leberkas’ Semmel*“, which incidentally is neither made of „*Leber*“, (“liver”), nor of „*Kas’/Käse*“, (“cheese”), but instead of a thick slice of densely pressed beef- and pork sausage-meat, put on a buttered bread roll and spread with mustard. (Good stuff.)

Next door to Bavaria, in Baden-Württemberg with its capital Stuttgart, they decided to call the bread roll instead „*Wecken*“, „*Weckla*“, „*Weckle*“, or „*Weckli*“, as they do also in Switzerland, Rhein-Hessen, the Pfalz region and in the Saarland, who are all using a variation of a term deriving from the Middle High German word „*wec*“, which surprisingly means nothing else but “little bread”.

Around seven hundred kilometres further up north in Germany, particularly in Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, and parts of north-western Niedersachsen, people are reputedly a rather pragmatic and no-nonsense lot. Which is probably why they are calling their breakfast roll simply „*Rundstück*“, which translates to the prosaic term, “round piece”.

Folks in the northern city-state of Bremen, however, break rank

and do their own thing, (as usual), by calling the roll instead a „**Krosse**“, because the adjective „*kross*“ means “crispy” in German and that’s just how the crust of any fresh „*Brötchen*“ should be.

Aside from the Bavarian „*Semmel*“, the other most widely known dialect-term for a „*Brötchen*“ comes from Berlin, where the roll is known as „**Schrippe**“, deriving from the slightly torn („*geschrippte*“) top-crust of the bread roll and used in Berlin since the late 18th century.

True to form and in line with the famously rude „*Berliner Schnauze*“, (“Berliner yap”), Berliners sometimes also use the term „*Olle Schrippe*“, (“old bread roll”), to refer to a woman who looks no longer like their beloved breakfast pastry, in other words, not anymore “crisp and fresh”. And while the name „*Schrippe*“ is also used in Brandenburg, parts of Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, this derogatory use of the term remains exclusive to Berlin.

A genuine peculiarity on this trip around „*Brötchen*“-Germany represents the small German island of *Hiddensee* in the Baltic Sea, where the islanders use their very own and unique name for the breakfast roll. The word „**Bömmel**“ was coined by the *Kasten*-bakery in the town of *Kloster*, an important institution on the island for three generations of bakers, still using a charcoal-fired oven and over 100-year-old machines as well as traditional recipes. All this dedication and love for tradition certainly deserves the right to name their special island-bread rolls whatever they like.

The last leg on the „*Brötchen*“ round trip takes the proof for the provincial dialect-differences to the extreme and us to the German region of Franconia. *Franken* is a thrice sub-divided area in northern Bavaria where each sub-region insists on its own individual term for the German equivalent to the French croissant or the British breakfast toast.

While people in Lower Franconia (*Unterfranken*) use the terms „**Kipf**“ or „**Brötli**“, their brethren a few kilometres further down the road to the east in Upper Franconia (*Oberfranken*), instead prefer to put their jam or ham on a „**Laabla**“, „**Semmala**“, „**Brötla**“, „**Stella**“ or „**Stolle**“. The two regions’ southern neighbours in Middle Franconia (*Mittelfranken*), however, will only have a „**Weggla**“ with their *Bratwurst*, *Rindswurst*, *Fleischwurst*, *Leberwurst*, *Teewurst*, *Gelbwurst*, or breakfast egg.

Naturally, this brief overview only provides a small part of the overall picture of the diverse dialect denotations in German. Other famous examples for this diversity include for instance the regional names for the German version of a donut, or doughnut, which doesn’t have a hole in the middle but many different names, including „**Kreppel**“ in Hesse, „**Pfannkuchen**“ in Berlin but „**Berliner**“ in North-Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg, „**Fastnachtsküchle**“ in the Saarland, and „**Krapfen**“ in Bavaria. Therefore, you probably won’t be surprised to hear that such regional dialect boundaries don’t stop at names but have their fingers in the linguistic pie even when it comes to German greetings and farewells.



„Servus, Grüezi und Hallo!” – All the German Greetings



Back in the year 1977, when German *Volksmusik*, (folk music, not to be confused with American folk music in any aspect), was still mainstream and the Berlin Wall still divided East- and West-Germany seemingly for at least the next two centuries, the popular German folk singer-sisters *Maria* and *Margot Hellwig* conquered the West-German music charts with their song, *„Servus, Grüezi und Hallo!”*, combining the most frequently used greetings of the three, (okay, nominally four at the time), German-speaking countries. The first verse of their song, (including a bit of yodelling), goes like this:

*„Servus, Grüezi und Hallo,
Holleroihi,
Wir singen heute von schönen Ländern,
Von Österreich, Deutschland und der Schweiz,
Von unsrer Heimat und unsren Nachbarn,
Und grüßen herzlich allerseits.“*

[*„Servus, Grüezi, and Hallo,
Holleroihi, (that’s the yodelling bit),
Today we sing of beautiful countries,
Of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland,
Of our homeland and our neighbours,
And are greeting everyone from our heart.”*]

Now, first the short and good news: These three semi-formal greetings will always serve you well in their respective countries in everyday situations outside of official occasions or business encounters.

And now the slightly longer and more, well, nuanced news: People in all three DACH-countries (Deutschland, Austria, Confoederatio Helvetica) still tend to attach considerable importance to the differences between formal and informal addresses, as well as (particularly in rural areas) to the correct use of their much-preferred regional dialect greetings.

But prior to saying *„Hallo”* to the colloquial salutations in various parts of the *Deutsche Sprachraum*, let’s first sneak a peek at those formal and informal greetings universally used in all three DACH-countries as well as other German-speaking regions. Before we can do that, though, we need to first clarify the touchy topic of how to correctly address a person formally or informally in German.

„Sie Bastard!“ or „Du Bastard!“ – The Correct Form of Address

As you may have already noticed, the German language goes to great lengths to distinguish between the two grammatical forms of address, even featuring its own verb conjugations for the formal „Sie“ (“you”). In other words, this is a serious matter that most adult people in all three German-speaking countries don't take lightly.



Using the informal „Du“-form with an unfamiliar, senior or higher-ranking person without being explicitly told that this is OK remains one of the fastest and easiest ways to insult a German-speaker, especially if the person is older and/or higher up the social ladder than you, (and should you address a German police officer with „Du“ or in the „Du“-form, it can even set you back several hundred or even thousand Euros in fines).

Finding yourself in polite company as the younger or “inferior” party and using the informal „Du” form without being invited to do so might at best label you as careless or uninformed – and at worst as deliberately rude and disrespectful.

On the other hand, if you are the older or “superior” party and use „Du” with unfamiliar 18–29-year-olds, you run the risk of coming across as some wannabe youngster – just like actor *Steve Buscemi* in the famous “Hello, fellow kids!” meme. The once rigid social boundaries may have become far more relaxed in recent years but, to be honest, it still depends mainly on your appearance and manner whether German-speaking young people will accept you using the informal „Du“-form of address or whether they will burst out laughing sarcastically. This aside, however, you can certainly bet your old, wall-mounted skateboard that you’ll earn yourself a load of sardonic sniggers whenever you address any teenager younger than 18 in the “adult” form with „Sie” in any but a very obviously ironic manner.

So, as you can see, the whole matter is rather complicated. On top of it all, the correct form of address is always also a matter of tonality and individual circumstances. German-students whose native language does not distinguish between formal and informal addresses will therefore usually need some time to familiarise themselves with these German social norms and their grammatical rules, of course.

Broadly speaking it is best to stick to the formal „Sie” address with any unfamiliar, older, or higher-ranking person, unless you’re explicitly told that: „Wir können uns auch gerne duzen!”, (“We can also switch to first-name terms, if you like.”), where „duzen” [ˈdʊʊˈtsən] is the German verb for using the informal „Du”-form, while „siezen” [ˈsiːˈtsən], is the verb for using the formal „Sie”-form.

Then again, if the management or HR at your new company has introduced a modern “We’re all best friends here!” policy, the „Du” form of address is not only the norm, but any deviation from it will also be seen

as an unwillingness to integrate into the company's "big family". Usually, though, someone will let you know right at the beginning that „*Wir sagen hier alle Du zueinander*“ (“We all use the ‘Du’ form with each other here”).

In case you’re working in a more traditional company, though, and you know that your German-speaking colleague is of the same age as you or younger and/or has the same or a lower rank, you have the “right” to suggest switching from the formal to the informal address by saying something like, „*Wir können auch 'Du' zueinander sagen, oder? Ich bin übrigens der Maximilian.*“ (“We can also just say ‘Du’ to each other, if that's okay with you. I’m Max, by the way.”).

Finally, please make a note on the inside of your eyelids that the formal “you”, „*Sie*“ [ˈzɪə], in written German is always spelled with a capital “S” and the formal “your”, „*Ihr*“ [ˈɪər], („*Ihre, Ihrer, Ihren, Ihrem, Ihres*”), is always spelled with a capital “I”, for instance in: „*Ist das Ihr Kind?*“ (“Is this your child?”); „*Ich treffe mich mit Ihrer Frau.*“ (“I meet with your wife.”); or: „*Schön, Sie ohne Ihren Mann zu sehen.*“ (“Nice to see you without your husband.”), with the pronoun-ending depending on the grammatical case and the gender of the object.

Writing „*sie*“ with a lowercase “s” changes the meaning of the word to either “she”, as in the sentence: „*Schön, sie ohne ihren Mann zu sehen.*“ (“Nice to see her without her husband.”); or to “they/their/them”, as in: „*Das geht sie nichts an!*“ (“That’s none of their business!”) in contrast to: „*Das geht Sie nichts an!*“ (“That none of your business!”)

In short, uppercase and lowercase letters aren't just a fancy way of making German more difficult for foreigners but can actually make a profound difference to the meaning of a word. And with that said, let’s now get on to

The Universal German Greetings & Goodbyes

You might have wondered what all the above “formal vs informal addresses” hullabaloo has to do with standard German greetings in everyday situations. Only to then realise, of course, that there must also be different German dialect salutations for formal and informal situations. In other words, you would naturally greet someone with whom you're on first-name terms in a different way compared to someone you meet in an official setting or for the first time.

Since you (usually) wouldn't say “Hey dude!” to your boss, or “How do you do, Milady?” to the young barista when ordering a coffee at your local Starbucks™ alternative, German provides you with a variety of greetings for different social situations. As a little guidance, you find therefore the term “formal” below if the salutation is appropriate when you’re addressing the person in the formal „*Sie*“-form. The same applies vice versa to “informal” greetings and the „*Du*“-form. And a "semi-formal" greeting is one that is used with friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and in semi-official settings.

„Guten Morgen!”

[formal; semi-formal]



The first German greeting of the day is, of course, the equivalent to the English “Good morning”. Whether you meet your landlord on your way to work or greet the doorman at the company entrance, you will probably utter the phrase **„Guten Morgen.”**, [~Goo'ten Moar'gain], several times before you have even arrived at your office desk or workplace, where you will then reply to the greeting in the same manner several

more times before 10:00 am.

However, after the seventeenth repetition within an hour, (or if you are still nursing a hangover from last night and can't be arsed), you might switch to the greeting's less formal abbreviation of **„Morgen.”**, (“Morning.”), which is also used in more casual situations, such as when you greet the guy behind the kiosk counter where you buy your daily newspaper or when you say hello to the friendly barista at your favourite Starbucks™ alternative.

Then there's also a special variant of this greeting that should not go unmentioned here, which consists of a play on words with the German term for yawning, i.e. **„gähnen”**, or rather the onomatopoeic expression **„Gähn!”** (“Yawn!”). So, if you want to make it clear that you are still dog-tired or that the person you are talking to looks like they didn't get a wink of sleep last night, then you can use the **„Morgen!”**-variant of **„Morgähn!”**

„Guten Tag!”

[formal; semi-formal]

Other than in English, where the morning is nowadays immediately followed by noon, German inserts an additional time-span between morning and noon, called **„der Vormittag”**, [~Fore'mittak], equivalent to the out-of-date English “forenoon”, which lasts roughly from 10:00 am to 12:00 am. During this time, you might already switch to the most general German greeting of **„Guten Tag.”**, [~Goo'ten Tak], i.e., “Good day”, with clients, customers, or superiors, or you continue to use the morning greeting. However, chances are that if you use **„Guten Morgen”** after at the latest 10:30 am with your colleagues, they might get the impression that you are a “lazy layabout” and reply to you with a raised eyebrow and a sarcastic, “Oh, you just woke up? Well, well, then you're surely all set now for a long day, right?”

Usually and in contrast to **„Guten Morgen”**, however, you don't use the full all-purpose greeting **„Guten Tag”** with your colleagues and friends but instead keep it short and informal by using the abbreviated



version of „**Tag!**“ (“G'day!”), which is often also pronounced „**Tach!**“, with an emphasis on the hard [ch]-sound typical for the by now familiar hairball-regurgitating cat. Outside of the office and workplace, the casual „**Tag.**“ is also fine when entering a shop or a taxi, when greeting your neighbour in passing or as a casual greeting introducing a request or a question, such as, „*Tach, ich hätte gerne zwei Bratwürste mit Senf.*“, (“Hi, I'd like two grilled sausages with mustard.”) or, „*Tach, kann ich Deine Telefonnummer haben?*“, (“Hi, can I have your phone number?”).

Just remember, while you can still get away with greeting your boss or a familiar customer or client with a semi-casual „*Morgen.*“, the same people won't react quite as amicable to being greeted with the more slangy „**Tag.**“, since this would clearly indicate a lack of respect or even deliberate rudeness. In official and semi-professional situations you might therefore want to either stick to „*Guten Tag,*“ followed by the person's surname („*Herr Müller.; Frau Maier.*“), or to the more relaxed yet still polite „**Hallo, freut mich.**“, [ˌhallo, ʁɔɪt mɛɛch], (“Hello, my pleasure.”), when introduced for the first time, or the simple „**Hallo, wie geht's?**“, [ˌhallo, vɛɐ̯ ɡɛtəs?], (“Hello, how are you?”), when you have already established some familiarity.

That said, many larger German cities also feature at least one neighbourhood where things are done and said a bit differently, where people are more relaxed and creatively dressed, the pavements and shop windows are more colourful, the street noise is interspersed with all sorts of music, and the general mood is a couple of notches livelier. In districts like the Hamburger *Schanzenviertel*, Frankfurt's *Bahnhofsviertel*, Berlin's *Kreuzberg*, or the *Glockenbachviertel* in Munich, you will therefore hear the greeting of „**Tach!**“ and its local equivalents (see below) far more often than the official-sounding „*Guten Tag*“ in most settings and situations.

„**Mahlzeit!**“

[semi-formal]



When the *Vormittag* slowly creeps up on *Mittag* [ˌMɪttak] – the “midday”, which falls during winter-time between 12:00 noon and 14:00 (2 pm) and shifts during summer-time often to 13:00 – 15:00 (1 to 3 pm) – you will unavoidably begin to hear what's probably the most German of all German greetings echoing through the corridors and hallways of most German companies and factories: The equally peculiar and ubiquitous salutation of „**Mahlzeit!**“, [ˌMarl'tsɛɪd].

See, in 19th century Germany, people used to wish each other „*Gesegnete Mahlzeit*“, (“a blessed meal” or “blessed mealtime”) before lunch, which has long since been abbreviated to the nowadays often half-barked „**Mahlzeit!**“, used as a greeting among colleagues in offices, canteens, factories, and on construction sites. Additionally, some people tend to use the expression also at the lunch table as another way to wish others “*Bon appetite*” [ˌbɒn ˈæpl̩ tɪts; (allegedly)], for which there's in fact the German expression of „**Guten Appetit!**“, [ˌɡʊːtən ˈapɛtɪt].

Weirdly enough, you will come across the word „*Mahlzeit*” also in a completely different context, namely when something suddenly goes “catastrophically” wrong or when someone has to complete an unpleasant task. For instance, when you grab a jar from the centre of the pyramid of mustard jars in the supermarket with predictable results and the store manager subsequently comments on the huge mess you created on the floor with the words: „***Na, prost Mahlzeit!***”, (equal to the sarcastic English: “Well, cheers!” or: “Wow, great!”) before wordlessly handing you the mop – to which you comment resignedly to yourself: „*Ja, prost Mahlzeit ...*”, (“Yeah, great...”)

Anyway, after lunchtime is over, the greeting of „*Mahlzeit!*” disappears just as quickly as it had suddenly popped up everywhere in the hour before the daily grub-grabbing. So, now what? What, for instance, do you say if you meet your CEO or the company janitor in the lift after lunch? Well, in such cases you can always fall back on the all-purpose „*Guten Tag*” or „*Hallo*”, of course, or even to „*Hi!*” or „*Hey!*”, if mutual familiarity allows. What you can’t do, however, is using the German equivalent of the English “Good afternoon” – and that’s because it simply doesn’t exist.

Sure, since German knows the time before noon as „*Vormittag*”, it naturally also possesses a word for the afternoon, called „*Nachmittag*”. Nonetheless, for some reason, German-speakers use neither of these times of day in any kind of greeting, unless in an ironic or sarcastic way. So, should a German-speaker wish you a „*Guten Nachmittag*”, he or she is most likely pulling your leg – or they want to poignantly point out that it is indeed already afternoon, (i.e. past 2 or 3 pm), and that you have clearly overrun your lunch break.

„**Schönen Feierabend.**”

[formal; semi-formal]

When the big hand on the analogue clock encroaches on the 6 and the small hand advances to the 12 – or, as they say in Europe, when it’s close to eighteen o’clock – most office workers will start to pack up their “body bags”, attaché cases and Dior™ handbags and get ready to start the enjoyable part of their day. (Yes, some companies start the day early and finish already at 16:30, others at 17:00. So, sue me.) Regardless of the time, however, they will all take their leave only after bidding their colleagues farewell for the day. But it would be far too simple, of course, if Germans would just use the German equivalent of “Goodbye” or some variation of “See ya!” or “Cheerio!” at this occasion. No, to no one’s surprise, there is of course a specific phrase to be said to anyone nearby in the office before leaving, which is: „**[Einen] schönen Feierabend!**”, [Aye’nen] shoi’nen Fire’ah’bent].

Literally, the phrase means “(Have a) nice celebration evening!”. Yet, the concept of „*Feierabend*” is actually a bit more complicated than this direct translation would suggest. See, on the one hand, „*Feierabend*”



refers to the exact moment when you put down your pencil, switch off your computer, drop the hammer, clock out, or do whatever else marks the end of your working day. Which is also why one of the most common chat-up lines among office workers is: „*Wann hast du heute Feierabend?*“, (“When do you finish work today?”), which is usually answered with an exact time, e.g., „*Um achtzehn Uhr. Warum?*“, (“At six. Why?”).

On the other hand, the „*Feierabend*“ also encompasses the complete timespan after work, the “free” time in which you can occupy yourself with all the pleasant and unpleasant tasks outside of work, from going to the *Kneipe* for a beer or visiting a live concert to grocery shopping and cleaning the kitchen. That’s why another popular chat-up line among the employed population is: „*Was machst du am Feierabend?*“, (i.e., “What do you do after work?”).

Apart from these work-related uses, the term „*Feierabend*“ also appears in another, somewhat quite different context. Picture for instance a scene in which your four-year-old son woke you up at half past six on a Sunday morning with a gush of orangeade from his drinking cup right into your face. At breakfast he or she then slaps the Nutella™ sandwich in your face only to next grab your coffee mug and pour your desperately needed morning brew all over your laptop. At that point you may perhaps finally snap and admonish your “little angel” with a heart-felt: „**Jetzt ist aber Feierabend!**“, (i.e., “Alright, that’s really it now!”), before proceeding with further adequate parental education methods.

„Guten Abend.“

[formal; semi-formal]



Once you have „*Feierabend*“ and left the office, you will probably either get into your car or take public transportation to finally get home and enjoy the few precious hours before bedtime. After circling the streets in your car in ever-increasing loops in search of a legal parking space or after enduring the diverse fragrant mix of tightly packed tired office workers, drunk youngsters, excited opera-goers, headscarves-

wearing old women and grumpy old men on the underground train, you walk another ten minutes along the street-lamps-lit alleys to your home.

As you approach the entrance door to your residential house, you rummage in your pocket for the house key, when suddenly, your neighbour *Herr Reineke* appears out of nowhere and calls your name in his inimitable, smoothly vibrating voice.

Startled, you flinch briefly until you recognise your neighbour's narrow face, reddish hair and fine moustache and smile a bit uncertainly before replying, „**Guten Abend, Herr Reineke!**“, [~Goo'ten Ah'bent, Hair Rai'neck'e!], adding his surname with the address „*Herr*“, (i.e., “Mr.”, or in case of a woman, „*Frau*“, i.e., “Ms.”), as a sign of respect.

„*Ja, auch Ihnen einen guten Abend.*“, (“Yes, a good evening to you too”), answers Reineke, with a smile but without adding your name. However, you don’t feel peeved by his omission of a “proper address”,

since you know that there is no hidden sleight implied by using just the simple friendly greeting of “Good evening” in German.

Paradoxically, in certain circumstances you will appear even more friendly if you simply use the short form of the evening greeting which is **„Abend”** or **„n’Abend”**, [ˌnʰahˈbɛnt], the “n’” being abbreviated from *„einen Abend”*, i.e., “an evening”. (Mind, you would never not abbreviate the *„einen”*. It’s always *„n’Abend”*.) This short form is used if you meet each other regularly in passing, e.g. with neighbours, loose acquaintances or the regular cashier at your local supermarket. You would also throw a laconic *„n’Abend”* to your friends upon arriving at your regulars’ table-meeting or to the “boss” whirling around behind the counter of your favourite Döner Kebab shop.

In all cases, the formless familiarity that resonates in *„n’Abend”* expresses personal closeness, whereas a formal *„Guten Abend”* tends to create more of a distance. Unless, that is, if you announce your presence with a loud and exaggeratedly pronounced *„Guten Abend!”*, where the deliberately ironic tone of voice, as is so often the case in German, “makes the music”, (*„Der Ton macht die Musik”* = “It’s not so much what you say but how you say it”), which cancels out the otherwise prevalent formality.

When you are out and about town, you can use the standard version *„Guten Abend”*, without any personal address when meeting unacquainted persons all through the evening, which runs from around 18:30 *Uhr* [ˌʊʁ] (a term that means “clock”, but also “o’clock”), to 23:30 *Uhr*, (or 6:30 pm to 11:30 pm). During this time, you wish a *„Guten Abend”* to the head waiter in the elegant restaurant just as to your blind date you meet there for the first time as well as to the policeman who stops your car for a breathalyser test after your date and to the taxi driver who takes you home the rest of the way.

„Gute Nacht.”

[formal; semi-formal; informal]

Following the arrival at your residential home and after paying the taxi fare plus the usual ten per cent tip in cash, you peel yourself out of the passenger seat, close the taxi door from the outside and wish your smirking driver a **„Gute Nacht”**, ([ˌɡʊːtəˈnaxt], again with that persistent cat’s harsh “CH”-sound).

While you can still hear the cabby condescendingly murmur something like, *„Keene Haare uff’m Kopp, aba ‘n Kamm inner Tasche ...”* while driving away, you start to wonder what your hair has got to do with anything, before asking yourself with a sudden flash of panic whether you might have unwittingly committed a *faux pas* and been too intimate or even flirty by wishing the taxi driver a *„Gute Nacht”*.

After all, that’s what you usually only say to your children before switching off their room’s light and leaving them lying alone in the dark with the resident monster under their bed; or at best to your loving spouse



before extinguishing the bedside lamps and the TV with your conveniently placed shammer, no?

Well, more or less. When German-speaking parents are switching off their children's room light to leave their offspring fend for themselves during the obligatory eight hours of unconsciousness while hallucinating in the dark, they traditionally like to extend their good night wishes to: **„Gute Nacht und träum' was Schönes“**, (“Good night and dream something nice”), or they even go the full nine yards with: **„Gute Nacht, schlaf recht schön und träum' was Schönes“**, [~Goo'te nacht, shlaaf raicht shoin doont troim' vas schoi'nes], i.e., “Good night, sleep nicely and dream something nice”.

Only an informed minority of parents will subsequently also look under their child's bed to loudly proclaim: **„Und Du auch, Bettmonster!“**, (“And you too, monster under the bed!”), before hitting the light switch on their hurried way out of the room – just to keep the little ones on their toes, you understand.

Outside of their own four walls, Germans use their equivalent to the English “Good night” almost exclusively as a farewell and never as a greeting. The general consensus among German-speakers seems to be that you can safely express this wish for another person's nocturnal well-being whenever you have developed a certain rapport over a shared time or experience with the addressee, and/or after having established a short-term relationship between service provider and service recipient.

In this way, it is completely fine to wish a **„Gute Nacht“** to your night nurse in the hospital, to your taxi driver, to your waiter after an enjoyable evening at the restaurant or to the lady or gentleman with whom you have spent said evening together. On the other hand, you will almost certainly raise sceptical eyebrows if you suddenly blurt out **„Gute Nacht“** to the grumpy night bus driver, the tired petrol station clerk, or the unsmiling policeman after your breathalyser test.

Until as recently as the turn of the millennium, it was in fact quite unusual to wish anyone other than family and close friends a good night in German. Today, however, social etiquette has become more relaxed and whether your taxi driver will smile amicably or raise instead a consternated eyebrow will mainly depend on your intonation of the farewell phrase. After all, a jovially proclaimed **„Gute Nacht!“** differs quite substantially from a sensually whispered **„Gute Nacht ...“** to your driver – and in the latter case your excuse of having polished off the second bottle of wine during your disappointing dinner date probably won't suffice.

Unsurprisingly, the more informal farewell for the night also comes in abbreviated form, which is of course, **„Nacht“**. This is usually mumbled almost in passing when male friends say goodbye to each other after being thrown out of the pub at 4:00 am, (while female friends celebrate a comparatively longer farewell-ritual in such cases), or when you're the last person in the office to switch off the PC late at night and suddenly feel the dull urge to inform the cleaning lady in passing about the ridiculous time of day, so that she knows that you know how thoroughly miserable you both are.

However, both **„Nacht“** and **„Gute Nacht“** are still most frequently heard during family bedtime routine, often also happily hollered half a

dozen times from the depths of the nightly children's room and sometimes mingled with shrieks and cries. But only if the monster under the bed feels unusually hungry that night.

„Hallo!“

[semi-formal; informal]



This leaves us now merely with all the other situations where the above greetings and farewells would be, for one reason or another, inappropriate or unsuitable for the respective circumstances. In other words, those greetings you can use in situations where a proper „Guten Tag“ would come across as strangely stiff and impersonal, but a casual „Tach“ would make you look like a wannabe teenager or a “gate-crasher” who pretends to be part of a group you’ve never met before.

Fortunately, German, like many other languages, has for just such occasions the universally understood greetings of „Hallo“, [~hallow], „Hey!“, or „Hi!“ ready for use. Most common among these three greetings is „Hallo“, which sounds almost exactly like the English word “hallow”, and is clearly distinguishable from the English “hello”. Outside of business meetings and official occasions, you can rarely go wrong with „Hallo“, which incidentally is also used as a shout to get someone’s attention in a semi-rude or urgent way. In such cases, the word is also frequently used in the combinations of „Hey, hallo!“ or „Hey, hallo, Sie!“, (“Hey, hello, you there!”).

In order to get someone's attention in a friendlier and more informal way, German women in particular also like to use the exclamation „Huhu!“, [~hoo'hoo]. You hear this called over the garden fence to neighbours as well as in pedestrian zones when friends or acquaintances bump into each other or when your doorbell rings and you open the door only to find your long-lost third cousin on your doorstep, who greets you with a „Huhu!“ as if he had just popped out to buy cigarettes and not disappeared into the Amazon jungle for the last three decades.

But back to the original „Hallo“ and the fact that, as is the case with many German one-word expressions, also here the intonation makes all the difference. That’s why a quick outburst of a half-yelled „Hallo!“ will be recognised as an urgent signal to another person, while a questioning and longer stretched „Hallooo?“ can mean, “Hello, is anybody there?” but also, “Hey, are you just slow on the uptake or is there really a total vacuum between your ears?”

When you’re roaming the streets in a German town or city, though, a friendly and neutrally voiced „Hallo“ will usually guarantee you plain sailing, no matter whether you are entering a shop, are introduced to someone new in your circle of acquaintances or are just getting into a Taxi. Instead of receiving the same greeting in return, however, you can often expect to hear in its place one of the many regional dialect versions

of this basic greeting, the most important of which you will become acquainted with more intimately further down below.

But before our long haul across the landscape of regional dialect-greetings in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland – and since you can't just say “hello” to someone without saying “goodbye” later – our next stop will be a peek at the customary general farewells in German.

„Auf Wiedersehen.”

[formal; semi-formal]



If there's one German farewell phrase that Hollywood's movie industry has made damn sure to disseminate successfully over the years, then it is indubitable the phrase **„Auf Wiedersehen”**, [~Aʊf Vee'da'sai'hən], which conveys the nice meaning of: “May we see each other again.” And although the phrase is a few syllables longer than the English “Goodbye”, the complete farewell still remains the most

commonly used “goodbye” in German, whether in business and official settings or in everyday life.

So, yes, you would make the effort of enunciating the complete phrase to the waiter while leaving your new favourite *Schnitzel*-restaurant, just as you would do when you'd bid farewell to *Ernst August Albert Otto Rupprecht Oskar Berthold Friedrich-Ferdinand Christian-Ludwig Prince of Hanover Duke of Brunswick and Lüneburg Royal Prince of Great Britain and Ireland* (*1954), wayward scion of the historic German noble house of the *Welfen* (Guelphs) and great-grandson of the last German Emperor Wilhelm II.

Believe it or not, but this *Prinz von Großbritannien und Nord-Irland* and one of the highest-ranking German “aristocrats”, has also been one of the most notoriously misbehaved public figures in Germany in the early 2000s. Although the privileges and titles of the German nobility were rigorously abolished when the Weimar Constitution came into force on 14 August 1919, it appeared that *Ernst August*, as he is commonly known, had never received the memo and continued to behave like he owned the place just like his great-grandfather, (who at least actually *was* the emperor of Germany).

In January 1998, for instance, *Ernst August* beat up a cameraman and a photographer with his umbrella while being filmed by the former. This incident made national headlines and earned the *Welfen*-prince the nicknames *„Prügelprinz”* (“Prince Bashing”) and *„PrügelAugust”* respectively. Most famously, though, during the ‘2000 World Expo’ in Hannover, *Ernst August* was photographed by a paparazzo while urinating at the wall of the Turkish pavilion, which earned him the additional nickname of *„Pinkelprinz”* (“Pee Prince”) from the tabloid press.

There have been other incidents with *„PrügelAugust”*, for example in Africa, where he had allegedly beaten someone so badly that the victim

needed to be hospitalised. But fortunately for all sides, in the following years the „Prinz“ calmed down and finally disappeared from the public radar.

All this notwithstanding, though, should you ever personally meet *Ernst August* unexpectedly, e.g. at the next World Expo, remember that even he deserves a polite „Auf Wiedersehen“ before you make haste to take your leave. Unless you find him and yourself in Bavaria, of course, where people prefer to say „**Auf Wiederschauen**“, which means exactly the same, only in Bavarian.

Anyway, naturally there exists also a shortened version of the most German of farewells, which is the ubiquitous „**Wiederseh’n**“, [~Wee'da'sain]. Once again, your intonation and the situation will determine whether this farewell is understood as a casual and good-natured goodbye between amicable acquaintances or whether you have just expressed a deliberate slight and insulted the addressee in front of all their colleagues at their own retirement party. Generally, however, you will hear this short goodbye from anyone who just popped into the petrol station for a sixpack of beer or to quickly pick up their pizzas at the local pizzeria.

Incidentally, there's also a special variation of „**Wiederseh’n**“ that is exclusively reserved for your drinking mates after you've realised that the pub-floor has suddenly turned into the deck of a ship in heavy weather. Fortunately, this ship usually has an exit-door to the street – which you are now desperately trying to reach. However, not before turning to the table of friends and slurring „**Wirsing!**“, [~veer'sing], which is the universally recognised drunken form of the German farewell and incidentally happens to be also the German word for a “savoy cabbage”.

Furthermore, „**Wirsing**“ is merely the final part of the famous goodbye-trifecta of the drunken German, which starts with the assurance that everything is okay by slurring „**Ice Hockey**“, wanting to say, „*Alles okay!*“, (“All good!”), followed by insisting that driving is still no problem when mumbling „**Kanu fah’n**“, [canoe fah'n], which is the slurred German term for “canoeing” („*Kanu fahren*“) but used here to express the half-sentence: „*(Ich) Kann noch fahren*“ (“[I] Can still drive!”). Only then will you conclude this farewell ceremony with a heart-felt „**Wirsing!**“, to bid your drinking buddies goodbye before stumbling out of the pub's door to get some sorely needed fresh air.

But that's just a side note for those who want to learn more about German pub culture together with their German friends. All you really need to remember is to combine your „**Wiederseh’n!**“ with a friendly smile and a nod and not to completely misread the vibe in the room or the facial expression of your boss in order to get away with the more flippant version of the German “goodbye”.

„Tschüss!“

[semi-formal; informal]

Now, you would think that with all these different variations of the traditional German goodbye-phrase, there certainly is no need for yet another way to bid others farewell. However, if you truly believe that German is that simple then you clearly haven't paid attention until now, since otherwise you would know that German always has another twist up its sleeve.



In this case, it is the fact that most Germans actually don't use „Wiederseh'n" with family, friends and good acquaintances but prefer the far more leisurely goodbye-term „**Tschüss!**" [~tshuess]) instead – but you knew that already, of course.

However, bear in mind the restriction: "most Germans", because once you enter Bavaria or Austria, you will much rather notice the term „**Servus**" as a greeting as well as a goodbye. Alternatively, you might also hear as a farewell the familial singular „**Pfiat di**" [~feart'dee] or „**Pfiat di Gott**", the familial plural „**Pfiat eich**" or the formal singular „**Pfiat eana**" – all of which mean something along the lines of „Gott behüte dich", which translates to, "May God protect you".

Moreover, the people around Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg prefer instead to say, „**Adee**", (from "à Dieu"), or „**Tschissle**", while in Luxembourg they say „**Äddi**" (~æ'dee), and in Austria they made a habit out of taking their leave in a familial environment by saying – and I kid you not – „**Ba-Ba!**", probably derived from the English "bye-bye".

Be that as it may, though, the most common goodbye in most of Germany nowadays is and remains the short and succinct „**Tschüss**". A seemingly neutral word in terms of religion in comparison to all the Bavarian "blessings" and "God-greetings". But, as the saying goes, one should not count one's chickens before they hatch. In this case, a closer look quickly reveals that the term "**Tschüss**" either derived from the French "*à Dieu*", the Spanish "*a Dios*", or the Wallon "*Adjuus*", all having their roots in the Latin "*ad deum*" ("to God"), signifying that „**Tschüss**" is in the end merely the modern form of the greeting „May you be blessed by God".

However, should you really insist on refraining from any farewell-phrase that is related to religion, then you are best served by the Bavarian and Austrian „**Servus**", which derives from the Latin "*servus*" meaning "the slave" or "the servant" and as such being the short form of "I am your servant" or ultimately, "At your service".

But back to the basic „**Tschüss**" which over the years has been the plaything of the *zeitgeist* as well as various socio-cultural subgroups who have come up with their own variations of the term. For instance, still in use with the champagne-crowd, (and the Instagram™ and YouTube™ influencer scene), is the cringe-inducing „**Tschüssi**", preferably pronounced with an extra-long "i" at the end, i.e.: [~tshuess'eeee!]. Just

imagine a group of “Insta-girls” taking their leave from each other after an afternoon in some trendy inner-city champagne bar and you get the picture.

On the opposite side of the cultural spectrum, the ‘80s and ‘90s saw the advent of the nowadays mainly ironically used variation of „**Tschüssikowski**” [~tshuess’see’kovs’key], still in sporadic use with younger workers and “the lads”, as well as the abysmal and universally despised (yet still sometimes heard) „**Tschö mit Ö**”, (the equivalent to “Bye with Y”), which can predominantly be found in the Cologne area.

In general use to this day throughout northern and central Germany is the “normal” goodbye-variation of “**Tschö!**”, as well as its close relative, the more casual and familial „**Tschö-hö**”, as well as the diminutive and endearing „**Tschöchen**” (with a soft [ch]-sound), and the doubling „**Tschö-tschö**” that’s often used to bid farewell to a group.

Then there’s also, and only for completeness sake, word „**Tschüssing**”, which is mainly used by people born before the turn of the millennium and then purely in an ironic way – while the expression’s origin will as much remain forever in the dark as the answer to the question how someone could come up with such a cringy word in the first place.

Finally, the less is said about the wordplay with „**Tschüss**” and the state capital of North Rhine-Westphalia, the better. In any case, whoever came up with „**Tschüsseldorf**” as a “creative farewell variation” should definitely be banned from the Düsseldorf city limits for life.

When it comes to the next ubiquitous German goodbye term, you’re excused if you might assume that it derived from the same etymological roots as the terms „**Tschüss**” and „**Tschö**”. After all, the nowadays often heard „**Tschau**”, [~tsh’ow], looks rather similar to the German all-weather goodbye. However, it is not only pronounced like the famous Italian „**Ciao**” it also originates from it — it’s just written in German spelling. Since its rise in the 1980s, „**Tschau**” has always been more prominent in southern Germany, especially around Munich with its so-called “**Bussi-Bussi**”-society [~boo’ssee-boo’ssee].

Oh, and a „**Bussi**”, that’s a peck on the cheek, a gesture that started with the “champagne-crowd” in certain well-off German circles, who returned home from their weekend trips to Italy with the habit to greet each other with “air-kisses” on both cheeks while exclaiming “**Tschau!**” in an exuberant manner.

„Bis bald!“, „Bis dann!“

[semi-formal; informal]



When all the “usual” goodbyes and farewells are said and done, then there’s still the collection of the more casual goodbyes and more specific farewell phrases that have established themselves in German culture over the decades – and in some cases even over the past centuries. The most widespread German “Bye” in this regard is indubitably **„Bis bald“**, literally meaning “Until soon”, as in, “See you soon”. This

phrase is particularly often used in situations when two Germans want to “assure” each another that they will “absolutely and definitely meet soon again for a coffee – as soon as their busy schedule will allow it”.

In other words, **„Bis bald“** is a rather noncommittal farewell and mainly used with loose acquaintances and less so with genuine friends – unless you really mean to see your BFF “soon” but can’t or won’t have agreed on a specific date or time. Otherwise, it’s honestly a bit weird to part from your friend with a **„Bis bald“** and could even lead to your pal or BFF tossing and turning in bed at night, racking their brains wondering what they did “wrong” to make you dismiss them so curtly.

Hence, **„Bis bald“** should best remain reserved for non-committal farewells with loose acquaintances or in shops when you don’t know when you’ll come around the next time.

In contrast, another German farewell comes around the proverbial corner with a completely different emotional value, and that’s the casual goodbye **„Mach’s gut!“**, the German equivalent of “Take care”. A phrase that expresses more than one might initially assume. When a friend waves goodbye to another friend, saying **„Mach’s gut!“**, there is often an unspoken declaration of affection in this farewell or even a degree of genuine concern– if it is not just said in a purely polite manner.

This would be the case for instance when your favourite Turkish-German *Döner* kebab-“Boss” behind his counter sends you on your way with a lapidary **„Mach’s ma’ gut“** and a steaming-hot 500 grams of lamb or chicken meat plus 350 grams of garlic-yoghurt sauce, fluffy pitta bread and fresh greens. Between genuine friends (male and female alike), on the other hand, a **„Mach’s gut!“** when parting frequently contains a subliminal caring message and has a warmer and rather more intimate ring to it than a simple **„Tschüss“**.

Another phrase you will often hear when people part ways is **„Bis dann“**, and its equivalent **„Bis dahin“**, both literally meaning “Until then”. In the case of **„Bis dann“**, the “then” is an undefined point in the future when you will (perhaps) meet again. In contrast, in **„Bis dahin“**, the **„dahin“** (approx. “to there/then”), usually refers to a specific time in the future that has been agreed upon prior to taking your leave.

Other than the uncommitted **„Bis bald“**, the goodbye of **„Bis dann“** is the most laid-back of laid-back, (yet at the same time serious), assurance

to see each other soon again and is mostly used as an informal farewell between good friends and family members. (However, when pronounced in a dismissive manner, „*Bis dann*“ can suddenly also mean: “Yeah, alright then, get lost now, will’ya?”).

And don’t confuse „*Bis dann*“ with „*Bis später*“, [ˈbeːs ʃpɛɪˈtɐ], meaning: “Until later” or “See you later”. Usually, you use this goodbye only if the “later” you are talking about has been agreed upon in advance – i.e. either as an exact time like “at eight in front of the cinema because the film starts at quarter past”, or at least as a vague point in the future, like “at dinnertime”, or “when the streetlights turn on”, or “when the first howl of the wolf sounds at full moon”.

In addition to the aforementioned „*Schönen Feierabend*“, German workers everywhere also like to bid farewell to each other with a casual „*Bis morgen*“, i.e., “Until tomorrow”, which naturally you can also use outside of the workplace whenever you plan to see the other person tomorrow.

Incidentally, German also allows you to expand on this concept by using the phrase „*Bis übermorgen*“, i.e., “Until the day after tomorrow” and even „*Bis überübermorgen*“, i.e. “Until the day after the day after tomorrow”. (But that’s it. „*Bis überüberübermorgen*“ sounds ridiculous.)

Finally, you also have the German counterpart to the famous English “Have a nice day”, which is: „*Einen schönen Tag noch*“, often also abbreviated as „*Schönen Tag noch*“ or simply „*Schönen Tag*“. This is the perfect goodbye to the shopkeeper after finishing your transaction or to the taxi driver when exiting the cab or to the obnoxious loud “Karen” or “Kevin” behind you in the queue at the supermarket checkout after you’ve deliberately counted each small coin from your purse into the outstretched hand of the friendly cashier. (No need to be impolite when teaching bullies a lesson.)



Master Class: The German Dialect Greetings

Admittedly, with all the above you've got a wide variety of greetings and farewells to choose from. Fortunately, though, you will still get by just fine in all three German-speaking countries with the four basic phrases, „Guten Tag“, „Hallo“, „Auf Wiedersehen“ and „Tschüss“.

Nonetheless, if you would like to be regarded as a bit more than just a welcome guest and instead want to become a full-fledged member of your local community, then you might want to adopt at least some linguistic peculiarities of your new home-region – starting with the way to say „Hello“ in your regional dialect to new friends, neighbours, café baristas, or local flower shop proprietors.

„Moin!“ – The “What’s up!” of the German North



Let's start at the top of the map in the windswept North, where you'll find kilometre-long, white, sandy beaches; picturesque fishing villages; vast agricultural plains; and beautiful cities such as Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and Schwerin, all steeped in centuries-old traditions.

Here, and particularly in the federal states of Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Bremen, and Niedersachsen, the natives famously greet each other with the cordial exclamation of „Moin“.

Contrary to the belief of many Germans from further down south, who conclude that „Moin“ must be an abbreviated dialect variation of „Guten Morgen“, the word most likely derives from the Low German/Frisian word „moi“, meaning “beautiful”, “pleasant” or “good”. So „Moin“ is simply a wish for a pleasant day – and since the greeting has nothing to do with the word „Morgen“ (meaning “morning”), it is in fact used throughout the day.

In recent years, the reduplicated form of „Moin Moin“ has also become increasingly common, sparking an ongoing debate about whether this double form of „Moin“ is more or less formal than the original. However, in parts of northern Germany, particularly along the coast, locals will tell you that saying „Moin Moin“ will immediately reveal you to be a foreigner with no understanding of their culture. Generally, though, nobody really cares all that much, and whether you use the double „Moin“, which is more popular with today's younger generations, or the traditional one-word greeting, which is more in line with the character of notoriously closemouthed northerners, is entirely up to you.

The youngest offshoot of „Moin“ is the more colloquial „Moinsen“, which is also predominantly used by younger Germans, not only in the windswept north. In fact, all three northern greetings have become increasingly popular in other federal states in recent times and can now be regularly heard as far south as Frankfurt, Leipzig, Cologne, and the Ruhr area around Dortmund and Gelsenkirchen, where some homesick Northerners who had to leave the coasts for work have

undoubtedly introduced these greetings to their “uncouth” southern colleagues.

„Gude!” – The “G’day!” of the German Heartland



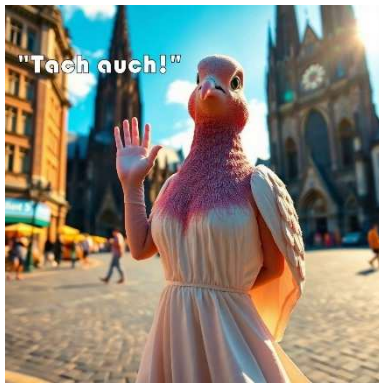
Speaking of “uncouth” Southerners, now let’s move on further down south on the map, to *Hessen* with its large rural areas and the economic hub of the *Rhein-Main Gebiet*, (Rhine-Main Area), as well as the bordering regions of *Hessen’s* neighbouring federal states of Bavaria and Thuringia. Here, your „Hallo!” to friends and family as well as to your beer-delivery guy, the flower-girl in the local florist shop, or your regular waiter at your favourite apple wine joint takes the form of the simple exclamation of „**Gude**”, spoken with a soft “G”, a long “oo”-sound and a lazy “de”-ending. In the true spirit of Hessian verbal laziness, this standard greeting can also easily be turned into, for example, an appreciative “Great-to-see-you”-„Gude!” [~Goo’dEEE!] or an enquiring “How-are-you-doing”-„Gude?” [~Goo’dde?], just by slight changes in inflection.

In full transparency, the word „Gude” is actually only an abbreviation of the, for Hessians already exhaustive, phrase, „**Ei, Gude wie?**”, [~Aye. goo’dde vee?], which has the approximate meaning of, “Hello, good sir, good lady, nice to see you, how are you doing on this fine day?”.

„Gude” is the Hessian pronunciation of the substantivized adjective „Gute/r”, meaning “good woman”/“good man”, omitting the noun of „Mann”, (“man”, “sir”), or „Frau”, (“woman”, “lady”), while the closing question word „wie?”, meaning: “how?”, is actually the first word of the omitted complete sentence: „Wie geht es Ihnen/Dir?”, (“How are you [formal/informal] doing?”). And as for the „Ei”? Well, that’s simply “Hey” or “Hello” in Hessian.

So, if you should ever find yourself in Frankfurt, Gießen, Hanau, Offenbach or Aschaffenburg, you should definitely visit one of the many Apple Wine taverns and gardens unique to this region and experience the laid-back mentality of Hessian speakers first hand, to understand that while life is hard, you can make it easier by „babbeln”, (Hessian for “to chat”, not for “to babble”), with new-found friends over a „Schoppe”, [~Shoppe’], (i.e. a glass of cool apple wine with a sprinkle of mineral water).

„Tach auch!“ – The “Aloha!” of the German West



The German West, consisting mainly of the federal state of Nordrhein-Westfalen, or NRW [~Enn-Err-Veh], is the state with the highest population density in Germany due to the *Ruhrpott* – the former coal-mining region of Germany, where you don’t know where one city ends and the next begins. Here, the Turkish subculture is most pronounced, with 32 per cent of all people of Turkish origin in Germany living in NRW alone. This is why you will hear „**Merhaba**“, the Turkish word for “Hello”, in Dortmund, Essen, Oberhausen, Bochum and other cities in the *Ruhrpott* almost as often as the local German equivalent „**Tach**“ or „**Tach auch**“, the *Pott*’s dialect-form of „*Tag*“, (“day”) as in “good day”.

In Köln, the largest city in NRW, you will also hear the more elaborate version of the greeting in the inimitable Cologne dialect: „**Jooden Daach**“, which means „*Guten Tag*“ in Cologne dialect.

Throughout the region, you can find the diminutive form „**Tachchen**“, (pronounced with the hard “CH”-sound first, followed by the soft “CH”-sound), which is often used in an affable manner. You will also hear „**Mahlzeit**“, here used throughout the day as a “buddy”-style greeting. The same goes for „**Tach, Chef!**“, where „*Chef*“ means “boss” in German (and not “cook”) and is used in a slightly ironic yet respectful way for your local kiosk proprietor, as well as for other acquaintances to whom you wish to show a modicum of respect without actual deference.

Equally informal is the ubiquitous „**Na, allet klar?**“, („*allet*“ meaning „*alles*“ = “all” or “everything”), asking “Hey, all right?” or “Hello, are you doing well?” as a greeting between friends and colleagues – but also with the guys meeting regularly for a „*Feierabend*“-beer at the „*Kiosk*“.

(A German “*Kiosk*”, also called “*Späti*”, usually is either a small corner shop or a small detached “cottage” where you can buy beer, wine, schnapps, cigarettes, newspapers, sweets and lottery tickets, (and sometimes much more), and which is also open on Sundays).

Of course, in the coal mining-region of Germany we mustn’t forget the famous greeting of „**Glück auf!**“. A traditional miner greeting, literally meaning “Luck up!”, in the sense of “Come back up healthy again!”. Nowadays, it is mainly still in use among „*Fußball*“ fans of football clubs from the *Ruhrpott*, (like Dortmund, Schalke, Bochum, or Essen).

Other casual greetings in the region include „**Hömma!**“. A contraction of the words „*Hör*“, (“listen”) and „*mal*“, (“once”), which is how you say “Hey, listen up!” in German. However, strictly speaking, „*Hömma!*“ is less of a greeting and more of an informal way to start a conversation with friends.

Incidentally, the *Pott* also has a specific word for “friend” which has found its way into general German parlance, which is „**Kumpel**“ [~koom’pell]. Originally the German word for “miner”, it has become a term

of endearment between friends, as well as a casual way to address strangers, for instance by greeting them with „**Na, Kumpel!**“.

„**Na!**“ – The “Hey!” of the German East



Now, it should be made clear here that the German East consists of much more than just Berlin, of course. For instance, its two largest cities, apart from the German capital, of Leipzig and Dresden, both in Saxony, where people greet each other with „**Nu, hallo!**“, [ˈnoo, halo!].

But let’s be real, most people associate Germany’s East with the largest German city and will likely restrict their visit of eastern Germany to Berlin. Thus, we’ll focus in this section on the inimitable ways Berliners greet each other – starting with „**Na!?**“, the shortest and most casual way to acknowledge another person’s existence in Berlin, (and in Germany at large).

In typical Berlin fashion, a more “elaborate” greeting in the capital is „**Tach!**“ – or, if a Berliner feels particularly magnanimous, „**Juten Tach**“, the dialect version of „**Guten Tag**“.

Depending on the area of Berlin you find yourself in, however, you might be instead accosted by a terse „**Wat is’!?**“ [ˈvatt ees!ʔ] or „**Is’ wat!?**“, both literally meaning “What is it?!” but rather expressing the sentiment of “What the fuck are you looking at?!” or, if you’re lucky, “What do you want!?”. In this case, a polite „**Nichts, alles klar.**“, [ˈnechts, alles klar], i.e., “Nothing, all good.” is the best answer before quickly but unhurriedly taking your leave.

Exclusively among themselves, Berliners also use a greeting that can seem to outsiders, including other Germans, like they’re just having a fit. This is because they greet each other in their dialect with, „**Icke, ditte, det!**“. In Standard High German this translates to „**Ich, dies, das!**“, meaning in English “I, this, that!”, and is a typical expression of the Berlin dialect, which has a very direct and often humorous way of getting to the point. However, to be honest, it’s not always clear what that point actually is. But Berliners would probably reply to this objection with a shrug and a casual „**Na und?**“, i.e. “So what?” or “Who cares?”; in other words, with a typical Berliner response.

„Griaß di!“ – The “Howdy!” of the German South



Contrary to popular belief outside Germany, the German South consists not exclusively of the free state of Bavaria, but also of its western neighbour Baden-Württemberg with its capital Stuttgart, where the tribal group of the *Schwaben*, i.e. Swabians, live. This industrious tribe greets each other in their unmistakable dialect with „**Guede Morge**“, („Guten Morgen“) in the morning, with „**Daag**“, („Tag“) during the day and with „**Nobe**“ or „**Noow**“, („Einen [schönen] Abend“) in the evening. (Truely, if one were to equate the Germanic tribes with the peoples in Tolkien's ‘*Lord of the Rings*’, then the Swabians would definitely be the dwarves.)

But although Swabia can boast similarly beautiful landscapes, traditional festivals and rich architectural history, most visitors to Germany are nevertheless most often drawn to neighbouring Bavaria. After all, it is unfortunately merely half of a cliché that a not insignificant number of visitors from overseas equate Bavaria with Germany and expect also men in Hamburg, Frankfurt or Cologne to exclusively strut around in „*Lederhosen*“, (thanks to successful Bavarian tourism marketing.)

In any case, don't forget during your almost unavoidable visit to Bavaria, (most likely to its capital *München* and/or Castle *Neuschwanstein*), that in southern Germany the difference between formal and informal forms of address is still taken very seriously. Keep this in mind when crossing the so-called „*Weißwurstäquator*“, the imaginary borderline between North- and South-Germany, alternatively located either along the river *Donau* (Danube), or along the 49th parallel, or in a radius of 100 km around Munich.

In practice this strict adherence to greeting-formalities entails that you only greet Bavarians (and Austrians) with a hearty „**Griaß di**“ (~gree'ass dee, i.e. „*Grüß Dich!*“, meaning “[I'm] Greeting you!”), if you're already on informal „*Du*“-terms with them. Which is to say, you can use this informal greeting mainly with family members, close friends, long-time colleagues, children, or someone who has previously offered you to “switch to first names”, i.e. to the „*Du*“- instead of the „*Sie*“-form of address. Your favourite waitress or waiter in your local beer garden might also greet and address you informally once they know that you're not merely a tourist – or have convinced themselves that you're not another obnoxious loudmouth who can't hold your beer. Until then, however, you do well in addressing them with the appropriate „*Sie*“.

But in most circumstances, sticking to the formal address is expected from you anyway. In particular if you encounter people who are older or higher up on the career-ladder, as well as with strangers, clients, customers, or service providers, whom you can greet with the formal „**Griaß Eana**“ or „**Griaß God**“.

As you will have guessed, the dialect-term „*Griaß*“ is simply the declined Bavarian version of the Standard High German verb „*grüßen*“, (“to greet”), while „*di*“ is the Bavarian pronunciation of „*dich*“, a grammatically declined form of „*Du*“. And „*Eena*“ is what happens when Bavarians want to say „*Ihnen*“, a declined form of „*Sie*“, (the formal “you”). And „*God*“, in Standard High German written as „*Gott*“, is presumably self-explanatory.

The greeting „*Griaß Eana*“ also omits the first word of the proper sentence, i.e. „*Ich*“, (“I”), which makes the proper translation “I greet you”. In contrast, the greeting involving a certain supernatural being translates in English to: “Greetings [be bestowed upon you by] God” – and not, as many believe, to the command: “Greet God!”. Although, this deliberate misinterpretation has allowed cheeky non-Bavarian atheists time and again to smirkingly answer: „*Mach’ ich, wenn ich ihn sehe.*“, (“Will do, when I see him.”).

When talking about typical southern German and Austrian greetings, none is more well-known and ubiquitous than the rather posh sounding „*Servus*“, which is sometimes preferred to „*Griaß God*“ due to its decidedly secular meaning.

Although, „*Servus*“ shouldn’t feel too comfortable on its high horse, since the greeting has its origins in the Latin word for “slave”. But to be fair, the salutation presumably didn’t start out as a command for a “slave to heel”, but rather in the meaning of, “I’m your servant”, as in, “At your service”. This meaning has been watered down over time, and today „*Servus*“ is used in Austria, Bavaria, and the Saarland as a simple equivalent to „*Hallo*“ as well as to „*Tschüss*“, similar to the Italian “*Ciao*”.

„*Servus!*“ – The “How do you do?” of the Alpenrepublik



Talking about the *Alpenrepublik*, (the “Alps Republic”, a popular German synonym for *Österreich*), it can be safely said that Austria distinguishes itself from its German-speaking neighbours to this day (among many other things) also by its endearingly old-fashioned sense of effusive politeness.

No wonder therefore that „*Servus*“ (once: “At your service”) today serves as the standard informal greeting in Wien (Vienna), Salzburg, Graz, Linz, or Innsbruck just as well as in the Austrian countryside, used in the same way and on the same occasions as „*Hallo*“ in Germany.

Just like this ubiquitous informal greeting, also the sometimes overly polite Austrian mannerism – which can take some getting used to – can be found all over the country of *Wiener Schnitzel*, *Mozart* and *Sachertorte*; for instance in any well-to-do hotel from Vienna to Salzburg, where the desk-clerk at the reception might inexplicitly address you in a show of professional respect as „*Herr / Frau Doktor*“, or „*Herr / Frau Professor*“, even though you’ve never finished secondary school, let alone written a doctoral thesis or taught at university. Should you be approached

in this manner, don't correct the adulatory employee. They're just doing their job. However, don't let it go to your head either. Unfortunately, being thusly addressed does not mean that you are now entitled to a honorary doctorate on your business card.

In "Catholic" Austria, instead of „*Guten Tag*“ you will also often hear the standard formal greeting, „*Griß Gott!*“, sometimes even followed by „*Gnä' Frau*“ or „*Gnä'ger Herr*“, („*Gnädige Frau*“, i.e. "Milady"; „*Gnädiger Herr*“, i.e. "Sir"). Mind you, these add-ons are mostly used by service-providers (e.g. in hotels, taxis, etc.) or at high-society functions like museum openings, classic music concerts and, of course, during the famous Viennese Ball-Season.

Occasionally, you will even still see the old-fashioned gesture of hand-kissing practised in true Austrian fashion, where the man holds the outstretched hand of the woman and hovers his lips a few centimetres above it for just a couple of seconds, (without touching the hand with the lips).

These two elegant, (while nowadays unfortunately neglected), greeting-forms may also appear in combination, when the gentleman first utters, „*Kiss di Hand, gnä' Frau*“, („*Ich küsse die Hand, gnädige Frau*“ = "I kiss your hand, Milady"), before then in a second step proceeding to do exactly that.

You've got to give it to the Austrians, while they may be second-calls in football, when it comes to professional flattery and the beguiling of women, they can certainly hold a candle to the French and Italians in this regard. Oh, and when Austrians take their leave, they tend to do either with the aforementioned „*Servus*“, doing double-duty as a farewell, or by saying „*Baba*“, presumably deriving directly from the English "Bye-bye". In more formal settings like when leaving one of the world-renowned pâtisseries with bags full of little sweet treats that cost you more than a decent seat at the Vienna State Opera, you use the Austrian equivalent to the German „*Auf Wiedersehen*“ and say goodbye with a friendly „*Auf Wiedersehaun*“.

„Grüezi!“ – The “Hello there!” of the Eidgenossen



Alas, objectively, such effortless flirtations can't be observed with Austria's next-door neighbours, the rather more reserved „*Eidgenossen*“. ("Oath Confederates", a historic synonym for the Swiss).

However, as little as they have in common with their Austrian neighbours in terms of excessive flattery, as much do they share the opinion with them that there should be a strict distinction between formal and informal salutations. To greet an „*Eidgenosse*“ with whom you're still on formal „*Sie*“-terms with a casually flippant „*Hallo*“ might therefore quickly brand you as a rather rude contemporary – as many clueless Germans with their generally more nonchalant behaviour could tell you from first-hand experience.

Using the formal „*Guten Tag*“ is therefore always a safe bet in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Yet, if you want to endear yourself a bit further to the Swiss, you might instead use the appropriate regional greeting, which naturally varies considerably, depending on whether you find yourself in the German, French or Italian speaking part of the *Confoederatio Helvetica*.

Still, that's not the end of it. Even just in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, (itself already a comparatively small country), the ideal greeting for e.g. the proprietor of a Patek Philippe™ wristwatch shop in Bern differs considerably from perfectly addressing the Zurich bank manager who handles your off-the-book gold deposits.

While the most famous Swiss greeting of „*Grüezi*“, [ˌɡr̥eːtsy] is predominantly used in northern and eastern Switzerland with the German-speaking cities of Basel and Zürich, you will find that in western Switzerland around the German-speaking city of Bern people will rather greet or be greeted with „*Grüessech*“, [ˌɡr̥eːsɐˈɛɪç]. On the other hand, in central Switzerland in and around the city of Friburg, instead you'll hear the familiar sounding „*Guete Tag*“ and in the evening „*Gueten Aabe*“ from the smiling waitress at the cosy Swiss farmhouse tavern.

Should the exceptional case occur that you're miraculously invited into the inner circle of a Swiss family or clique of friends, and should you therefore actually become eligible for using the informal Swiss greeting form, then you've not only become a quasi-honorary Swiss national but are now also allowed to use the informal salutation „*Hoi*“ when greeting your new Swiss friends and future in-laws.

Rumours have it that this informal greeting was originally used by Swiss dairy farmers to call their cattle to and from the pasture and that it somehow became German-speaking Switzerland's version of “Hi” or “Hey!”. More likely, though, is the explanation that „*Hoi!*“ is simply the Swiss dialect's interpretation of the English greetings.

To round up your tour around the Helvetic Republic then, let us quickly hop down to the Italian region of the country and its largest city of Lugano. Here, “*le gente*” naturally prefer to use „*Ciao*“ as their informal greeting of choice, while over in the French speaking region with Geneva at its centre, “*les gens*” greet their friends and family predominantly with „*Sali*” or „*Salü*” as a close relative of the French “*Salut*”.

But now it's time to say goodbye together with the Swiss, so „*Adieu*“ [ˌaˈd̥yö] and „*Ade*“ [ˌaˈd̥ay], and to all the older and higher-ranking ladies and gentlemen, „*Uf Wiederluege*“ [ˌʊf ˈvɛːˈdaˈl̥yːɡɐ]. *Over and out*.



Words Do Come Easy – Also from Other Languages

Now that you have come this far, you may very well ask yourself: *“And where does all this leave me as an aspiring German-speaker? Do I really need to know all these different dialect terms for dozens of everyday objects depending on where I am in Germany and to memorise all these widely different types of greetings whenever I travel around Germany, Austria, or Switzerland?”*



Well, the answer is obviously: Yes. Yes, of course you do.

Nah, just kidding. The *Hochdeutsch*-terms you’ve learned in your German studies for everyday stuff from bread rolls to pavement/sidewalk and the German standard greetings at the beginning of this chapter are totally sufficient to get around from the North Sea to the Alps in Germany as well as in Austria and the German speaking part of Switzerland.

Naturally, Austrians and Swiss have some different words for certain things compared to Germans, but rest assured, the “mountain dwellers” will understand your *Hochdeutsch* just as fine as the German flatlanders on the border to Denmark. And should some locals really pretend to have no clue what you’re talking about, you can always channel your inner Samuel L. Jackson and yell at them at the top of your lungs: *“German, motherf*ckers! Do you speak it!?”* (Or maybe not. Your choice.)

This said, however, many cherished local dialects are in fact, (fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective), increasingly on the retreat in Germany. While dialect-speaking talk-show guests or comedians on television may still be seen as endearing and “cute”, in contrast speaking in dialect in a white-collar environment is almost a taboo nowadays in Germany and will mark the dialect-speaker often as “less educated” and “unprofessional”.

Whether this is a positive or negative development is debatable. However, it is undeniable that dialects are constantly being pushed further and further into an ever-shrinking niche and are increasingly being replaced by subculture languages with their own idioms, terms and phrases, particularly in urban areas.

“Kanak Sprak” – The Arabic-Turkish Version of German

The most prominent example for this sub-culture phenomenon represents the Turkish-Arabic-German pidgin language „Kanak Sprak“, (in Standard High German: „Kanakensprache“ = “dago or wog language”, and incidentally an offensive term if you’re not part of this sub-culture).



The *Kanak Sprak* has gained rapid influence with younger people in urban centres, who make it a habit of amplifying every other statement with an exclamation of, „**Wallah!**“, (Arabic for “By God”), or an added proclamation of „**Ich schwör’!**“, (“I swear!”/“I promise!”), to clarify that e.g. the colour of their lipstick will attract the boys like Red Bull™ is drawing flies, (“**Bitch, ich schwör’!**”), or that they’ve already had serious hanky-pankies with 3 out of the 5 girls in their class, („**Ist mehr als 90 Prozent, echt, ich schwör’!**” – “That’s more than 90 per cent, really, I swear!”)

Although the term „Kanak” is a derogatory term and remains offensive in many contexts, (and you should definitely not use it!), it is also an “official” social science term used in linguistic research in an analytical sense. And young people of Turkish and Arab descent born in Germany adopted the term for themselves in a self-deprecating, provocative manner.

Consequently, *Kanak Sprak* developed as a multi-ethnic youth language that emerged in urban environments in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in cities such as Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg and Frankfurt, combining German youth-slang with Turkish, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, Romani and English loanwords.

A typical feature of *Kanak Sprak* is the simplified German grammar and sentence structure. In *Kanak Sprak*, most definite articles (*der, die, das*) and especially the declined forms in the four grammatical cases are mostly omitted. For instance, „*Gib ma’ Feuer!*” (Instead of: „*Gib mir mal das Feuerzeug.*”, i.e. “Give me the lighter”); or: „*Ich geh’ Tanke!*” (Instead of: „*Ich gehe zur (= zu der) Tankstelle.*”, i.e. “I go to the petrol station.”)

Furthermore, verb-forms become simplified, e.g. by consequently using the imperative form for second person singular (*geh, mach, guck, gib, fahr, etc.*). The most prominent feature of *Kanak Sprak* however is undoubtedly the insertion of mainly Turkish, Arabic and Serbo-Croatian loanwords into otherwise German sentences. Typical examples include,

- „**Lan, komm ma’ her!**”, (“Lan” = “Dude”, “Man”; [Turkish], colloquial speech. – “Dude, come here!”)
- „**Wallah, is’ ja gut!**”, (“Wallah” = “By God”; [Arabic]. – “By God, alright, calm down!”)
- „**Hey, Bratan, nette Chaya haste da!**”, (“Bratan” = „brother”; [Slavic]. “Chaya” = “(attractive) woman”; [Spanish]. – “Hey, brother, nice chick you’ve got there!”)

- **„Der Film war echt Haram.“** (*“Haram”* =:“forbidden”; [Arabic], often used in jest. – *“That movie was really forbidden (good).”*)

Apart from that, you also have an above-average use of so-called intensive particles that boost or weaken the intensity of content expressed by another word, such as: “very, quite, completely, extremely, deeply, highly, etc.”. For example,

- **„Krass korrekt!“** – “Extremely correct/good!”
- **„Echt stabil!“** – “Really stable/excellent!”
- **„Voll lost!“** – “Totally lost/clueless!”
- **„Lowkey cringe!“** – “Slightly cringe/embarrassing!”
- **„Mega sus!“** – “Extremely suspect/suspicious!”

Kanak Sprak also has several overlaps with so-called *Kiezdeutsch*, („Kiez” = the “hood”, sometimes also the “redlight district”), which is a *multiethnolect* that arose with young people from different linguistic backgrounds speaking German together in multiethnic neighbourhoods in inner cities and that has developed its own regular grammatical patterns over time.

However, the biggest differences appear neither in the use of youth-slang or loanwords nor in the grammar, which are almost congruent in both sub-languages. Rather, *Kiezdeutsch* has developed into a stable *multiethnolect*, while *Kanak Sprak* continues to change and expand since its beginnings as a youth-lingo in the 1980s/90s. And while *Kanak Sprak* has its home predominantly in the group of young people with an immigration-background, *Kiezdeutsch* is spoken by youths from all backgrounds, including Germans. Finally, *Kiezdeutsch* tries less to provoke, while *Kanak Sprak* is deliberately more aggressive and provocative.

Anglo-German – A One-sided Love Affaire

But dialects and urban sub-culture lingo aren’t the only language-areas undergoing constant changes in German. Like any language, (and more than many), German is an ever-evolving beast that constantly gobbles up new trends while spitting out old-fashioned and over-used tropes.



Since the 1990s, the perhaps biggest new influx to the language comes indubitably from the country that is the world’s main source for movies, rap and pop music, computer tech, video games, and streaming services.

The internet and the U.S.-entertainment industry as well as a globalised economy naturally have left their own mark on the German language, which has adopted and still adopts more English words than many Germans probably realise. As already the late TV-show master of Dutch origin, *Rudi Carrell*, (1934 – 2006), once said: *“When I came to Germany, I only spoke English – but because the German language has so*

many English words now, I now speak also fluent German!"

Just ask any German who is younger than thirty about the German word for the English term „**Meeting**” and you’ll likely get some very blank stares in return, while at least some older Germans may still remember that there exists in fact the German word „*Besprechung*”, entailing the verb „*sprechen*”, (“to speak”, “to talk”). Similarly, the word „**Deadline**” is nowadays ubiquitously feared by employees in German companies, while the German equivalent of „*Abgabetermin*”, (i.e., “agreed upon hand-over date”), just doesn’t elicit the same stress-inducing “quality”.

So, once the modern-day German **Businesswoman** has finally „*Feierabend*” after a day filled with **Meetings** and **Deadlines**, she might want to go and **relax** with a **Drink** at a **Bar**, where she meets some guy who compliments her on her **Looks** instead of on her „*Aussehen*” and who calls her a real **Eyecatcher**, since he has never heard of the nice German equivalent, the „*Blickfang*”.

As soon as she finally gets rid of the **Creep**, her colleague Pauline from **Accounting** sends her a **Message**, prompting her to **check out** Pauline’s latest Instagram™-**Posting**. Opening the **App**, she sees Pauline’s **Bikini-Pic** on a beach in Bali, straight up noticing that it is a bad **Fake**, while thinking bemusedly that the use of the German equivalent of “fake”, the word „*Fälschung*”, is nowadays mainly used to denote fakes like the counterfeit Rolex™ of that slimy idiot with his **creepy** compliments. Later on that summer evening our woman finally drives home with perhaps more **Speed** than necessary, and after having fed the cat with **Cat Food**, she finally removes her **Make-Up** („*Schminke*”) and **Eyelinier** („*Lidstrich*”), puts on some **Body Lotion** („*Körpercreme*”) and while sitting on her bed thinks to herself: „**Fuck**, und heute ist erst Montag.”, (“Blimey, and it’s only Monday today.”)

“But is this still German?”

This probably irreversible trend of replacing German words with their English equivalents may raise the question whether this represents a positive linguistic development or if it rather embodies “all that is wrong with the German language today”.



Of course, the answer to this question will largely depend on your own position on “language purity”, the related notion of tradition and your foible for the preservation of the status quo.

In the end, however, one should take into consideration that languages are “living creatures” in the sense of being in a constant state of change, and that all living things need to adapt if they want to survive and to thrive. Only a dictatorial language-police, (cough, *Académie française*, cough, cough), can force a language into a corset of rules, prohibitions, and restrictions while disregarding the fact that keeping any living thing in restrictive captivity for too long will ultimately lead to its

decline and premature death.

Like any other language, German draws its lifeblood from the people who speak it every day in all its fascinating variations. Its prosperity springs exactly from these diverse roots, and not from any committees, expert panels, or language purists and gatekeepers. In fact, if there's one excellent example for an abstract construct that shows key-characteristics of an organically growing entity then it is our languages, where every living cell of the "body", i.e. every individual in the language-speaking community, contributes constantly to the language's natural growth and ongoing vitality.

To stretch this analogy to its ultimate extensibility, the single cells, i.e. language speakers, of such a vibrant "language-body" also serve as a resilient defence against attempts to manipulate a language's DNA, whether from the ideological left or the right.

Natural change and growth always originate from the bottom up, and as long as this remains the case with German, there's certainly nothing to worry about regarding the health and longevity of the German beast.

How the Young Ones Yap.

Nonetheless, there is one development that regularly drives language purists, (apparently since the ancient Greeks), up the wall – and that's the idioms, buzzwords and expletives made up by the young ones of each new German generation.



Somehow, there appears to be a natural cycle of around 10-15 years after which the slang terms of one generation, which were in vogue just yesterday, suddenly lose all their lustre and become lame and old-fashioned, only to be replaced seemingly overnight by brand-new alternative slang words, with the intended effect that these fresh buzzwords are once again all but incomprehensible to the "living corpses" who make up the previous generations.

What German Gen-Xers in the 1980s and early Millennials in the 1990s found „*krass*“, „*geil*“, or „*cool*“, Gen Z- and Gen Alpha-kids will find instead „*nice*“, „*steil*“, „*hammer*“, „*stabil*“ or simply „*the fuck*“.

In 2022, the "Teen Slang Word of the Year", (yes, that's an official thing in Germany), was actually „*smash*“, used either as the verb „*smashen*“, (yep, with a German verb-ending), to describe the physical act of lovemaking, or as an appreciative noun for a person or item to which one ascribes a particularly high value, (inadvertently proving that also teen lingo can be quite „*cringe*“ sometimes).

What the Ad-Agencies Add.

Another main contributor to the never-ending flow of new German word- and phrase-creations is, and how could it be otherwise, the advertising industry. Copywriters in small and big ad-agencies



from Hamburg to Düsseldorf and from Frankfurt to München diligently grind down their keyboards to bestow each new generation with fresh phrases, idioms, wordplays, word-creations and deliberate bastardizations of the German language.

One such intentionally grammatically false sentence in a TV-ad that has made it into common parlance from the 1990s is „**Da werden Sie geholfen!**“, recited by a briefly popular TV-starlet and -influencer, (at a time when online-influencers weren't a thing yet), promoting another service rendered obsolete by the internet, namely a telephone directory hotline.

In a (probably) unintended twist, this sentence is in fact the literal translation of the grammatically correct English sentence: "There you'll be helped", while the grammatically correct German sentence would be: „**Da wird Ihnen geholfen**“. Nonetheless, or rather precisely because of that, Germans adopted the sentence with glee. Until today it is used mainly to ironically or sarcastically comment on some badly or not at all provided service. (So, presumably it won't die out any time soon.)

Other phrases that have found their way into everyday-German via the overheated brains of German copywriters include:

- „**Ich bin doch nicht blöd.**“ – MediaMarkt [Electronics Retail]
“Hey, I ain't stupid.”
- „**Geiz ist geil.**“ – Saturn [Electronics Retail]
“Stinginess is a turn-on.”
- „**Quadratisch. Praktisch. Gut.**“ – Ritter Sport [Chocolate]
“Square. Practical. Good.”
- „**Haribo macht Kinder froh ...**“ – Haribo [Sweets]
“Haribo makes children happy...”
- „**Red Bull verleiht Flüüügel!**“ – Red Bull [Energy Drink]
“Red Bull gives you wiiiings!”
- „**Nicht immer, aber immer öfter.**“ * – Jever [Beer]
“Not always, but more and more often.”
- „**Dann klappt's auch mit dem Nachbarn.**“ – Jacobs [Coffee]
“Then it'll also work out with your neighbour.”
- „**Es gibt immer was zu tun.**“ – Hornbach [DIY Retail]
“There's always something to do.”

- „Nichts ist unmöglich.“ – Toyota [Automobile]
“Nothing is impossible.”
- „Wohnst du noch oder lebst du schon?“ – IKEA [Furniture]
“Are you still living or are you already alive?”
- „Weil ich es mir wert bin.“ – L'Oréal [Cosmetics]
“Because I regard myself being worth it.”

* An excellent example of the German peculiarity to team up two “small” words whose meanings are actually quite unambiguous and to assign a shared new or modified meaning to the new word-couple. A prime candidate for these word-combos is the term „immer“, meaning “always” on its own. In tandem with other “small” words, however, it tends to alter the meanings of these words slightly (or considerably). For instance:

Table: When „Immer“ changes the Meaning. Always.

immer wieder	again and again	wieder =	again
immer öfter	more and more often	öfter =	more often
immer seltener	more and more rarely	seltener =	rarer
immer gleich	always the same	gleich =	same
schon immer	since time immemorial	schon =	already
immerzu	incessantly	zu =	to
immerfort	evermore	fort =	away
immer noch	still (still ongoing)	noch =	still; yet
immer mehr	more and more	mehr =	more
immerhin	at least	hin =	towards
immer nur	only ever	nur =	only

“I am finished!”

Lastly, even the world of sports can boast its fair share of contributions to the treasure trove of German one-liners and catchphrases. Some of the most unforgettable ones, which all found their way to a greater or lesser extent into the common German idioms-collection and are frequently quoted, are:



- “Lebbe geht weider.” – Ex-Eintracht Frankfurt Manager *Dragoslav Stepanović*, 1992. Hessian dialect. German: „Das Leben geht weiter.“ Engl.: “**Life goes on.**”
- „Eier. Wir brauchen Eier!“ – Ex-Bayern Munich Goalkeeper *Oliver Kahn*, 2001. English: “**Balls. We need balls!**”, (i.e. testicles).
- „Mal verliert man, mal gewinnt der andere.“ – Ex-Werder Bremen Manager *Otto Rehagel*. English: “**Sometimes you loose and sometimes the other one wins.**”
- „Mailand oder Madrid – Hauptsache Italien.“ – Ex-National Team-Player *Andreas Möller*, 1990s. English: “**Milan or Madrid – as long as it’s Italy.**”
- „Ich hatte vom Feeling her ein gutes Gefühl.“ – Ex-National Team-Player *Andreas Brehme*. English: “**Regarding my feeling, I had a good feeling.**”

Yet, undisputably one of the most famous sentences ever uttered in German football must be the immortal phrase: „**Ich habe fertig!**“, exclaimed by Italian former *Bayern München*-manager *Giovanni Trapattoni* in 1998. During a press conference in which Trapattoni ranted epically about his team of millionaires, who had just lost another match in a blatant show of work-refusal, the Italian coach did not mince his words and loudly told the journalists present that his players „**ware’ schwach wie eine Flasche leer!**“ (“were as weakly as an empty bottle!”). A little while later he singled out *Bayern* player *Thomas Strunz* and asked in his inimitable Italian ductus loudly: „**Was erlaube’ Strunz!?**“, (roughly: “Who does Strunz think he is?”, in grammatically correct German: „*Was erlaubt sich Strunz?!*”). Naturally, both these sentences immediately found their way into German Parlance.

However, it was Trapattoni’s final, grammatically incorrect but most vigorously exclaimed phrase: „**Ich habe fertig!**“, that became the most iconic dictum and the one that has rightfully claimed a firm place in German colloquial language, due to its dramatically energetic utterance and its (for German ears) funny incorrect grammar.

See, while in English you would indeed say, “I have finished”, which is the direct translation of Giovanni’s German phrase, in German you’d say instead: „*Ich bin fertig*“, (i.e., “I am finished” – which in turn has a rather different connotation in English). And since the phrase is firmly anchored in the collective German memory even decades later, Germans nowadays still use the expression in an ironic way to indicate that their lengthy rant, monologue, or explanation has finally come to an end.

And with this, merry greetings from Babylon. „*Ich habe fertig!*“



The Secrets of the German Language

"Things were suddenly brought into being that never had a name in English, such as, Weltanschauung, Schadenfreude, Sippenhaft, Sonderweg, Scheißfreundlichkeit, or Vergangenheitsbewältigung."

Australian author Anna Funder, (*1966), about her experience learning German

The words Anna Funder quotes as being without English counterparts have the meaning of, (in the same order): "a philosophical view of the world", "the joy at another's misery", "the collective incarceration of a group or family", "a unilateral approach to a specific situation", "a shitty, pretended friendliness" or "taking responsibility for and coming to terms with one's own nation's past".

Okay, let's start with a Pop-Quiz: *Which language hast the most words?*

In fact, chances are that you've already come across this question in some trivia-quiz, casual conversation, or at school or university. And if you are a native English-speaker, it is likely that your answer will have been: *"English, of course."*

Which is correct. Well, in a certain way, at least. Many linguists consider English to be indeed one of the "largest" languages in terms of word count. And understandably so, if you consider that the Oxford English Dictionary™ contains almost 200,000 terms, with 171,476 active and 47,156 obsolete words.

However, Koreans would quickly interject to state that the largest Korean dictionary can boast no less than 1,100,373 terms, more than double the number of words found in the English language's most extensive lexicon, Webster's Third New International Dictionary™, which surpasses its Oxfordian rival by far, listing no less than 470,000 English terms. And yet, Korean can double that number easily and then add another 160,000 words just for good measure.



But wait, what about another contender that is often assumed to lead the pack of word-rich languages? Well, surprisingly, modern Chinese seems to trail behind Korean and even English in word-count comparison. At least officially, since most common Chinese dictionaries come up with "only" about 370,000 words, created from various combinations of the language's roughly 4,000 active characters. Nonetheless, no need for Chinese to throw in the towel just yet, because linguists are quick to point out that as many as 500,000 Chinese terms are in fact in existence across the vast Chinese territory.

Alright now, let's cut to the chase, which of the 6,909 distinct languages in existence in the world today, (according to the Linguistic Society of America), really deserves the crown for the ultimate "King of Word Count"?

Considering the numbers above, the answer seems to be clear. Korean obviously beats every other language by several miles, followed at a wide distance by Chinese in second place, and close on its heels English reaches the finishing line to take bronze. Case closed, correct?

Well, by now you know of course that nothing is ever this easy, particularly not if that one cheeky language is involved that loves to do things ... – well, let's just say, a little bit different. Therefore, it might be prudent to check out which trick the rascalion German has still up its sleeve. Although, what on Earth could that trick be, if Korean, Chinese, and English are so obviously leading the field on word count, while German should rank not much higher or lower than any of its neighbouring European language-cousins?

To fully appreciate the surprising solution to this mystery, we first need to hammer the boundary posts into our evaluation matrix, i.e., to determine the definitions we're working with here, because there are in fact various ways in which you can parse the words of a language.

For instance, if you query the AI (artificial intelligence) of a popular search engine on the language with the most words, the silicon-brain will in fact hem and haw quite a bit in its diplomatic answer, stating that, *"it is difficult to determine the exact number of words in a language, as there are many factors that can affect the word count, such as the number of dialects, sub-languages, and words that are not included in dictionaries"*.

At first glance, this answer certainly doesn't provide German with any amazing advantages to write home about. In search for more fact-based hints, we might therefore better turn to the most widely used German dictionary, *Der Duden*, for the language's word count.

Doing so will quickly reveal – presumably to the relieved sigh of many English language-afficionados – that the number of German words in *Der Duden* amounts to no more than a measly 135,000 terms. Which isn't even one third of the total number of English words in Webster's Dictionary™. And that should be the end of that, since this "official" number obviously removes any doubts regarding German's chances to even come close to the three champions of the international word-count competition.

And if this frustrating blow to German's word-champion ambitions wouldn't be enough already, it gets even worse for German when you're considering that the number of German words used in everyday conversations comes down to just 12,000 to 16,000 commonly employed terms, including roughly 3,500 foreign- or foreign-derived words.

Naturally, these facts are particularly good news for German language students, who will be even happier to hear that it takes a mere 500 to 700 essential German words for getting by in everyday German life. For the German language on the other hand, such an almost bottomless drop can surely only mean that it can bury even the last remnants of its aspirations to play in the word-count premier league. Right?

Well, guess again.

A Nation of Wordsmiths



To be clear up front, it is certainly true that roughly 700 German words will get you through most everyday situations anywhere in Austria, Switzerland, or Germany. But as you've probably already anticipated, what

now follows is the big "However", of course.

See, if you go to Google™ and just dig a little bit deeper into the factual number of German words in use today, the unexpected answer will mercilessly crush any blossoming hope that German-students might have harboured after having learned about the mere "700 essential words" and will leave many of them only with a heap of shards from the shattered dream of an easy way out.

So, as not to prolong the torture any further than necessary (and fun), this now is what the internet has to say on the matter of German word-count in one short, succinct, and mind-blowing sentence: *"The German language consists of about 5.3 million words – with a rising trend"*.

Yes, you read that correctly. It says: "Five-million-three-hundred-thousand words" – and don't forget the adage, "with a rising trend", thank you very much.

Oh, what's that? Ladies and gentlemen, would you believe it! Korean, Chinese, and English are suddenly faltering on the final metres. And there, there is ... yes, it's German coming up from behind! Now, unbelievable, German is actually overtaking the frontrunners ... Yes, it's taking the lead! German pulls away from the rest of the field, ladies and gents. It's leaving the other languages thoroughly in the dust! Folks, German flies over the finishing line ... and, and, yes, it's far ahead of all other languages!

There you have it, ladies and gentlemen! The incontestable world word-count champion, the King of Word Counts: The German language. (Appropriate applause, please.)

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on! ... And what about the measly 135,000 words in the Duden then?", you could interject now, slightly peeved. "Isn't that the official word-count? And if it isn't, why aren't those other 5,165,000 words in the German dictionary?!"

Why, didn't you pay attention? The answer to this seemingly puzzling conundrum has in fact already been given by that friendly search engine AI mentioned above, who stated that, *"there are many factors that can affect the word count, such as the number of dialects, sub-languages, and words that are not included in dictionaries."*

To repeat: *"... and words that are not included in dictionaries."*
Got it?

"But does this mean that the vast majority of German words aren't even listed in the language's foremost dictionary?"

Yes, in fact that's exactly what it means. As a matter of principle, German dictionaries do not include almost any of these iconic German terms known as "compound words", simply because this would lead to a practically infinite number of words – and hence, dictionary-pages.

"So how do you know then which German words actually exist, huh?", you could now rightfully ask.

The answer to this question ultimately comes down to the findings of German linguist Professor *Wolfgang Klein*, a founding director of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and known for his contributions in language acquisition, text analysis, and studies on the semantics of time and space.

Professor Klein and his students, in typically dogged German fashion, made the valiant effort to determine the total number of German words in existence between 1994 and 2004, including each and every compound word, by scouring newspapers, magazines, books, and other publications as well as the emerging internet for ten years. When they had finally completed this herculean task, the staggering result proved that there were 5,328,000 lexical units existent in the German language at the time, (and not to forget: "with a rising trend", so in the 2020 we may well be at an above 6,000,000 number).

Doubtlessly, such a ginormous number must automatically raise some questions. For instance, *"Do native German-speakers really know all these words? And who, for Mark Twain's sake, comes up with all that stuff? And more importantly: Why!? Why create over five million words? That's what I would really like to know!"*

All fair questions, deserving good answers. So, let's start at the beginning, or to paraphrase one of the most iconic characters in German film-history, the Berliner student-turned-teacher "Johannes Pfeiffer", (played by *Heinz Rühmann*), in the classic black-and-white German movie *'Die Feuerzangenbowle'*, ('The Punch Bowl', 1944) who impersonated his teacher while asking his class in Berlin-dialect: *„Da stelle ma uns mal ganz dumm und fragen uns: Wat is een zusammenjesetztes Wort?"*, i.e., "So let's all just play dumb for a moment and ask ourselves: What is a compound word?"

The (In)famous German Compound Nouns

Well, Herr Pfeiffer (movie-quote: *"Pfeiffer with three F!"*), basically, a German compound word can take three different forms: That of a noun, of an adjective, or of a verb. In the case of compound nouns, these are just a



string of two or more nouns, fused together to form a new noun with a new and/or expanded meaning. For example, while English is content with using two or more separate words to describe a specific thing like "punch bowl", "mashed potato", or "outboard motor", German on the other hand fuses the single words together to create new terms like *„Feuerzangenbowle"*. (literally "fire tongs bowl"), *„Kartoffelpüree"*, or

„Außenbordmotor“.

In about one-third of all compound nouns, you will also find the letter “s” wedged in-between connected noun-parts. This so-called „**Fugen-S**“ is used when the first noun in the row ends in

Table: The Compound Words-Connecting „Fugen-S“

• -heit	[e.g. „Freiheitskampf“ = “Fight for freedom”]
• -keit	[e.g. „Magerkeitswahn“ = “Obsession with thinness”]
• -schaft	[e.g. „Freundschaftspakt“ = “Friendship pact”]
• -ung	[e.g. „Achtungserfolg“ = “Respectable success”]
• -ion	[e.g. „Positionslampe“ = “Positions lamp”]
• -tät	[e.g. „Popularitätswettstreit“ = “Popularity contest”]
• -ling	[e.g. „Däumlingshut“ = “Tom Thumb’s hat”]
• -tum	[e.g. „Altertumforschung“ = “Antiquity research”]

Also, as you know, each “thing” in German has a gender assigned to it, often seemingly arbitrarily, yet nonetheless unavoidably. That’s why for example the moon is masculine in German, („Der Mond”), the sun is feminine („Die Sonne”), and the universe is neuter, („Das Universum”). For compound nouns, where you stick several nouns together, the rule states that the gender of a compound noun is always determined by the last noun in the word-chain.

The final point you need to know to successfully create compound nouns is that this last noun in the chain is always your root-word, i.e., the thing or living being you’re talking about, while the preceding noun(s) will define, describe, annotate, or classify this root-noun in more detail.

With these three rules in mind, you can then create compound nouns like „*Die Aufmerksamkeitsdefizithyperaktivitätsstörung*”, (“attention deficit hyperactivity disorder”), in this case thus effortlessly fusing four separate nouns together into one single word with 44 letters.

“Okay. But come on! Are these truly new words that count as fully autonomous words in a linguistic word count? In my opinion that’s just plain cheating”, you could criticise now, (and make quite the harsh accusation, I dare say.)

But fair enough, let’s tackle the question of whether German compound words are in fact “real” words by turning to the renowned language-columnist who was writing under the pen name *Johnson*, (named after dictionary-maker Samuel Johnson), for the international business-magazine *The Economist*. Fortunately for us, *Johnson* addresses this exact question of German compound nouns in an article from June 2010, discussing the topic of word counts of different languages. And although some water has travelled down the river Rhine since then, his argument has nevertheless lost none of its validity, as he writes:

“[...] Moreover, many languages habitually build long words from short ones. German is obvious; it is a trifle to coin a new compound word for a new situation. Are compounds new words? Is the German „*Unabhängigkeitserklärung*”, (“declaration of independence”), one word? It’s certainly written that way in German.

Given the possibilities for compounds, German would quickly

outstrip English [in the number of words], with new legitimate German "words", which Germans would accept without blinking, coined every day.

Just one quick glance at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* homepage finds „Abschiedsvorstellung” ("leave-taking performance", about South Africa putting on a display for the departing French in the World Cup), „Weltmarktführer” ("world market leader"), „Stromtarifrechner” ("electricity fee calculator") and so on. There's no reason to say: "It's incredible how the Germans have a word for 'leave-taking performance'," because to create such words ad hoc is banal in German."

Following *Johnson's* reasoning, this means that whenever you take two or more German nouns and fuse them together, and when this newly created word then expresses a new and/or expanded meaning, it can only be regarded as a new word in its own right. Which only allows the conclusion that German compound nouns are indeed new and stand-alone words and are to be counted independently. (So, no, it's not "cheating". Really, the nerve of some people.)

Going back to *Johnson's* examples for a moment, you may be surprised to find that „Weltmarktführer” and „Abschiedsvorstellung” have in fact their own entries in the online edition of *Der Duden*. While „Stromtarifrechner”, on the other hand, isn't listed in the dictionary, thus putting it in the same category as the other roughly 5 million German terms not included in the list of "basic" German words.

So, how can you find out what this apparently "too-specific-for-the-dictionary" word actually denotes? Well, you just break it apart into its single components and look up „Strom”, „Tarif”, and „Rechner” separately, which are all listed in *Der Duden*, and then suss it out for yourself by logically going from the last to the first part of the compound noun, i.e., a „Rechner” ("calculator") for the „Tarif” ("fee, charge") for „Strom” ("electricity"), aka an 'electricity fee calculator'.

Incidentally, this also answers the question if German-speakers actually remember all of the 5,165,000 unlisted German words by heart. Once you understood the inherent logic of compound nouns, which determines that the root-word is found at the end of the word-string, (being the actual "thing"), while the preceding words are defining attributes, then the obvious answer to this question can only be the uniquely German reply of, „Jein!", ([~Y'ain], a word-combination of „Ja” and „Nein”, ("yes" and "no"), usually used as an "as well as ..." or "both are true"-answer).

The „Nein”-side here being that no, German-speakers don't have memorised all the millions of compound words existing in their language. Because there is simply no reason to do so.

The „Ja”-side of the „Jein”-answer, on the other hand, is based on the fact that the inherent logic of German compound words guarantees that even a never-before heard word will be immediately understood by German-speakers, regardless whether the compound word has just been invented by you on the spur of the moment or whether a certain German railroad engineer named Otto Sarrazin came up with it at the end of the 19th century.

Just as *Johnson* writes, in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland the act of creating new words on the fly is neither a fancy pastime of dedicated linguists nor a hobby of bored Scrabble™-enthusiasts or the exclusive domain of pubescent girls on their Instagram™ accounts. Instead, conjuring up brand-new terms is business-as-usual on any given day in countless German conversations, discussions, meetings, chitchats, and debates across the lands.

That's because the consistent logic of German noun-fusing allows instant word creations such as for instance „*Schmetterlingsbauch*“, for the belly of a butterfly, a term just created out of thin air and certainly not found in any dictionary. Or how about „*Bleistiftakrobat*“, a freshly minted term that 99.9% of German-speakers will never have heard before and yet will still recognise as the description of someone who is finger-juggling a pencil. Or let's make up the word „*Handywaagerechthalter*“, which will immediately trigger in any German-speaker's mind the mental image of one of these weird Normcore-men and -women, E-girls and -guys or bling-gals and “softboys” who all walk along the street while holding their mobile phone horizontally, („*waagerecht*“), in front of their mouth, as if talking into a hot slice of pizza.

On the other hand, there are of course also hundreds of thousands of “established” fantastic word-creations that have long since found their way into common parlance, like the by now iconic „*Turnbeutelvergesser*“, used as a mild insult for a clumsy, forgetful, or plain “uncool” guy who, as the term suggests, habitually forgets to bring his gym-bag to PE-class, („*Turnbeutel*” = cloth bag for school-gymnastics clothes, „*Vergesser*” = person who forgets something).



(Picture symbolic, the real sign is totally ugly).

Since, at least theoretically, there is no upper limit to the words strung together in a compound noun, naturally you can take the whole game to the extreme, if you like.

Germans do this either for fun or more often in the genuine attempt to squeeze as much information as possible into one term. What happens if you try to do the latter can be impressively seen on a famous shop-sign in the city of Hamburg, which proudly announces the shop's service with the word „*Fußbodenschleifmaschinenverleih*” on a metre-long sign above the shop.

In this compound noun you find no less than five stand-alone words fused together. Starting with the last word in the row, „*Verleih*“, you know right away that this is a shop where you can rent something, („*verleihen*” = “to lend”). This is preceded by „*Maschinen*“, (“machines”). To find out what kind of machines you can rent here, you look at the next word, „*schleif-*“, from the verb „*schleifen*“, meaning “to grind” or “to sand”, (here: to sand a wooden floor). Next in line is the term „*Boden*“, meaning “floor” or “ground”. Finally, the word „*Fuß*“, meaning “foot”, which here goes together with „*Boden*” to form the proper word for “indoor floor”, („*Fußboden*”). And there you have it: This is a shop that

rents out machines for sanding indoor floors.

In the same manner, German allows you to direct your partner's attention just as succinctly to a beautifully striped „*Schmetterlingsbauch*“ as your CEO's focus to the company's „*Quartalszahlensturzflug*“, i.e., to the “nosedive” („*Sturzflug*“) of his business's quarterly („*Quartal*“) sales figures („*Zahlen*“), thus encapsulating the same meaning in one concise word for which other languages would need a full sentence.

As a matter of course, the most memorable, poignant, descriptive, or appealing new word-creations often find their way over time, frequently via the internet, from their birthplace in a conference-room, kitchen, pub, lecture hall, or classroom into the public realm, to become a fixed part of the living German language. Simultaneously, countless other ad hoc creations experience a quick and unlamented death as soon as they accomplished or failed to fulfil their intended purpose. Which still leaves German with a rising trend of new additions to the already in 2004 existing 5.3 million terms German-speakers easily understand without the need for any miraculous mental osmosis, mysterious telepathy, or microchips personally implanted in their brains by some sinister Silicon Valley-tycoon.

A Neat Way to Name Your Nouns



Nonetheless, creating new meanings out of thin air by combining existing basic terms constitutes only one aspect of the big picture representing the full width of German's core language philosophy. Further parts of the portrait include, probably to nobody's great astonishment, also the dreaded German grammar and the meticulous German pronunciation. In concert, this trifecta of grammar, word-creation, and pronunciation serves to uphold and implement the overarching principle at the very root of the German language, that is, to maintain and to employ the German language as the fastest, neatest, and most precise conveyer of meaning possible.

Of course, neither a specific person nor any group of philosophers, language scholars, or grammar-Grinches can claim sole responsibility for steering the German language over the centuries into this characteristic direction where precision and creativity meet in fine-tuned balance.

The question why languages develop certain aspects while they forego others, whether due to shifting external circumstances, a society-dominating worldview, or through the hands and minds of a secret cabal of language-tinkerers after all, has been fiercely debated by scholars and experts for several centuries now, and a definite answer is yet to be forthcoming.

But at least there is no uncertainty when it comes to the diverging course the German language has taken over time compared to other European languages regarding the process of naming all the things surrounding us.

As you'll surely have noticed, the Anglo-Saxon vernacular in particular, (but other European languages just as well), often provides its native speakers with brand-new terms for any newly discovered situation, object, substance, feeling, view, or abstract. These words usually have no immediately apparent relation to other, already known English words – which incidentally is also one of the main-reasons why English has so many words in the first place.

While the etymological roots of these unique English terms can usually be found, after some digging, in Old English, Norse, Latin, French, or Middle High German, a majority of English words still appear to be rather consist of a “random combination” of letters making up a new word that must simply be learned, as it will rarely offer any existing reference points that would allow you to deduce, infer, or even just guess the word's meaning.

Take for example the word “wallet”. A term that first came up in the late Middle English period to denote “a bag for provisions”, although its origins are thought to lie in an earlier Germanic word that is still present in today's German term „*wohl*” and the Dutch “*wel*”, as well as in the English “*well*”, (as in “good”).

It is believed that in its modern meaning “wallet” was first used in the USA during the 1800s to name the thingy in which you now store your money, credit cards, slips of paper with undecipherable phone numbers and old condoms. Probably, the old cowboys simply transferred the original word-meaning of “bag of provisions” onto the object that now was holding their papers, (i.e., banknotes), that they needed to buy provisions.

In any case, if you'd have never heard the word “wallet” before, you would have no other choice but to guess to what kind of object it pertains, and your chances for getting it right would be about as good as for guessing the meaning of “*Tschechisches Streichholzschächtelchen*” correctly on the first try.

In German, on the other hand, the word for “wallet” is „*Brieftasche*” or „*Geldbörse*”. Both are compound nouns, each using two basic words to create a new meaning. „*Brieftasche*” is comprised of „*Brief*”, (“letter”), and „*Tasche*”, (“bag”), while „*Geldbörse*” uses „*Geld*”, (“money”), and „*Börse*”, meaning “purse”.

Admittedly, guessing the purpose of a „*Brieftasche*” might need a certain stretch of the imagination, combined with the knowledge that the predecessors of modern paper-money were in fact letter-sized “vouchers” that you carried with you in leather folders. But if you would hear the word „*Geldbörse*” for the very first time, there's a good chance that you could make an immediate educated guess to its meaning and the thingamabob it denotes.

Oh, and by the way: „*Tschechisches Streichholzschächtelchen*” [~Tshe'chish'es Shtraych'holtz'shech'tel'chen] simply means “Czech matchbox”, i.e. a small box („*Das Schächtelchen*” being the diminutive form of „*Die Schachtel*” = “the box”) of matches („*Das Streichholz*”, literally “the stroke-wood”), from the Czech Republic („*Tschechien*”).

Now Picture This!

Clearly, in the creation of its nouns, i.e., the “names” at the very foundation of every language, German distinguishes itself from English and many other languages. And no one will blame you if you’d now think that compound word formation in German follows the same rules as German grammar, i.e. the same “logic”, “efficiency” and “precision”. Alas, nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, when it comes to its word-creation, German suddenly veers off into a generally unexpected direction and presents itself from an angle that does not fit at all the global image of the language.

Or would you’ve thought that the best way to describe German’s attitude towards its word creation practice would be “playfully creative”?

See? And yet, it’s true. Where English, French, Italian, and other European languages lean heavily towards either genuine or apparent abstracts to name the world around us, German on the other hand revels

in creating ever new vivid images by (re)arranging existing basic “pictures” and combining them to produce colourful, fresh descriptions.

You can best imagine the German naming game as a set of picture-cards with all kinds of basic images like „das Haus“ (house), „die Katze“ (cat), „die Sonne“ (sun) or „das Zeug“ (literally meaning “the stuff” or “the things”), which can be rearranged and combined to your heart’s content to create new mind-images, i.e. designations.

Admittedly rather unimaginative, yet precisely to the point, are those established German nouns ending with „-zeug“, which perfectly illustrate the German predilection for “engineering” their vocabulary by welding words together.



Table: Lazy German Words with „Stuff“-Endings

German Things & Stuff	English Equivalent	Literal Meaning
das Flugzeug	airplane	Flight-thing
das Schlagzeug	drums	Things to hit/beat
das Werkzeug	tools	Things to do work with
das Feuerzeug	lighter	Fire-thing
das Spielzeug	toys	Stuff to play with
das Fahrzeug	vehicle/car	Drive-thing
das Bettzeug	bedding	Stuff for the bed
das Grünzeug	greenery	Green stuff

Once you’re following the simple rules for creating German compound nouns, it’ll be „kein Ding“ [~kine deeng] (“no thing” = no problem) for you to take some basic building blocks (i.e. words) and arrange them such that they complement each other to create ever-new “word-paintings” that display more than just the sum of their parts. Specifically, this means that often German compound nouns possess another “hidden”

layer in plain sight most people tend not to consciously notice when talking or hearing German. However, subconsciously that's a totally different ball game, because the human brain cannot help but create images from spoken sounds and read symbols. Usually, in everyday situations you aren't consciously aware of these images – but they nonetheless add an “invisible” layer of additional meaning to the word, (as do many English expressions, to be clear).

Below you now find twenty examples of German “image-words” together with their far more blunt and one-dimensional German twins that carry the same or similar meaning but nothing of the vivid colours, scenes, shapes, emotions and innuendos as their imaginative equivalents:

Table: Twenty Images Painted with German Words

Image-Word	Literal Meaning	Blunt Equivalent	Blunt English
Der Wolkenkratzer ¹	<i>The cloud-scraper</i>	Das Hochhaus ¹	<i>High-rise building</i>
Das Strohfeuer ¹	<i>The straw-fire</i>	kurze Begeisterung	<i>Short-lived enthusiasm</i>
Der Drahtesel ²	<i>The wire-donkey</i>	Das Fahrrad ¹	<i>Bicycle</i>
Das Zahnrad ¹	<i>The tooth wheel</i>	Das Getriebeteil	<i>Cogwheel</i>
Das Luftschloss ²	<i>The castle in the air</i>	Die Illusion ¹	<i>An illusion</i>
Die Schattenseite ¹	<i>The shadow-side</i>	Der Nachteil ¹	<i>Disadvantage</i>
Das Zugpferd ²	<i>The pulling horse</i>	Der Leistungsträger ¹	<i>A top-performer / An 'effort-leader'</i>
Das Nadelöhr ²	<i>The needle's eye</i>	Der Engpass ¹	<i>A bottleneck</i>
Die Feuerprobe ²	<i>The fire test</i>	Die Bewährungsprobe ¹	<i>Test of endurance</i>
Der Denkkettel ¹	<i>The think-note</i>	Die Strafe ¹	<i>A punishment / A lesson learned</i>
Die Augenweide ²	<i>The eye-revelling</i>	Etwas Schönes ¹	<i>Something beautiful</i>
Die Zitterpartie ²	<i>The tremble trip</i>	Die enge Situation	<i>A tense situation</i>
Das Wortgefecht ¹	<i>The word-skirmish</i>	Das Streitgespräch ¹	<i>An argument</i>
Das Gedankenkarussell ²	<i>The carousel of thoughts</i>	Das Grübeln ¹	<i>Brooding</i>
Die Katerstimmung ²	<i>The tomcat-/hangover-mood</i>	Die gedrückte Stimmung ¹	<i>Depressed mood</i>
Der Seelenstriptease ²	<i>The soul striptease</i>	Die Selbstoffenbarung ¹	<i>Soul-baring</i>
Das Himmelfahrtskommando ¹	<i>The ascension mission</i>	Das aussichtslose Unterfangen	<i>Hopeless endeavour / Suicide mission</i>
Der Brandherd ²	<i>The incendiary hearth</i>	Der Ursprung ¹ / Entstehungsort ¹	<i>Place of origin of a conflict</i>
Das Wespennest ²	<i>The wasp's nest</i>	Das Konfliktfeld / Das Minenfeld ¹	<i>Possible volatile point of conflict / Minefield</i>
Das Pulverfass ²	<i>The powder keg</i>	Der Krisenherd ¹	<i>Crisis hotspot</i>

Some of these terms (marked: ¹) are the default go-to expression and usually the first choice when Germans talk, while others (marked: ²) are used more deliberately in specific situations to convey “beneath the surface” a certain feeling, opinion or evaluation. For instance, by choosing the term „Drahtesel“ instead of „Fahrrad“ in a conversation with your friend about his or her new bike, you're telling your buddy or BFF pretty directly that you don't think much of the bike and that you think your grandfather's boneshaker – which he's been riding to the village for 30 years – looks just as rickety as the birthday present your friend was so excited about just a moment ago.

(Great job, by the way. Jeez, you really put your friend in a *Katerstimmung* there. Now they'll likely be caught in a *Gedankenkarussell*

and probably think about the *Schattenseiten* of your friendship. So, best prepare for an upcoming *Wortgefecht* and don't be surprised if they're planning to serve you with a *Denkzettel* for poking the *Wespennest*.)

While the words on the above list are used selectively and often carry a second layer of meaning, i.e., they are conveying a personal judgement or emphasise the drama of a situation or similar, the following list contains colourful German nouns that are all in everyday use and therefore "value-neutral" – but this does not detract from their beauty and originality.

Table: Examples of Colourful German Nouns

German Noun	Literal Translation	English Equivalent
Die Schildkröte	The shield toad	A turtle
Der Seelenfrieden	The soul peace	Peace of mind
Der Augenblick	The eye glimpse	A moment
Die Nacktschnecke	The naked snail	A slug
Der Funkenflug	A sparks-flight	Flying sparks
Die Regenbogenhaut	The rainbow-skin	The Iris (eye)
Das Hirngespinnst	The brain gossamer	A figment
Das Nebelmeer	A sea of fog	A sea of fog
Das Blätterrauschen	A leaves-rush	A rustling of leaves
Das Federkleid	The feathers-dress	The plumage (bird)
Das Tränenmeer	A sea of tears	An overwhelming sorrow
Der Zungenbrecher	The tongue breaker	A tongue twister
Der Bärenhunger	A bear's hunger	A ravenous appetite
Der Katzenjammer	The cat misery	The blues
Das Fernweh	The far-away aching	The travel lust
Das Kopfkino	The head-cinema	Vivid imagery
Die Schnapsidee	A schnapps-idea	A crackpot idea
Der innere Schweinehund	The inner pig-dog	Your lazy 'inner bastard'
Fingerspitzengefühl	The fingertips-sensitivity	Your sensitive instincts
Die Fremdscham	The extrinsic shame	Vicarious embarrassment
Das Kuddelmuddel	A hodgepodge	A mess
Der Erbsenzähler	A peas-counter	A nit-picker
Das Luftschloss	An air-palace	A pipe-dream
Der Angsthase	A fear-rabbit	A coward
Das Sammelsurium	The disorderly collection	A smorgasbord
Das Sitzfleisch	The sitting-flesh	Staying power
Die Sternschnuppe	A glimmering star-wick	A shooting star
Der Schiedsrichter	The decisions--judge	The referee
Das Riesenrad	The giants' wheel	A Ferris wheel
Der Budenzauber	The stalls' spell-magic	A jamboree
Der Putzfimmel	The cleaning addiction	Mania for cleaning
Der Zauberstab	The spell staff	A magic wand
Der Dachboden	The roof-floor	The attic
Die Küssenschlacht	A cushion battle	A pillow fight
Der Reibekuchen	The grating cake	Potato fritter
Der Affenzahn	The monkey tooth	Breakneck speed
Der Schnurrbart	A purr-beard	A mustache
Die Hosenträger	The trouser carriers	Braces/suspenders
Das Fersengeld	The heels-money	Turn tail and run
Der Schauspieler	The act-player	An actor
Die Rolltreppe	The rolling stairs	An escalator
Der Fahrstuhl	A driving chair	A lift/elevator
Die Schaufensterpuppe	The shopwindow doll	A mannequin
Das Hundewetter	The dogs' weather	Beastly weather
Der Wasserhahn	The water rooster	A faucet

Das Weltall	The world-all	<i>Outer space</i>
Das Ohrenschlackern	An ears-flapping	<i>To be left speechless</i>
Der Musikantenknochen	The musicians' bone	<i>The funny bone</i>
Die Lümmeltüte	The bugger bag	<i>A condom (coll.)</i>
Der Himmelsstürmer	The heavens-assailant	<i>Persisting against all odds</i>
Der Rausschmeisser	The out-thrower	<i>A bouncer</i>
Das Erdmännchen	The little earth-man	<i>A meerkat</i>
Das Fegefeuer	The brushing/cleansing fire	<i>Purgatory</i>
Der Pfennigfuchser	The penny-foxer	<i>A miser</i>
Die Gürtelrose	The belt rose	<i>The shingles</i>
Das Winkfleisch	The waving-flesh	<i>Loose fat on upper arms</i>
Die Klobrille	The toilet-spectacles	<i>A toilet seat</i>
Die Atempause	A breath break	<i>A respite</i>
Das Handgemenge	A hand conglomerate	<i>A scuffle, a brawl</i>
Das Bauernopfer	A pawn sacrifice	<i>Fall guy, sacrificial lamb</i>
Das Elfenbein	The elven bone	<i>Ivory</i>
Das Faustpfand	A fist-collateral	<i>A bargaining chip</i>
Das Ohrläppchen	The little ear-cloth	<i>The earlobe</i>
Die Himmelsrichtungen	The sky directions	<i>Cardinal directions</i>
Das Trommelfell	The drum fur	<i>The eardrum</i>
Der Alptraum	The elf-dream	<i>A nightmare</i>
Die Nebelkerze	The fog candle	<i>A red herring, smokescreen</i>
Der Mutterkuchen	The mother cake	<i>The placenta</i>
Das Blütenmeer	A sea of blossoms	<i>An abundance of flowers</i>
Der Kraftprotz	The strength show-off	<i>A muscle man</i>
Die Baumwolle	The tree wool	<i>Cotton</i>
Der Kosename	The caressing-name	<i>Pet name, nickname</i>
Der Kofferraum	The suitcase space	<i>The boot/the trunk</i>
Der Anhalter	The stopper	<i>A hitchhiker</i>
Der Windhund	The wind dog	<i>A greyhound</i>
Die Tuchfühlung	The cloth-feeling	<i>Close body contact</i>
Der Schweinsgalopp	The pig's gallop	<i>Fast but insufficient action</i>
Der Kotflügel	The faeces wing	<i>The wing/the fender (car)</i>
Der Besserwisser	The better-knower	<i>A know-it-all, smart-alec</i>
Der Einbrecher	The in-breaker	<i>A burglar</i>
Der Mettigel	The raw-pork hedgehog	<i>Pork-loaf w/ onion-spikes</i>
Die Gottesanbeterin	A female god-worshiper	<i>A mantis</i>
Der Wolkenbruch	A clouds-fracture	<i>A downpour</i>
Die Pustelblume	The puff flower	<i>A dandelion</i>
Die Engelszungen	The angels tongues	<i>All powers of persuasion</i>
Der Miesepeter	The pissed-off Peter	<i>A sourpuss</i>
Der Frechdachs	The cheeky badger	<i>a rascal, a whippersnapper</i>
Das Streichholz	The stroke-wood	<i>A match (fire)</i>
Das Lampenfieber	The lamps-fever	<i>Stagefright</i>
Die Zuckerschnute	A sugar snoot	<i>Sweetheart</i>
Die Schamhaare	The shame-hairs	<i>Pubic hair</i>
Der Liebestöter	The love killer	<i>Long johns (underwear)</i>
Der Mitesser	The eating-joiner	<i>Blackhead, spot</i>
Der Wellenreiter	The wave rider	<i>A surfer</i>
Der Feureifer	The fire alacrity	<i>Zeal, ardour</i>
Der Bildschirm	The picture screen	<i>A monitor</i>
Das Trinkgeld	The drinks-money	<i>The tip (service)</i>
Die Lichtgestalt	A light-figure	<i>A paragon</i>
Der Sternenhimmel	The stars-sky	<i>A star-lit sky</i>
Das Viereck	The four-corner	<i>A square</i>
Das Dreieck	The three-corner	<i>A triangle</i>
Der Kraftstoff	The power stuff	<i>Fuel</i>
Die Halbinsel	The half-island	<i>A peninsula</i>
Die Affenschande	A monkey shame	<i>A crying shame</i>
Der Armleuchter	The arm-flambeau	<i>A candelabra; a bonehead</i>
Der Birnenpo	The pear-bum	<i>A pear-shaped bottom</i>

Der Muskelkater	The muscle-tomcat	Muscle aches after sport
Der Gerstensaft	The barley juice	Beer (coll.)
Der Führerschein	The leader certificate	A driving licence
Der Schaumschläger	A foam-beater	A swashbuckler, a windbag
Der Heiligenschein	A saints-glow	A halo, a nimbus
Die Verbesserung	The bettering	An improvement
Das Elfenbein	The Elven bone	Ivory

“Okay, stop. Wait a minute”, I hear you say. “I always thought of German as the exact opposite. As a grey, dull, and dry language that’s all about its nitpicky grammar. Where does this artistical, image-creating side suddenly come from!?”

Well, at least you’re partly right about your not-so-flattering assumption. German grammar can indeed be rather nitpicky and at times even “dry” and tedious or, as some would put it: Simply hellishly complicated. Yet the two sides – on the one hand the finely tuned and efficient grammar, on the other hand the artistic and playful creation of picturesque terms – aren’t as mutually exclusive as you might think. In fact, as it turns out, they represent merely the two sides of the same coin.



On the “tedious” side of the coin, you will find that German grammar has a pretty solid reason for being so strict about following its rules. Ultimately, you can trace this “nitpicking” back to the core philosophy of the

German language-beast, which is to be a language where every “change”, whether it’s declension, conjugation, word alteration, vowel shift or anything else, carries as much information as possible while exerting the least possible effort – resulting almost inevitably in a linguistic “code” where adherence to watchmaker-like precision is the only guarantee for flawless information exchange.

Following this premise to its ultimate consequence, modern-day German grammar has been finetuned to such an extent that the simple change of just one or two letters in a word (particularly at the word ending) will already change e.g. the gender of a noun, turn a singular into a plural, or change the description of a static position into the account of an ongoing action.

Sorry, what’s that? You need proof? Sure, „kein Ding”. As you may recall, earlier you’ve been promised to learn more about the “levitating cat”, so now let’s visit this feline wonder by looking at the simple phrase: „Die Katze läuft über den Tisch”. A sentence that is set in the grammatical *Akkusativ* case, recognisable by the declined article „den”, which is the accusative form of the infinitive (i.e. “default”) masculine article „der” for the noun „Tisch” – (yes, “table” is masculine in German and no, nobody knows why. So, best don’t rack your brains over it.)

Since the *Akkusativ* case is (broadly speaking) primarily used for describing an action (which is directed at the so-called “direct object” of the sentence), the above sentence therefore translates to: „The cat walks

across the table.”

Okay, so far, so simple. But watch what happens when you change just one single letter in the article for „Tisch“. By replacing the declined accusative article „den“ with the declined dative article „dem“, thus turning this sentence-part into a *Dativ* case which, (again, broadly speaking), is used to describe primarily a position (of the so-called “indirect object”), you will now get the sentence: „Die Katze läuft über dem Tisch“.

Now you may think, “So what? No big deal. After all, what can one tiny letter do on its own?”

Well, not much – except that the sentence now suddenly tells German-speakers the story of an amazingly gifted cat that is apparently capable of levitation, because now the phrase in *Dativ* with the article „dem“ translates to: “The cat walks above the table.” – *Purrrely* magical, isn’t it?



Okay, the more down-to-earth explanation is that by changing the letter “n” to “m” in the article of the „Tisch“ and therefore the grammatical case from accusative to dative, you also change the meaning of the preposition „über“ from “across” to “above”. That’s because „über“ is a so-called „*Wechselpräposition*“ (alternating preposition) which can be used in the accusative case, (that will answer the question: “Where to [is the subject going/moving]?”) as well as in the dative case, (which provides the answer the question: Where [is the subject]?).

Alright, so now that we've clarified the “boring” grammar side of the proverbial coin and the importance of its precise use, what about the other, the wild and creative side that expresses itself foremost in the creation of nouns such as, for example and off the cuff,

German	Meaning	English equivalent
Mondlichtzauber	The magic hidden in moonlight	<i>Moonlight magic</i>
Tauferlenmorgen	A morning fresh as dew pearls	<i>Dew drops morning</i>
Rosendämmerglanz	A dawn glowing like roses	<i>Roses-dawn glow</i>
Meeresatemruhe	The calm of the sea breathing	<i>Sea-breath calm</i>
Glühwürmchenhimmel	Sky sparkling with glow-worms	<i>Firefly sky</i>
Angsthasenfellbürste	The fur-brush for a scaredy cat	<i>Fear-rabbit fur-brush</i>
Sommerwindpoesie	Poetry of the summer wind	<i>Summer wind poetry</i>

But to return for a moment to the less prosaic logic behind such emotionally charged verbal imagery: The clearly defined method of naming “things” in German can claim as its roots the very same principle of maximum efficiency with minimum effort as does its counterpart on the grammar side – albeit with a good dose more freedom and creativity in the mix.

At this point, one or the other impatient student will usually pipe up and ask with an annoyed undertone: “But why is it that the German language does things so completely different compared to more user-friendly languages like English, Romanian, Spanish, or Italian? Why does German have to take this exceptional path and make my life so difficult!?”

Well, "difficult" is always a pretty subjective thing to say – but you do already speak English after all, so you've already got a big head start on all other German-students who don't. So, instead of getting down about it, you might as well count your blessings, since English is an excellent stepstone for reaching your goals in German quicker and easier.

As for why German has taken the “less travelled” route, however, we will need to hop into our trusty time-machine and make a quick fourth-dimension jump back to the vast primeval forests of northern Europe more than 2,000 years ago. So, *bzzz*, *woosh*, *beep*, and all those other ‘timey-wimey’ sounding noises ...

Right. Get out and behind that huge oak tree over here. *Psst!* We are now somewhere close to the river Rhine in the last century BC, and if you stick your head out for a second, you’ll see one of the Germanic tribes living here beneath the dense canopy of oaks, beeches, birches, and chestnut trees spreading all the way to the horizon in all directions. Except in the western direction, of course, where mighty old “Father Rhine” provides a natural border and keeps the arrogant invaders and occupiers from that empire across the Alps halfway at bay.

The tribe you see in front of you could be *Chatti*, (incidentally the namesakes of the modern federal state of *Hessen*), but just as well *Usipetes* or *Sugambri*. Regardless, the Germanic tribes of this era, be it the *Angles*, *Saxons*, *Jutes*, *Bavarii*, *Chatti*, *Cherusci*, *Goths*, or *Alemanni* (to name but a few), generally occupy their days with hunting, gathering, building, planting, harvesting, crafting, and other daily chores typical for a tribal village at the dusk of the last millennium BC – if they’re not just hitting each other over the head in some tribal dispute, of course.

Although the forests and fields provide ample food and good shelter for our early Germans, they still miss out on most if not all of the amenities and achievements enjoyed by that technologically far more advanced culture from beyond the southern mountain range. Fortunately for them, however, they usually don’t even know how luxuriously the Roman occupiers live even here, just across the Rhine, in the occupied province of *Germania inferior*. Then again, it’s quite possible that our early Germans here would rather derisively scoff at the Roman “wimps” who are soaking in their indoor thermal baths and drive newfangled carts on paved roads to visit trained medics for their toothaches only to later sit together on the shitter in their communal toilets with fancy underground canalisation that’s flushed with water from their elaborately engineered aqueducts. Nah, go away with your mollycoddling inventions of your so-called Roman civilisation – and take your stupid Latin language right with you too, thank you very much.



Not for lack of trying on the part of the Romans, this fervent “wish” of many Germanic peoples to be spared compulsory Latin-lessons was

ultimately fulfilled, thanks to a certain *Hermann der Cherusker* (Arminius) and a little hanky-panky that he arranged in the *Teutoburger* forest.

After the devastating defeat in the “Varus battle” in the Teutoburger Forest in 9 AD, the Roman legions along the Rhine would continue their efforts to subjugate the unruly tree-huggers for some time and with some success even in the wake of *Hermann’s* bloody cat-and-mouse game with the entire Roman XVII., XVIII., and XIX. Legions among the forest’s densely growing trees. However, the Latin language with its six, (some would say even seven), grammatical cases never made the permanent jump across the Rhine after that.

Due to this continuous absence of Roman Latin as the foundation and shining example for any hypothetical Latin-German language, however, the Germanic tribes were left to their own devices and consequently never found any reason – let alone the time or idleness – to rethink or “upgrade” their time-honoured method of naming things. An attitude that was in fact pretty much in line with their practical and literal-minded outlook on life. And with that, let’s jump back into our time-machine to make some more ‘timey-wimey’ *Doctor Who*-noises. *Beep*, *Woosh*, and *Bzzz*.

Now, to briefly summarise our little trip, firstly it should be clear that the vernacular spoken by the Germanic forefathers and -mothers naturally shows very few points of contact with the modern German spoke today. However, one aspect of the language that has survived all attacks from outsiders – from the Roman Empire to the Huns, the Slaves, the Magyars and the Vikings to Napoleonic France and up to the USSR, the USA, Great Britain and France after WW II – and that has been handed down across the generations is the often stunningly colourful and creative German “naming”-system that employs a stock of “basic” nouns to create ever-new and surprising words.

When a Word Fits Like a Glove



To start you off with some tangible examples, in the following you find a list with four exemplary basic German nouns together with their most common compound noun variations. as a little demonstration of the ease

with which German transitions from “basic” nouns to more detail-providing and/or meaning-changing compound nouns.

(As a side note: For all its ingenious simplicity, one must nonetheless admit that this method also carries with it an undeniable hint of laziness. This becomes particularly evident in the „*Tier*“-example below, which seems to indicate that the early German “naming authorities” sometimes went beyond the goal of simplicity and straight into the territory of slothfulness. But then again, if it works, it works. But judge for yourself.)

Table: German Compound Noun Examples

Der Schrank	the wardrobe	<i>Literally:</i>
Kühlschrank	fridge	cool wardrobe
Kleiderschrank	wardrobe	clothes wardrobe
Waffenschrank	weapon cabinet	weapons wardrobe
Geschirrschrank	cupboard	crockery wardrobe
Schuhschrank	shoe cabinet	shoe wardrobe
Aktenschrank	filing cabinet	files wardrobe
Die Schranktür	wardrobe door	wardrobe door

Das Tier	the animal	<i>Literally:</i>
Faultier	sloth	lazy animal
Gürteltier	armadillo	belt animal
Schnabeltier	platypus	beak animal
Murmeltier	groundhog	murmur animal
Schuppentier	pangolin	scales animal
Krabbeltier	creepy-crawly	crawling animal
Huftier	ungulate	hoof animal
Schalentier	crustacean	shell animal
Haustier	pet	house animal
Kleintier	small animal	small animal
Beuteltier	marsupial	bag animal
Kriechtief	crawler, reptile	crawling animal
Raubtier	predator	robbing animal
Beutetier	prey	prey animal

Die Uhr	the clock	<i>literally</i>
Wanduhr	wall clock	wall clock
Armbanduhr	wristwatch	wristband clock
Bahnhofsuhr	train station clock	train station clock
Standuhr	grandfather clock	standing clock
Taschenuhr	pocket watch	pocket clock
Stoppuhr	stopwatch	stop clock
Parkuhr	parking metre	parking clock

Der Brief	the letter	<i>literally</i>
Die Briefftasche	wallet	letter bag
Der Briefumschlag	envelope	letter wrapper
Der Briefträger	postman	letter carrier
Der Briefkasten	post box	letter box
Das Brieffach	pigeonhole	letter compartment
Der Briefkopf	letter head	letter head
Der Briefbogen	sheet of paper	letter sheet
Der Brieffreund	pen pal	letter friend
Die Briefmarke	stamp	letter marker

One other particularly poignant and illustrative example in this regard comes in the form of the piece of clothing that's used to cover your hands to keep them warm in winter. The exclusive name in English for this thing, (that generally comes in a pair), is of course "Glove", or "Gloves". The term derives from the Proto-Germanic word "Galofo", denoting "a

covering for the hand" and is also the source for the Old Norse term *"glofi"* with the same meaning.

Since you are (presumably) not fluent in Proto-Germanic or Old Norse, however, such an etymological information would be of little help to you if you'd be trying to guess the object that is described by the word *"Glove"* if you'd have never heard the term before. Incidentally, the same naturally also goes for the French word *"gant"*, the Spanish *"Guante"*, and the Italian *"guanto"*.

Now take your rustic Germanic settlers, warriors, and farmers around the 9th century AD in comparison. A down-to-earth type of people who wanted nothing to do with "meaningless" descriptions lacking any concrete tangibility. Instead, they simply came up with the Old High German word *„hantscuoh"*, later turning into the Middle High German *„hantschuoch"* until finally becoming the modern Standard High German word *„Handschuh"*. What unites them all is their figurative meaning of being a shoe (*„Schuh"*) for the hand (*„Hand"*).

You can just imagine the two Germanic warriors in the 9th century AD who had never seen a proper glove before and now came across a pair of finely stitched gloves in the merchant's display at the annual village market. After having had a good look at the leathery splendour, one bearded tribesman finally tried the gloves on, looked at them for a while and then said to his buddy: *"Hey, Thorleif, would you look at that. These things cover my hands just as tightly as my shoes cover my feet."*



And Thorleif, equally taken with the skintight marvel, replied delightedly: *"By Wōðanaz, it's true! Hey, Astúlf, you know what? Let's call them fingersocks!"*

"What?! No. We call them handshoes, you moron!"

And just like that, the word stuck for the next 1,100 years, because everyone agreed that Astúlf's new word was the perfect pictographic description for this piece of clothing. (Admittedly, details regarding the exact historical event may vary, but this story is just as good as any other, so there.)

"Schadenfreude" and other Picturesque Depictions

Naturally, and in all seriousness now, the *„Handschuh"* came to the Germanic territories at the latest with the Romans in the 1st-4th century AD and was probably known even before that, considering that gloves were even found in the tomb of Egyptian pharaoh *Tutankhamun*.

However, the Old High German word *„hantscuoh"* (also written *„hantscōh"*) first appears in texts from around the 8th-9th century AD during the time of the Carolingian period under *Charlemagne*, when Old High German began to be written down more systematically in

monasteries. But the old Germanic wordsmiths were not content with inventing picturesque names only for tangible and touchable objects by fusing together existing basic terms. No, they also excelled in the true art of describing intangible elements, ideas and concepts such as particular emotions, theories, or situations in one single pictorial word.

It is here where German compound nouns really take off and soar into hitherto unimagined heights. For instance, just take the well-known word „*Schadenfreude*“ that has been mentioned already in author *Anna Funder*’s quote at the beginning of this chapter. This “*feeling of an internal joy about someone else’s misfortune*” is an emotion that certainly almost everyone has experienced at least once in their life.

However, if you were to translate „*Schadenfreude*“ directly into English as “damage joy” to describe your internal joy at someone else’s misfortune to your good friend Archibald P. Snodgrass, he would probably just look at you, slack-jawed and uncomprehending. Even if he did guess the intended meaning, that’s just not how things are done in English, and he would still look at you slightly befuddled, convinced that you’re overdoing it with your obsession with German beer.

So, if “damage joy” falls short in describing this particular emotion, how about consulting the dictionary to find an English equivalent? Well, the online-dictionary dict.cc™ provides the terms “malicious glee”, “spitefulness”, “gloating” and “mischievousness” as translations. In fact, however, these are only inadequate descriptions and don’t even come close to capturing the whole array of connotations that spring to mind upon hearing the words „*Schaden*“ and „*Freude*“ combined in the German „*Schadenfreude*“.

See, a brain running on a German Operating System will not only recognise the word „*Schadenfreude*“ but will simultaneously and subconsciously also proceed to associate the term „*Schaden*“ directly with words like „*Dachschaden*“ – literally meaning “roof damage” and indicating that someone has “some bats in the belfry” or is “a few marbles short of a full set”.

At the same time, in the back of the mind there will sound a faint echo of the word „*Unfallschaden*“ which denotes a literal “accident-damage” and in particular a damage on one’s automobile. This in turn connects to „*Schadensfall*“, a “damage-case”, bringing up images of an accident or material loss. And from the cesspool of unpleasant terms, even the word „*Schädling*“, i.e., “vermin” emerges, which in German is unfortunately associated not only with insects and rodents but also with the true pests that were the Nazis, who perverted the term beyond all that is bearable.

From another corner of the mind, in a less dark recess, reverberates the exclamation „*Schade!*“, approximately meaning, “Oh, what a shame!”, while the tiny gnome of unsolicited mental interjections will pipe up next by quoting the German colloquial saying, „*Wer den Schaden hat, braucht für den Spott nicht zu sorgen*“, which translates less elegantly as “The one who has the damage doesn’t have to worry about the mockery”.

And that’s only the first half of our compound noun. Now comes „the term „*Freude*“, and with it subconscious connotations like „*Kindliche Freude*“, (childlike joy) and „*Freudentaumel*“, (delirium of joy), but also

„Freudlosigkeit“, (joylessness), as well as similar-sounding words, like „Freunde“ (friends), or „Friede“ (peace), and last but in many cases not least even the polyphonic, bell-like singing of a large classic choir intoning Ludwig van Beethoven’s hymn „Freude schöner Götterfunken“ (“Ode to Joy”), in which the text by one of Germany’s greatest authors Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) describes joy as “the beautiful spark of the gods”.

But the true magic happens when these two words are combined. In this case, the fusion proves even more fruitful due to the fact that the two terms are almost diametrically opposed and thus rub at each other to make mental sparks fly. In many German compound nouns, it is in fact this imbalance in, for example, emotional impact, complexity, meaning, or linguistic elegance between the separate words making up the compound that suddenly open up new neural pathways and conjure up unexpected imagery.

With all this said, however, this naturally still doesn’t mean that all these connotations appear in every German-speaker’s mind upon hearing the word „Schadenfreude“. Rather, a brain on German will unnoticeably pour these associations into a large cauldron and stir them together into a rich and multi-layered interpretation that is in parts unique to each listener or reader. Yet the part they will all have in common is the hearer’s or reader’s perception of the term’s multi-faceted associations and staggered emotional impact depths.

And yet, in the grander scheme of abstracts you will find „Schadenfreude“ merely on the beginner’s level compared to the genuine heavy hitters in the arena of German word creations.

Take e.g. such complex emotions as „Hoffnungsschimmer“-¹, „Fernweh“-², „Weltschmerz“-³ or „Torschlußpanik“-⁴, which are effortlessly condensing lengthy explanations like, ¹: “A small ray of hope in a desperate situation”, ²: “A longing for travelling to far-away lands”, ³: “Being weary of the world and its shortcomings”, or ⁴: “The panic setting in when being left on the shelf”, while simultaneously also creating some vivid mental images in the listener’s mind.



One excellent example for this creation of mind-images – or even whole “movie”-scenes, (what Germans call „Kopfkino“, i.e., “head-cinema”) – is the word “Torschlußpanik”, literally translating to “gate closing

panic”. The word immediately conjures up the scene of a person desperately sprinting towards a large gate in a high wall that is slowly but inexorably closing while the gap between the two gate-sides is continuously narrowing, and the person is frantically scrambling to reach the gate before it closes forever. You’ve got to admit that the English equivalent for “Torschlußpanik” as “the fear of being left on the shelf” or “the fear of hitting the wall”, can’t quite hold a candle to this vividly illustrative scene.

No End to the Madness

On the prosaic side of the German compound noun game there often arises one specific question: Is there actually such a thing as an upper limit for the length of a compound noun? With the answer simply being: Nope, there isn't. The sky is the limit, or in this case, your own imagination.

In daily life, however, it ultimately comes down to understandability, since the longer the word, the harder it will be to follow its full meaning, not only for listeners but also for the word-creators themselves. Furthermore, it's no secret that even in German it is sometimes easier and more comprehensible to employ full sentences instead of compound nouns. After all, the mere length of a compound noun is no indicator for the word's impact or importance per se.

Take for example the rather bland German compound noun „*Nahrungsmittelunverträglichkeitsreaktion*“. With an impressive length of forty letters, the term still only denotes an adverse reaction to food, for instance a lactose or gluten intolerance. If you wanted to further specify e.g. that this reaction relates exclusively to frozen food, („*Tiefkühl-*“), you would just need to add that term to the front of the word, thus getting „*Tiefkühlernahrungsmittelunverträglichkeitsreaktion*“, with 48 letters a good example for the outer limits of compound noun comprehensibility.

When confronted with lengthy compound nouns like this, your trick to make them make sense is to deftly take them apart and to look at each part separately. Sticking with the example above, you start as always at the end with the word „*Reaktion*“, („reaction“), followed by „*Verträglichkeit*“, („tolerance“), plus the prefix „*un-*“, making it a negative like the English prefix „in-“. Hence, „*Unverträglichkeit*“ equals „intolerance“. Finally, „*Nahrung*“ is the German word for „nutrition“, and „*-mittel*“ will always denote „the means to/for something“, here therefore „the means to satisfy your nutritional needs“, making „*Nahrungsmittel*“ the official/bureaucratic German term for „food“.



Should you remain in Germany for a longer period than just the standard fortnight needed to visit *Neuschwanstein* Castle, the *Berghain* club in Berlin, and a Munich *Biergarten*, then best prepare yourself for being accosted at one point by some grinning German who finds it hilarious to “shock” you with the archetypical textbook-example for German compound nouns.

Probably, this encounter will go something like this: “*Ha, I’ll tell you a compound noun that will make your very ears wiggle! Ready? You won’t believe this. It’s famous. A classic! Ready? Okay, so, listen! Ready? Okay, here it goes: ‘Donaudampfschiffahrtsskapitänsmütze’! Crazy, isn’t it? Isn’t that crazy? What!?’*”

If you find yourself trapped by this kind of windbag, your ideal reaction would be to smile back at him and explain that the hat („*Mütze*“)

of a captain („*Kapitän*“) of a shipping company („*Schiffahrt*“) running on steam („*Dampf*“) on the river Danube („*Donau*“) is truly old hat („*ein alter Hut*“) and that you would only take your hat off to him, („*den Hut ziehen*“) if he could pull a more original example out of the hat („*aus dem Hut ziehen*“), but until then he’s just all hat and no cattle, („*Große Klappe und nichts dahinter*“).

(Oh, and by the way: Did you notice that there are three consecutive letters “F” in the word „*Schiffahrt*“? That’s thanks to the reformed German spelling-rules of 1996 which allow „*Schiff*“, (“ship”), to be connected to „*Fahrt*“, (“drive, ride, travel”), without the need of dropping one “F”, as the pre-reform rules demanded. Crazy, what?)

Don’t fear Using Your “Food Weapons”

If there’s anything you should take away from the entire compound noun topic, it is that you shouldn’t fear long German words. Just cut them into their individual pieces and perform the necessary mental gymnastics to suss



out their meaning back to front. For newbie German-speakers, the whole compound word system can even work to their advantage, because whenever a German term is eluding you at the moment, you only need to rummage in your brain for two or three words that you do know and then combine them into an approximate description for the thing you need to name. You can usually bet your entire “bag of provisions” that your German speaking counterpart will get the gist. Since native German-speakers grow up with this method of creating new words for conveying meaning, rest assured that the only reactions you will get in return for your valiant “word-puzzle” attempts will be either a casual nod of understanding, a respectful grin, or a congratulatory high-five.

In fact, German-speakers are so used to play this game themselves that they aren’t the least bit afraid of applying this method also in other languages. For instance in English, as the experience of a waitress from the UK illustrates, who posted this hilarious short story of the following encounter on the internet: “A German man just came into the pub and tried to ask for cutlery but ended up saying, “I need some food weapons!”, and I will now be referring to them by nothing else!”

The moral of the story? Never hesitate to come up with your personal version of “food weapons” when you are out and about and speak with Germans. Creativity is key and your audience will appreciate your ad hoc creations with gusto.

But wait, there’s more! The Complicated Compound Adjectives.

Should you think that stitching together two or three or more nouns to create a German Frankenmonster-word is already crazy, well, then think again. Because the mad scientist who sometimes seems to hide

behind the curtain of the German language applies the same principle also cheerfully to verbs and adjectives. And although the results are generally a nuance less vividly descriptive, compound verbs and adjectives display at least an equally high level of efficiency as their noun brethren.

Conveniently, a good example for a compound adjective, i.e., a „*zusammengesetztes Adjektiv*“, is in fact the German word for “compound” itself, namely the adjective „*zusammengesetzt*“. If you split this word in its two components, you get two basic German words. For one, the adjective „*zusammen*“, meaning “together”, and for another the conjugated past participle-form („*gesetzt*“) of the verb „*setzen*“, meaning “to sit”, “to place”, or “to put”. By combining adjective and verb, you get the literal meaning of “having been placed together”, a typical straight-to-the-point German compound adjective.

Generally, you can combine adjectives with other adjectives, nouns, or verbs in order to describe something more specifically, just like in English. The only difference to English: German fuses the two words together. In this way you can create descriptive adjectives like „*dunkelblau*“, „*hellrot*“, „*nachtschwarz*“, or „*blütenweiß*“, as the German equivalents for “dark blue”, “light red”, “black as night”, or “white as a blossom”.

German gives you the freedom to create your own combinations of 1]. **adjective + adjective** (e.g., „*hellrot*“, „*dunkelblau*“), 2]. **adjective + verb**, (e.g., „*zusammengesetzt*“), and 3]. **noun + adjective**, for example if you want to call your wife or girlfriend „*schmetterlingsleicht*“, (“light as a butterfly”), or your husband or boyfriend „*bärenstark*“, (“strong as a bear”).



Of course, you could also call your wife or girlfriend „*bärenleicht*“ or your husband or boyfriend „*schmetterlingsstark*“, if you are out for a lively argument – while giving your significant other the pet name „*Schmetterlingsbär*“, (“butterfly bear”), has a non-zero chance to result in an interesting debate about divorce procedures, regardless of your counterpart’s gender.

Yet, the true challenge posed by German adjectives, (and feared and loathed by every German-student), doesn’t come with the almost limitless possibilities of creating new descriptive terms. Instead, one of the hardest nuts to crack in German is the challenge of assigning the correct grammatical ending to an adjective, (its different declined forms), since these depend not on one, not on two, but on three separate grammatical circumstances.

At the root of this struggle lies the grammatical rule that German adjective-endings, such as „-en“, „-er“, „-es“, or „-e“, must be applied whenever you use the adjective in direct relation to a grammatical subject or object, in other words, whenever they don’t serve as a nominative description, for instance when you’re saying, „*Der Mond ist schön*“, [~dare mond eest shoin], (“The moon is beautiful”).

The correct ending of an adjective is determined by the following three variables: 1). the grammatical case, (nominative dative, accusative, or genitive), 2). the gender of the subject or object, (male, female, neuter, plural), and 3). the type of article (definite, indefinite, or no article) used with the described subject or object.

This is why you say, „*Der Mond ist schön*“, where the adjective „*schön*“ remains in its infinitive form, (nominative), while as soon as you apply the adjective as a direct description of the noun in combination with either a definite, an indefinite or without an article *and* in different grammatical cases, you will need to say respectively:

- „*Der schöne Mond*“, (“The beautiful moon”)
- „*Des schönen Mondes*“, (“Of the beautiful moon”)
- „*Ein schöner Mond*“, (“A beautiful moon”)
- „*Schöner Mond!*“, (“Beautiful moon!”)
- „*Schöne Monde*“, (“Beautiful moons”)

In any case, though, the only correct reply to such an observation is, of course: „*Welcher Mond? Ich sehe nur Deine wunderschönen Augen.*“ (“What moon? I only see your beautiful eyes.”).

Naturally, there exists also a rather complex table listing all different options for adjective endings, but fortunately for you, you don’t need to memorise any of them right now, since this is not a grammar textbook. Hence, let’s leave all grammatical pitfalls aside for now and merely keep in mind that German adjectives represent yet another malleable linguistic toy to play around with to your heart’s content.



But wait, there’s even more! The Challenging Compound Verbs.

When it comes to German verbs, the simple principle of word-fusion takes a rather different turn, to say the least. That’s because German verbs, just like their English counterparts, almost always appear together with their “personal” preposition. *Präpositionen* are those small words telling you everything about location, time, relation, manner, etcetera, like in English for example, “on, at, of, from, to, off, before, after, up, down”, and so on. In this way, you can say in English e.g., “I give up!”, with the verb (“to give”) and the preposition (“up”) remaining separate.

German on the other hand doesn’t make it that easy, of course. Instead, German repurposes prepositions by using them also as an attachment to “basic” verbs in order to change the verb’s meaning, from sometimes just slightly to often quite dramatically.

When prepositions are used in this manner, they are called *Präfixe* (prefix-syllables). Some of the most common German prefixes, (and their meaning as prepositions), are:

•	vor- (before, in front of, earlier)	[~foar-]
•	auf- (on, up, on top)	[~aooof-]
•	zu- (to, close, at)	[~tsoo-]
•	ab- (off, away)	[~abb-]
•	weg- (away)	[~veck-]
▪	mit- (with, together)	[~mitt-]

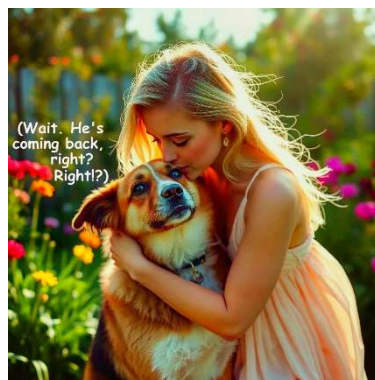
When you attach just these few prefixes for instance to the basic verb „**geben**“, [~geh'ben] (“to give”; but also: “to exist”, “to be [there]”), you can already create such diverse verbs as:

•	vorgeben – to pretend
•	aufgeben – to give up, to surrender
•	zugeben – to admit
•	abgeben – to hand over
•	weggeben – to give away

Verbs formed with such preposition-prefixes all share one specific attribute, namely being so-called “separable verbs”. This means, you will need to split these verbs into their two parts, the prefix and the root-verb, as soon as you use the verb in a conjugated manner instead of in its infinitive form.

The rule is: When using a separable verb in a main clause, you place the root-part of the verb, (in its correctly conjugated form), at the second position of the sentence. (Side note: “Position” does not mean “word”. A “position” in a sentence is “one bit of information”. For instance, in the sentence: “My old but surprisingly fit grandfather comes tomorrow” the first position constitutes everything from “My” until “grandfather”).

So, while you put your conjugated root-verb in second position (always!), you “take off” the prefix and place it at the very end of the sentence. This results in such grammatically correct German sentences as, „*Wie vereinbart, **gebe** ich meinen Hund jeden Morgen um acht Uhr im Nachbarort bei der Hundesitterin **ab**.*“ = “As agreed, I **hand over** my dog to the (female) dog sitter in the neighbouring village every morning at eight.”



As you can see, English keeps the two action-describing words i.e. “hand over” together in one place while German instead splits the verb with the same meaning into its two parts and separates them as far apart from each other as humanly possible.

“But why, though?”, I hear you sigh exasperatedly.

Well, why not, for that matter? After all, it’s not as if this is so much weirder than for example pronouncing a “gh” like an “f”, (as in “tough shit”), innit?

However, if you’re not satisfied by this well-rounded explanation,

you might be interested in the fact that linguists assume that already since the times of Old High German, separable verbs have allowed German-speakers to put a specific emphasis on the prefix by moving it to the end of the sentence, thus drawing particular attention to the action-aspect of the verb, since prefixes often indicate a direction of movement, a starting-point in time, a targeted action, an active negation, or an active change of a present situation.

Additionally, and in typically efficient German grammar fashion, separable verbs and their prefixes are also used to differentiate nuances (or sometimes major plot twists) in meaning, depending on whether the prefix is used separately or together with the verb. For example, „*Er umfährt den Baum*“, (“He drives around the tree”), versus, „*Er fährt den Baum um*“, (“He drives into the tree and knocks it down”).

But probably the best reason for separable verbs might be that they provide the language with a large degree of additional flexibility and expressiveness without the need of introducing new and previously unknown words. In turn, this system also brings the necessity with it, (presumably unintentionally), to train your brain in thinking ahead and to stay focussed instead of wandering off on a tangent.

Why Cutting Germans Off is so Off-Putting



Employing separable verbs in German sentences demands from non-native speakers indubitably a certain adjustment of their thought-processes while “caching” the verb-prefix until the very end of the main clause. However, also the passive role of a listener to spoken German should not be forgotten in this regard.

In case you’re familiar with the debate-culture in e.g. Italy, France, or Spain and are furthermore listening to German radio, television, YouTube™ channels or live conversations from time to time, (as you should if you’re serious about learning German), then perhaps you have also noticed one specific and quite peculiar difference between speakers of Latin-based languages and those of the German language. Namely, that German-speakers are noticeably less prone to loudly interrupt their conversation partners willy-nilly in mid-sentence.

Leaving aside for the moment that interrupting each other is generally regarded as impolite and inconsiderate in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, the reason why German-speakers refrain from cutting off a speaker before they can finish their sentence is a very practical one, which you’ll certainly have already guessed.

Yep, you’ve got it, of course. In a language where the prefix of a separable verb sits in the last position in a sentence and yet will determine no less than the meaning of the entire sentence, it simply doesn’t make sense to interfere with the speaker before this final word has played its important role.

By cutting off a German-speaker mid-sentence, you will therefore

always run the risk of at best producing some awkward misunderstanding. At worst, however, (and after repeat offenses), you're provoking the abrupt termination of the entire conversation. You see, German-speakers are generally not used to being frequently interrupted and will therefore quickly assume that you aren't interested in what they have to say and that you are deliberately demonstrating your blatant disrespect for them.

Sure, in many cases you can actually venture an educated guess regarding the verb-prefix that is about to make its appearance at the end of a German sentence. In such cases, while still rude, you can perhaps even get away with your brutal hacking right into the midriff of your German friend's phrase.

In the previous example about the dog and the dog sitter, it is only possible to cut into this German-speaker's sentence when it has barely begun because this particular beginning of the sentence allows for only a very narrow selection of meaningful prefixes for the root verb „gehen“.

The verb „ab·geben“ is the most “logical” choice here and can be easily guessed before the sentence is finished. Which might let you conclude now that it is only a matter of “clever” guessing whether you are “allowed” to murder your German friends' sentences mid-flight. Well, rest assured that your contingent of lucky guesses will run out rather sooner than later. And why is this such a certainty? Oh, I don't know – but how about the fact that already a simple verb like „gehen“, [ˈgəyˈhɛn] (“to go”) offers a minimum of 39 different prefixes to choose from, each with its own exclusive meaning. Just to give you a visual impression of the scope of prefix-power, cast your glance at the list below with only the most common separable verbs with the root-verb „gehen“.

Table: 35 Compound Verbs with the Root-Verb „gehen“ (to go)

1)	abgehen = to party, to be exuberant; to engage in heavy flirtation
2)	angehen = to attack someone; to concern (you); to switch on by itself
3)	aufgehen = to rise (sun); to bloom (plants); to open by itself
4)	ausgehen = to go to a party or dinner; to switch off by itself
5)	auseinandergehen = to separate by itself; to get fat; to split up (relationship)
6)	draufgehen = to die (colloquial)
7)	eingehen = to die slowly, to wither (mainly plants)
8)	einhergehen (+ mit) = to occur simultaneously with
9)	entzweigehen = to break (into two parts); to break apart (relationship)
10)	fortgehen = to leave; to go far away permanently
11)	fremdgehen = to be unfaithful, to have an affair, to commit adultery
12)	heimgehen = to go home
13)	hervorgehen (+ aus) = to originate from
14)	kaputtgehen = to break
15)	losgehen = to start walking; to leave by foot
16)	mitgehen = to accompany someone
17)	nachgehen = to follow someone; to run slow (clock)
18)	niedergehen = to come down (rain); to go down (empires)
19)	raufgehen = to go up (upstairs)
20)	rausgehen = to go outside (open air); to leave a room
21)	reingehen = to go inside; to enter a room
22)	runtergehen = to go down (downstairs)
23)	sichergehen = to make sure, to control, to check twice
24)	spazieren gehen = to take a stroll, to go for a walk
25)	untergehen = to sink (ship, person); to set (sun); to lose badly

- 26) **vorangehen** = to take the lead
- 27) **vorausgehen** = to scout; to go ahead
- 28) **vorbeigehen** (+ an) = to pass by foot; going to have an end (timewise)
- 29) **vorgehen** = to start walking while leaving others behind; to run fast (clock)
- 30) **vorübergehen** = to end; going to pass (timewise)
- 31) **weggehen** = to go away, to leave; to go out for dinner or party
- 32) **weitergehen** = to keep walking after a pause; to continue (event)
- 33) **zugehen** = to close by itself
- 34) **zugehen** (+ auf) = to move towards something, someone
- 35) **zurückgehen** = to go back to whence you came from

But let's make a practical example and say that your German friend Xaver tells you on the phone that tonight he is going to undertake something specific with a woman called Susanne after he has gone shopping at the supermarket.

In English, Xaver's sentence would then look something like this: *"Tonight, after I went shopping at the supermarket, I go [out, home, away, dancing, etc.] with Susanne."*, or alternatively, *"After I've gone shopping at the supermarket, I will go [out, home, away, dancing, etc.] with Susanne tonight."*

The rules for the correct German sentence structure on the other hand will demand from you to split your action-word (i.e., the separable verb: *prefix + gehen*), resulting in a sentence that would look like this if translated directly into English: *"I go tonight, after I went shopping at the supermarket, with Susanne [out, home, away, dancing, etc.]"* or alternatively, *"After I've gone shopping at the supermarket, I'll go tonight with Susanne [out, home, away, dancing, etc.]"*.

Depending on the actual message Xaver wants to convey, he would choose the appropriate prefix that comes with the root-verb „gehen“ and then put this prefix at the end of his sentence. With so many meaning-altering prefixes available, however, you couldn't even guess what he wants to tell you before he finishes, since he could end his sentence with any of the prefix-examples below (among others), each considerably altering his statement.

- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **heim**. (*heimgehen* = to go home)
- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **aus**. (*ausgehen* = to go for a drink)
- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **fort**. (*fortgehen* = to leave for good, to depart)
- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **ab**. (*abgehen* = to go wild, to party)
- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **spazieren**. (*spaziergehen* = to take a walk)
- Ich **gehe** heute Abend, nachdem ich im Supermarkt einkaufen gegangen bin, mit Susanne **fremd**. (*fremdgehen* = to commit adultery)



These are only six out of 39 possible options. In other words, you wouldn't have the absolute foggiest about Xaver's intentions right until he puts a full stop behind his sentence. Before that, your guess is as good as that of Xaver's unsuspecting wife Gerda. Maybe he is merely going to have a stroll with Susanne. Or perhaps he's just accompanying her home. But then again, he might instead intend to

elope with Susy that night. And who's to say that he isn't planning to cheat on unsuspecting Gerda with Susanne tonight. Well, *you* certainly aren't – if you're not going to let him finish.

Seeing the World Through German Eyes

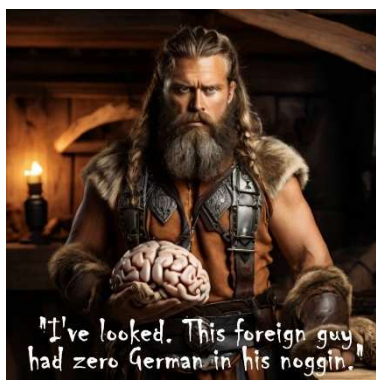
But dissuading German-speakers from interrupting each other is only one character-trait of the German sentence structure and its separable verbs rule. The sometimes (only at first glance) confusing word-order in German sentences also result in a very physical hard-wired outcome in any human brain that's running with the German Operating System. This outcome is no less than the actual evolvement of a specific set of thought-patterns, which ultimately come to fruition as a uniquely German view of reality.

"Thought patterns?", someone from the peanut-gallery will likely interject now. *"As in, you know, the way you think and analyse and draw conclusions, you mean?"*

Yes, that's it exactly. See, when you are constructing sentences with a separable verb in your mind, you will at least theoretically always run the risk of forgetting the little prefix at the end of your statement, which would leave your listeners pretty much hanging regarding the most crucial part of the phrase's information. Okay, but now take a wild guess how often such a lapse occurs with the average native German-speaker.

If you've estimated that such a *faux pas* happens roughly once in a thousand sentences, you might want to add another zero to the end of your number to land in the right ballpark. But that's only if you count also statements made under the influence of German "Barley Juice".

In fact, if you would ask any German, Austrian, or Swiss how often they tend to forget placing a verb-prefix at the end of a sentence, probably they wouldn't even know what you are talking about. Apparently, brains of German-speakers have been furnished with a particular little oversight-programme, whose sole purpose it is to keep track of a sentence's progress by caching the intended message right at the start, then divulge all necessary sentence-elements in the correct order – and then immediately wail with an internal alarm if the brain runs



the risk of leaving the important final prefix-part out.

“Good heavens, how unnecessarily complicated!”, you might very well exclaim at all this. To which the German language beast would reply: *“On the contrary, my dear. This isn’t a bug. This is a feature.”*

This subconscious knack of keeping track – which native German-speakers develop early on in their career as a German-speaking human, (and that most German language-students acquire around the time when they also start dreaming in German) – actually results in a quite remarkable side-effect.

Such a necessity to subconsciously pre-plan and construct your sentences before even uttering the first word obviously won’t leave your brain unaffected, just as well as the indispensable ability to keep track of your sentence’s progress in the back of your mind won’t refrain from re-shaping certain areas in the three pounds of flesh between your ears.

If you want it or not, over time German will implant several small sub-programmes on your hard disk whose sole purpose it is to carefully monitor your language-centre’s compliance with any applicable grammatical rules and correct word-orders from start to finish.

The practical consequences of this literally mind-altering process are probably best explained by *Panos Athanasopoulos*, Professor of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, who presented his team’s experiments with German and English bilinguals and monolinguals in an article titled, *“How the language you speak changes your view of the world”*, published in April 2015 on www.theconversation.com. In it, Professor Athanasopoulos explains:

“We showed German-English bilinguals video clips of events with a motion in them, such as a woman walking towards a car, or a man cycling towards the supermarket and then asked them to describe the scenes.

When you give a scene like that to a monolingual German-speaker, they will tend to describe the action but also the goal of the action. So, they would tend to say, “A woman walks towards her car” or “a man cycles towards the supermarket”. English monolingual speakers would simply describe those scenes as “A woman is walking” or “a man is cycling”, without mentioning the goal of the action.

The worldview assumed by German-speakers is a holistic one – they tend to look at the event as a whole – whereas English speakers tend to zoom in on the event and focus only on the action.

The linguistic basis of this tendency appears to be rooted in the way different grammatical tool kits situated actions in time. English requires its speakers to grammatically mark events that are ongoing, by obligatorily applying the –ing morpheme: “I am playing the piano and I cannot come to the phone” or “I was playing the piano when the phone rang”. German doesn’t have this feature. [...]

In our study we also found that these cross-linguistic

differences extend beyond language usage itself, to nonverbal categorisation of events. We asked English and German monolinguals to watch a series of video clips that showed people walking, biking, running, or driving. In each set of three videos, we asked subjects to decide whether a scene with an ambiguous goal (a woman walks down a road toward a parked car) was more similar to a clearly goal-oriented scene (a woman walks into a building) or a scene with no goal (a woman walks down a country lane).

German monolinguals matched ambiguous scenes with goal-oriented scenes more frequently than English monolinguals did. This difference mirrors the one found for language usage: German-speakers are more likely to focus on possible outcomes of people's actions, but English speakers pay more attention to the action itself." [...]

In a nutshell, once your brain runs on high-octane German, it will shift its focus from a typically English "Here-and-now"-centric view of the world to a more "What-if..."-oriented standpoint by increasingly taking possible future outcomes into account. And it should go without saying that anyone with the ability to shift at will between these two mutually complimentary views will gain a clear strategic advantage over their competitors.

That Gruesome German Beast

Well, congrats to you! With this excursion into the convolutions of your cerebral lobes you have now successfully uncovered a good chunk of the secrets that the German beast hides so successfully from cursory glances just as well as from second or even third glimpses.



You've fought your way through the smokescreen of forbiddingly scary grammar rules, dissuasive throat-croaking pronunciation, and dauntingly elongated Frankenmonster-words and have emerged on the other side in a light-flooded clearing reserved for the persevering and initiated.

Irrefutably, German is a tricky beast that in one moment loves to play word-games and in the next becomes dead serious about its grammar. Seemingly willy-nilly, it gleefully constructs phantasmagoric new mental images while simultaneously forcing even toddlers to keep a tiny word in mind and stick it to the very end of their babbled sentences. Over there, it goes completely bonkers and marries words from different grammar-tribes to create weird yet beautiful offsprings, while over here it will happily declare you clinically unintelligible if you dare to misspell or mispronounce as much as one letter at the end of a word. It gets quickly offended if you interrupt it prematurely, but at the same time shows extreme leniency when you're making up your own word-creations in

order to circumnavigate holes in your knowledge of German terminology.

Amazingly, all this daunting weirdness also establishes a view of the world that looks beyond the “here and now” by including previously hidden future potentials, thus widening your perspective and deepening your understanding. Suddenly, you don’t concentrate anymore only on a walking woman but additionally on the woman’s destination. A perspective that will give rise to new insights into the realm of “What if ...”-scenarios, in turn coming with heretofore unimagined, unconventional and well-thought-out solutions, ideas, and possibilities.

To illustrate this concept and its potentials in a slightly exaggerated way serves the well-known legend of “The Indian Raja, the Sage, a Board of Chess and two Corns of Wheat”.

ONCE UPON A TIME, a mysterious wise man arrived at the court of an Indian raja and presented the game of chess to the ruler. The raja was delighted with this new game and offered the sage any reward he wished.

Thus prompted, the wise man asked for something that at first glance seemed tiny and insignificant. “Please, oh mighty raja”, he said, “merely place one grain of wheat on the first square of this chess board, then double it on each square until all 64 squares are filled.”

The ruler was amused by the humble request and gladly agreed. However, his amusement quickly faded when his treasurers did the math. By the 64th square, the total amount would result in more grains than existed in the entire kingdom, or even the entire world.

Upon realizing the wise man’s wisdom, (and his own shortsightedness), the raja acknowledged that the request was anything but small, and while in some versions of the tale he rewarded the man generously, in others he regrated having agreed to the deal and simply sent the sage away. (And anyone familiar with the aristocracy knows which outcome is more likely.)

Without putting too fine a point on it, you could say that the raja here symbolises the English language’s point of view, concentrating on the here and now and the apparently “obvious”, while the German language „*sieht über den Tellerrand hinaus*”, (‘looks beyond the rim of the plate’, i.e. “looks beyond the horizon”), and takes future outcomes into consideration.

Which is by no means to say that your brain on the German OS will suddenly come up with exponential sequences, zero power, capital-sigma notations and geometric series. Nor will it miraculously be able to provide you with the figure 18,446,744,073,709,551,6151 for the number of grains of wheat on the 64th square.

But what it is to say, however, is that you will experience a shift towards viewing and setting middle- and long run goals and analysing the separate steps on the way more carefully, (or even compulsively). As a nice-to-have bonus, you will also begin to notice the differences between your more holistic perspective and that of your mono-lingual friends, colleagues, and competitors.



These ultimate consequences of having the German language run on your organic super-computer also have played a rather considerable role in shaping the minds of many exceptional German-speakers in the past. German's intrinsic penchant for meticulous planning and execution helped *Johann Gutenberg* when he conceived the idea, made the plans, and finally built the first occidental printing press that changed

world history forever.

German's linguistic patterns also aided and guided *Karl Benz* in his successful endeavour to engineer and construct the world's first combustion motor vehicle, the *Benz Patent-Motorwagen Type 1* of 1886. German's characteristic out-of-the-box thinking also influenced *Heinrich Focke's* thought-process when inventing the world's first helicopter, the *Focke-Wulf FW 61*. German's insistence on precision and inclusion of future "What-ifs?" also supported *Wernher von Braun* during the realisation of the *Saturn V Rocket* that brought the first men to the moon. And yes, German's holistic world view even gave a certain Albert Einstein a leg up in conceiving his *Special Theory of Relativity* and the famous formula $E = mc^2$.

With all this said, it is nonetheless completely understandable that at the outset of their journey into the peculiar German language, many German-students typically fear to be snowed under with grammatical rules, with the exemptions to these rules and with the rules regarding these exemptions and ... Well, let's just say, fledgeling German-students generally anticipate a ton of gruesome linguistic cruelties.



And yet, when you ask advanced German-students about their experiences with the language, most will tell you that learning German certainly can be a shit ton of often frustrating work. But they will also confess to a flabbergasted amazement and exuberant joy that comes with the discovery of the hidden marvels embedded in the German language.

After they have conquered the at times quite steep learning curve, and once they have arrived at the peak of German language internalisation, advanced German-students will frequently rhapsodise about the astounding beauty and freedom of noun-fusions and the vast descriptive possibilities of love-child adjectives. They will tell you all about the malleable yet logic-bound German sentence structure and delightedly give you a taste of the frequently funny-sounding yet decidedly no-nonsense German pronunciation.

And if they see a genuine spark of interest gleaming in your eyes,

they might even take you to the side and, in an enigmatic hush, let you in on the secret of German grammar that shows on the one hand all the hallmarks of a master watchmaker's clockwork, while on the other hand provides you with an almost limitless number of building blocks in all shapes and sizes to create your very own and perhaps never before seen linguistic image of reality.

Running your brain in German mode allows you to adopt the same perspective as *Rudolf Diesel* when he invented the Diesel engine, or as *Max Planck* when he gave shape to Quantum Theory, or as *Ludwig van Beethoven* when he composed his 9th Symphony, or as *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe* when he wrote '*Faust*'. And, well, you know, there are probably worse bedfellows to share a secret with.



Part III: Going Full German

Voll und ganz Deutsch werden

Religion in Germany. Less Heat. More Heart.

“Religion should not be the root of states, which patiently bears only such or such fruit, but a moisturising dew that refreshes all plants.”

Carl Ludwig Börne, (1786 – 1837), German journalist, literary, and theatre critic

Okay, so let's address the ordained elephant in the pews right away and take a closer look at the loaded topic of religion in Germany.

Incidentally, although modern-day Germany is more secular than ever before, few other European countries have a history as deeply affected by religion as Germany's.

This fateful relationship began as early as in the reign of *Charlemagne* (747–814 AD), the first Western European emperor and “Father of Europe”, whose primary goal was to spread Christianity throughout the known world. This initial surge of Christianity was swiftly followed by widespread German participation in the Crusades between 1095 and 1291 AD. A period that fell within the early centuries of the *Sacrum Imperium Romanum Nationis Germaniae*, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, that lasted from 962 to 1806 AD.

However, two events in particular shook the religious, pre-modern world and the German-speaking peoples during this long period. And without exaggeration, these two events verily dwarfed any other notable occurrences during the almost 850-year history of the first Germanic Empire.



Furious Fights over Fateful Faiths

The first of these two world-shattering events occurred when an Augustinian monk and professor of theology named *Martin Luther* (1483–1546), allegedly nailed his famous 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. While the tremendous effects of Luther's Theses are beyond any doubt, the question of whether he truly took a hammer and some nails into his own hands and hammered away is still disputed.

Most historians agree, however, that the Theses first circulated as an enclosure to a letter Luther wrote to *Albrecht of Brandenburg*, Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg, dated Wednesday, 31 October 1517.

In his list of 95 points attached to this letter, Luther made it clear to Archbishop Albrecht that he regarded God's promise of grace and justification through Jesus Christ as the sole foundation of the Christian faith and demanded an end to unsavoury practices such as the sale of indulgences to innocently gullible believers.

Although this letter and the '95 Theses' were undoubtedly theological dynamite, hardly anyone (least of all Luther himself) could

have anticipated the explosive force with which this “faith bomb” would soon detonate among the German people. Luther later confessed that he had “merely” aimed to restore the Roman Catholic Church to its original form, but once the revolutionary cat was out of the bag, it seemed impossible to recapture the rascal and put it back in again. Ultimately, this initial spark led to the sky-high blaze of the Reformation and a schism in the Church that finally gave birth to the Lutheran and other Protestant churches.

This brings us almost seamlessly (with a mere 100-year gap) to the second historical “event” (a term that hardly does justice to the enormity of the unfolding disaster), which lasted for three decades and is known today as the Thirty Years' War (*Der Dreißigjährige Krieg*). This war raged from 1618 to 1648 AD between the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and his *Catholic League* allies on the one side, and the *Protestant Union* on the other and was mainly fought on German soil. Historians estimate that around 40% of the entire rural German population lost their lives during this war, while the death rate in the cities was somewhat lower at “only” 20–30%.



But deaths and utter devastation were not only distributed unfairly between country and city dwellers, but also between the Empire’s regions. The Palatinate, Thuringia, Mecklenburg, Pomerania and parts of Württemberg were clearly worst off in this regard, having seen at the lower end every second man and woman inside their borders killed, and at the higher end having seen losses of up to 70% of the regions’ civilians. All over the *Reich*, civilians fell like flies to the war atrocities, sieges, conflagrations, pillaging, rapes, famines and diseases brought upon them by the lansquenets of both sides.

However, it was the city of Magdeburg that held a gloomy record in this regard. During the so-called “Magdeburg Wedding” on 20 May 1631, Imperial troops of the Catholic League under legendary *Field Marshal Tilly* descended upon the town in what is now the state of Saxony-Anhalt like locusts upon a cornfield. By nightfall, Tilly’s men had wiped out almost the entire population, men as well as women, children and infants, claiming over 25,000 individual murders in less than twenty-four hours. That’s more than 17 killings per minute, every minute, for an entire day.

At the beginning of the Thirty Years' War in 1618, the Holy Roman Empire had an estimated population of 15–20 million. The war brought unspeakable scenes of mothers screaming as they wandered through burning alleys with their dead babies in their arms, of small children desperately holding their open stomachs to keep their spilling intestines inside, and of mercenaries drunkenly roaring while dragging old men out of their hiding places and onto the market square, where Magdeburgians were beheaded in a seemingly endless line with blunt axes.

Thirty years and countless battles, sieges and atrocities later, the number of living inhabitants of the *Reich* had decreased by over one-third, after these thirty years of the most inhumane war ever fought on the

European continent had left between 6 and 9 million civilians and fighting men to rot in the alleys, streets, rivers, gardens and fields of the German Empire. Innumerable further non-combatants were left behind in the rubble and burnt-out houses – impoverished, displaced, raped, orphaned, mutilated, and starved. leaving the population of an entire nation physically and mentally devastated.

Religion Post-1648 AD: The Unifying Divider

Just to get a rough idea of how people must have felt back then, try to imagine what it would be like if, for instance, the United States with its 330 million strong population would suddenly lose 110 million citizens in just thirty years during a no-holds-barred war raging on U.S.-soil, erasing entire cities from the map, burning down large swaths of the countryside and literally leaving no community untouched, while countless families, towns, and cities have been entirely wiped from the face of the earth.

This might give you an inkling on the depth of the long-term scars left by the Thirty Years' War in the collective subconscious of the German-speaking people, and why these scars still itch from time to time, even hundreds of years later.

But don't worry, it's not that Germans, Austrians, or the Swiss are still lying wide awake at night today while trembling over centuries-old atrocities, or that they wake up shrieking from any nightmares of the "Magdeburg Wedding", or that they still harbour any strong emotions at all about the most devastating war ever on German soil, (yes, including both World Wars).

In fact, you'll be hard put to find any present-day German-speaker who could tell you the exact dates of the 1618 – 1648 War, let alone the names of the major parties involved in this monumental struggle. Still, while the people who are living today on the lands once ravished by Halbert-wielding *Landsknechten*, (mercenaries) aren't consciously aware of the long-term repercussions of the Thirty Years' War, the epochal struggle still brought about a fundamental change in the German speaking peoples' attitude towards the two churches and organised religion in general that continues to shape the subconscious stance on religion in German speaking societies to this day.

Which shouldn't surprise anyone, considering that it took more than seven decades, until around the year 1720 AD, before the German speaking population of the Holy Roman Empire's numerous states had finally been able to regain its pre-war numbers and to begin repopulating its cities, reclaiming long-since fallow fields and regrouping as a coherent society.

With this deep-seated collective trauma immovably entrenched in the common subconscious, it was somewhat of a done deal that Thuringians, Mecklenburgish, Pomeranians, Württembergers, or citizens of any of the other hundreds of German speaking states would never again march in large numbers into war in the name of "Faith", nor would they allow the two dominant denominations to ever again ignite new religious blazes and divide the population again. And yes, the irony that Germans and Austrians repeated the same mistake almost 300 years later just under the banner of the substitute-religion of fascism and Nazism is certainly

only lost on the most brainless and ignorant Germans or Austrians today.

“I’m losing my Religion.”

In the decades following the Nazi-rule and the second World War, the two large churches in Germany, the Catholic and the Protestant Church, (both of which didn’t exactly cover themselves in glory during the Nazi era), found their place in society as predominantly care-providing institutions by running hospitals, ambulance services, homeless shelters, and orphanages and by collecting donations for the needy, while naturally also continuing their traditional role as the premier contact-point for God-believers and performing the usual Christian ritual from Sunday services to baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

As such, both Churches still play a prominent role in the DACH-countries to this day, particularly in the rural areas in all three countries. However, the Catholic as well as the Protestant Church are clearly fighting a rearguard action already for some time now. According to the German business magazine *Wirtschaftswoche*, in 2023 the two Christian churches combined had a membership of just over 40 million in Germany, divided into 20.9 million Catholics and 19.2 million Protestants.

This might look like quite a lot at first glance, but the picture changes upon realising that this number represents only half of the German population of 84.4 million in total. This figure is further relativised when considering that 34 million Germans now declare themselves to be non-denominational, with 27% of all Germans, (22.7 million), claiming to be actual Atheists. Alarming for the leadership of both Churches in Germany, this trend is only continuing to head further down south, as the historic benchmark of 50% church-members in the total population has already been undercut back in 2021, while church resignations continued to reach record-highs each year since.

The Tax Collector in Priestly Robe

One often-cited argument for this membership-drain points at the German *Kirchensteuer*, (church tax), which is, in its specific German form, unique in the world. If you haven’t yet heard of this ingenious invention, church tax in Germany is a tax that both major religious communities levy on their members and that is collected by the governmental tax offices of the respective federal states. Thus, as a member of the Catholic or Protestant Church, your church tax will be automatically deducted from your salary and transferred to the churches, with the amount owed to your church depending on your income tax, of which 9%, (or 8% in Bayern and Baden-Württemberg), are calculated and then added on top of your monthly tax payments.

There is little doubt that thousands of former German church-members have found this rate a bit too steep in the long run and have



therefore decided to praise the Lord rather at home before dinner or bedtime or during a tranquil walk in the woods instead of joining the at times uninspiring Sunday services.



However, the *Kirchensteuer* alone doesn't hold up as the sole explanation for the mass-exodus suffered by both Churches in recent times, when 19,081 people have left the religious communities in 2022 in the Bavarian capital of München alone.

The Darkest Corners of the Sacristy

When searching for other explanations for the diminishing return of Sunday church-goers, however, one might not need to look too long and hard behind the trees and bushes circling the many religious institutions like, for instance, Catholic and Protestant private schools, school hostels, altar boys' practice rooms and church youth camps.



The reason for many a former church-goer's disillusionment has long since been pointed out by victim-groups, the media, and experts alike. In fact, the public outrage over the continuously forthcoming and credible accusations against clergymen of both Churches has finally even spurred the German Bishops' Conference into action, ultimately feeling compelled to commission a study that analysed more than 38,000 Catholic clergy personnel-files from all 27 German dioceses between 1946 and 2014. The shocking, but at this time not surprising result of this study: In the 68 years analysed by the experts, a total of 1,670 clergymen of the *Katholische Kirche* have been accused of sexually abusing minors, with 3,677 children and young people having been affected by such offences.

On the other side of the aisle, the *Evangelische Kirche* (Evangelical Church in Germany – EKD) also commissioned an independent research team to scrutinise and process the murky corners of its own past. Here, the experts found that at least 1,259 suspected perpetrators had been lurking in the ranks of the Protestant Church over the past decades and that a minimum of 2,225 young people had fallen victim to them.

As you might expect, though, these “official” numbers aren't the last word. An independent study by German child psychiatrist *Jörg Fegert*, based in Ulm, found that there exists a dark field of an estimated 114,000 victims of abuse in both the Catholic and Protestant Church who have not yet dared to come forward with their personal story of suffering.

Yes, both churches have set up commissions to uncover the mass abuse and, in some cases, even have (often inadequately) compensated the victims. Still, these efforts appear all too often half-baked, and the perpetrators are far too rarely brought to justice in a worldly court. Many

German church members at grassroots level agree that their higher-ups don't do nearly enough to permanently remedy this shameful situation, which only increased the flood of church-leavers in recent years.

And as if this large dark stain („*Schandfleck*“) on the Churches' cassock wouldn't be enough already, there are also those other smallish and medium-sized scandals which keep leaking through the thick walls of particularly the Catholic Church in the last couple of decades.

Whether a certain bishop had his residence remodelled at the cost of 31 million Euro, (with the interior furnishings of his private chambers alone costing 478,000 Euro), or whether the Vatican rejected and outright prohibited the establishment of a "Synodal Council", which advocates for a more active involvement of lay church-members in fundamental church decisions – the German Catholic Church can only blame itself for the continuous drainage of their lifeblood in the 21st century.



Which is by no means to say that both Churches would not do valuable work in the social and health sectors, in maintaining community life and in providing important cornerstones in the personal lives of many

Germans. And it also shouldn't be forgotten that in the year 2023 alone, the German Catholic Church collected 673 million Euro in donations for international aid-projects.

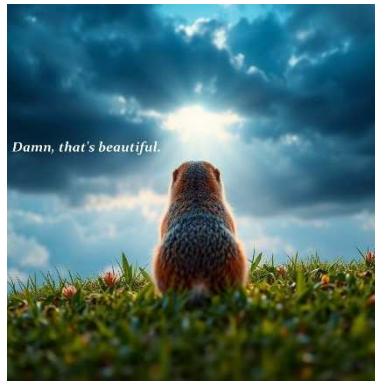
But then again, during the same time-period, the 27 Catholic dioceses were showered with around 6.8 billion Euro, (billion, with a "B"), in church taxes, and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) recorded in 2022 a total of 6.24 billion Euro in church tax revenue. On top of it all, the two churches own together almost 830,000 hectares in Germany, which makes them the largest landowners in the country. So, rest assured that neither church will be on the verge of starvation any time soon.

The ongoing string of scandals, the steadily advancing influence of academia and the sciences in German society, the reunification of East- and West-Germany, and an unconscious wariness towards any religious influence outside the confines of the churches' walls all together have led to the decline of religion's importance in modern German public life.

However, if you ask most Germans on the street today whether the two major churches should continue to play "a not insignificant role" in German society, the answer will be more often than not a clear "yes". Since despite the churches' obvious shortcomings, Germans are well aware of the many caregiving, distress-alleviating, and life-saving services provided by Protestant and Catholic organisations, and not least also of the Christian values, culture, and traditions that have moulded the German people and the entire Occident.

One Country. Many Faiths.

The dominant role of Christianity in shaping German culture notwithstanding, however, the Germany of the 21st century has also long since become a haven for all other major (and many minor) religions. Apart from the approximately 40 million German Christians in the two Christian communities of **Catholicism** and **Protestantism**, you can therefore also find further millions of native and immigrant Germans, permanent residents and expats who freely and openly follow other faiths, all protected by **Article 4 of the Grundgesetz**, aka the German Constitution, which unequivocally states:



- (1) Freedom of faith, conscience, and religious and philosophical belief shall be inviolable.***
- (2) The undisturbed practice of religion shall be guaranteed.***

Below you find a brief outline of the four most prominent faiths in Germany, apart from Christianity, plus one increasingly popular non-faith.

Islam

The Islamic community is the third-largest religious community in the country, with around 5.5 million people of all Muslim faiths having lived in Germany in 2024, predominantly located in Nordrhein-Westfalen (33.1%), Baden-Württemberg, (16.6%), Bayern, (13.2%), and Hessen, (10.3%).

Today, around 2,500 mosques can be found all over the country according to the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, representing various Muslim communities and organisations.

While Muslim culture in Germany has a long history, it only truly came into full bloom with the first Turkish guest workers, who came to the country in the 1950s and 1960s to help Germany's transition into an economic powerhouse, many of whom later brought their families to permanently live in the country. Nowadays, it is downright impossible to imagine modern Germany without its large Turkish community, and the 3rd and 4th generations of Turko-Germans are as much a part of Germany as delicious Döner, refreshing Ayran, and lowered BMW 3 Series cars with their radios turned up to full volume.

Buddhism

Perhaps surprisingly, the history of Buddhism in Germany goes back for more than 150 years. Today, there are an estimated 260,000 to 300,000 Buddhists living in the country, made up by immigrant Asians as well as Buddhists born in Germany, who are organised in the German Buddhist Union (DBU), representing Buddhist organisations from various traditions.

Interestingly, the teachings of the Buddha have enjoyed an excellent reputation in Germany since long before the two World Wars and continue to be held in high regard also in modern-day Germany. In fact, according to a 2008 opinion poll, around 43% of Germans consider Buddhism to be the most peaceful world religion, elevating Buddhism to the top-position amongst all religions presented in the poll. Indubitably, this sentiment also contributes to the great popularity which the 14. Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, continues to enjoy throughout Germany.

Judaism

While comparatively small, Germany's Jewish Community is still the third largest in Europe and plays an important cultural and societal role in Germany. The German cultural scene as well as the realm of science and other prestigious areas can boast numerous prominent members of Jewish origin today, with around 91,000 Jews in total having been registered members of Jewish communities in 2022 according to the German Central Council of Jews. Additionally, it is assumed that a larger number of Jewish German citizens simply hasn't yet registered with a Jewish community.

Jewish life and Judaism enjoy a place of special protection and appreciation in German society and the German government continues to take measures to further protect Jewish institutions, to ensure the safety and well-being of the Jewish community and to combat all forms of anti-Semitism rigorously. So, you should be aware that statements, slogans, and insults against Jews, the Jewish faith, and the Jewish community can be punished as incitement to hatred – regardless of whether they occur on the street, at demonstrations, or on the internet.

Before the horrendous rule of the Nazis and their unspeakable atrocities against German Jews and other nationals of Jewish faith, there used to be more than 2,800 synagogues in Germany. Today, this number has been reduced to ca. 900 synagogues, of which only around 100 are still used by Jews to celebrate their religious services, while the remaining synagogues have become museums or serve the communities in other capacities. If you want to know more about Jewish life in Germany from the Middle Ages until today, you might want to visit one of the several Jewish Museums in Germany, for example the largest Jewish museum in Europe in Berlin, the oldest independent Jewish museum in Germany in Frankfurt am Main, or the Old Synagogue Meeting Place in Wuppertal, serving as a Jewish museum and as a memorial to the victims of National Socialism.

Hinduism

More than 130,000 Hindus live in present-day Germany. Indian Hindus have emigrated to Germany since the 1950s and could count around 40,000 members in their ranks in 2024, while Tamils from Sri Lanka have been coming to Germany since the 1970s and number today roughly 45,000. Further 5,000 Afghan Hindus and 7,500 Hindus of German or other European origin make up the total number of Hindus in the country, where you can find notable centres of Hinduist life particularly in Berlin, with a 6,000 members strong Hindu community, and in Niedersachsen, home of

around 5,000 Hindus.

Despite rarely being in the public eye, Hinduist culture and life is quite visible in most German cities today and continues to enrich local communities with the culture's excellent food, popular annual festivities, and colourful music and fashion.

Atheism

Although Atheism is by definition the actual absence of belief in any deity, this world view shall nonetheless be mentioned in this list, since a quarter of all Germans, (22.7 million, to be precise), state that they're happily living without faith in any God, goddess, or gods, while in fact 11% explicitly prefer to be referred to as Atheist instead of Agnostic or non-denominational.

Interestingly, the demographic distribution of non-believers across Germany appears to be just about as well balanced as the distribution of wealth between (former) East- and West-Germany, albeit just the other way around, since, according to a 2018 survey by Statista, only 16.6% of respondents in western Germany describe themselves as non-believer, Agnostic, or Atheist, while in eastern Germany the number of non-believers reached a whopping 68.3%. This also explains why the five federal states on the territory of former East-Germany are frequently called "the most godless region in the world".

Should you be wondering how this "world record" came about, then you only need to take everything that's been going on in communist East-Germany over the 40 years prior to German reunification, add to it the historic German experiences of the past 400 years, sprinkle it with the recent scandals of the two major churches, and spice it all up with the prevailing rationality and logic-affinity found in the German national character and you've got the perfect recipe for your German secular casserole.

„Nun sag, wie hast du's mit der Religion?“

"So, tell me, what's your attitude to religion?"

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, „Faust“, Verse 3415, (*Marthens Garten*)

Next, we get to the truly important questions: How do Germans actually deal with their personal religiosity in public? What's their reaction when you ask them about their beliefs? And do you need to cross yourself each time someone mentions Jesus?

To first elaborate a little, it is in *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's* literary masterpiece 'Faust' where you find a famous scene in which young Margarete, or 'Gretchen', asks the courting older Doctor Faust during one of their conversations a loaded question that has famously become known as the „Gretchenfrage“, (Gretchen question): "So, tell me, what's your attitude to religion?"



Just like you may want to ask a German friend or acquaintance about their attitude to religion, so does also Gretchen want to know from Faust what he believes in his innermost heart. And like the infatuated older man, who continues to wiggle out of the conversation without ever providing any conclusive answer, so too will many Germans react rather evasively to such a bluntly put question.

Today, the term “*Gretchenfrage*” has taken on a wider meaning as a common German expression used for any direct and abruptly asked question aimed at an inconvenient truth that the interviewee is reluctant or uncomfortable to admit.

This can range from your opinion on abortion to your honest assessment of your boss, to your height or weight, your secret crush, your menstrual cycle or your salary – an information that Germans usually keep even closer to their chests than their bras or undershirts, as they regard any question about their income almost as blasphemous as an inquiry about their preferred sexual positions. And the same usually goes for their personal stance on religion.

Now, it isn't entirely clear whether Goethe captured on his pages in ‘*Faust*’ an already existing German reluctance to talk about religion or whether this common reluctance only came to full bloom through Goethe's immensely popular work. Regardless, the fact remains that Germans to this day consider their faith to be a private matter which isn't flaunted in public – apart from in a religious calendar-compliant manner, shape, and form.

Asking a German about their religion will therefore usually elicit about the same reaction as if you would be asking a man whether he is circumcised or a woman whether she has her period. In other words, the answer will frequently be a polite, “*Thanks for asking, but that's really none of your business, mate.*” Unless, of course, you bump into an active church-member, in which case you can generally expect an animated conversation and the need to postpone your subsequent appointments by a couple of hours.

However, the validity of this general rule of thumb is largely dependent on your actual location in Germany, since urban areas and the countryside are two entirely different kettle of Friday fish when it comes to the importance of religion in everyday life.

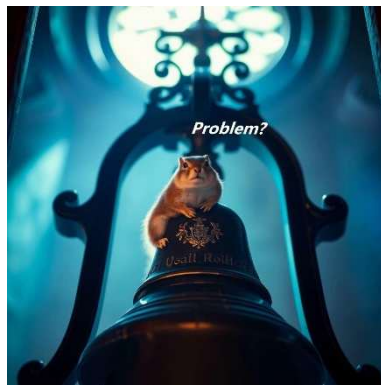
While city slickers in the big metropolises generally regard the churches in their vicinity as more of a beautiful and historically important piece of architecture, folks in smaller towns and villages continue to consider their church, which is usually situated in the centre of town, also literally as the societal focal point in town. Here, the priest and pastor are still respected figures of influence and the traditional rituals from baptism to church weddings to only eating fish on a Friday remain an integral part of local society.

Furthermore, the individual regions in Germany are historically characterised by either Protestantism or Catholicism. By and large you can say that the North, (i.e., Niedersachsen, Hamburg, Bremen, Schleswig-Holstein, etc.) is largely Protestant territory, while the South, (i.e., Bayern, Baden-Württemberg) is firmly in Catholic hands. As mentioned above, the

East, (i.e., Sachsen, Brandenburg, Berlin, etc.), has been declared the world's least religious and most atheist region anyway, while the West, (i.e., Köln, Dortmund, *Ruhrgebiet*, etc.), has been a traditional Catholic stronghold since the Middle Ages. And the centre, (i.e., Hessen, Nordrhein-Westfalen, etc.), has always been a mixed bag where both confessions coexist peacefully side by side.

In the end, it truly doesn't matter where you pitch up your permanent tent in Germany and what religion you follow. As long as you keep your faith a private affair and don't go like a bull at the gate with your religious convictions, you can be certain to live in harmony with people of all faiths in Germany. Even if you don't cross yourself each time someone mentions Jesus.

"Ring My Bell!" - That Thing with the Church Bells



No matter where you are taking up residence in Germany, however, best prepare yourself for being regularly torn from your morning slumber or afternoon nap by an oftentimes devilishly loud ringing of the nearby church bells.

Particularly in smaller German towns and villages it is in fact almost impossible to escape this quite quaint religious tradition of church bell ringing, neither in a physical nor in any legal way. You see, German law makes a clear distinction between the ringing of bells for religious reasons and the mere measuring of time by bell, often signalled by a single chime for the quarter hours and by one chime for every hour for the full hours. This continues until the evening, meaning that at least your nightly beauty-sleep won't be affected.

But while German law regards the hourly ringing as a "secular service" that can be (and has successfully been) challenged in court, the liturgical ringing of bells in the traditional setting on the other hand does "not generally constitute a significant noise nuisance" and is therefore to be accepted as "reasonable and socially acceptable", according to the judgement of the Federal Administrative Court of September 2, 1996.

Hence, should you be living just a squirrel's throw away from your local church and would like to join the long line of complainers who have already unsuccessfully taken legal action against the centuries-old tradition of church bell ringing, you might want to rethink your priorities-list, as you have clearly too much time on your hands.

The by far better option would simply be to consciously relax for a couple of minutes during the chiming melodies coming from your area's historical church tower and regard them as a ringing reminder to take a well-deserved break from stressful work, exhausting tasks, or mindless doom-scrolling on the internet.

In conclusion to this sermon then, remember that nobody in Germany will prevent you from freely practising your religion as long as

you don't attempt to dictate your beliefs to others. In turn, you can also safely assume that nobody will impose their beliefs on you. Or, as the popular German saying goes: „*Was du nicht willst, das man dir tu', das füg' auch keinem anderen zu*“. Which is merely the rhyming German version of the Golden Rule: “Do not do onto others what you would not want to have done onto you”. It really is as simple as that.

Table: Religion-Related Vocabulary

German	English
Die Apokalypse	<i>The Apocalypse</i>
Das Abendmahl	<i>The Last Supper; Eucharist</i>
Die Beerdigung	<i>The Funeral</i>
Die Beichte	<i>The Confession</i>
Die Bibel	<i>The Bible</i>
Das Christkind	<i>Christmas Angel, (not Jesus!)</i>
Die Dornenkrone	<i>The Crown of Thorns</i>
Der Erlöser	<i>The Redeemer</i>
Der Engel	<i>The Angel</i>
Die Feindesliebe	<i>Love for your Enemy</i>
Das Fegefeuer	<i>Purgatory</i>
Das Gebet	<i>The Prayer</i>
Die Gemeinde	<i>The Congregation, Community</i>
Die Glocke	<i>The Bell</i>
Der Glaube	<i>The Faith, Belief</i>
Der Gott	<i>God</i>
Die Gottesfurcht	<i>Fear of God</i>
Die Gottlosen	<i>The Godless</i>
Der Gottesdienst	<i>The Church Service</i>
Die Heiligen	<i>The Saints</i>
Der heilige Geist	<i>The Holy Spirit</i>
Der Heide	<i>The Heathen</i>
Der Himmel	<i>Heaven (also: Sky)</i>
Die Hölle	<i>Hell</i>
Die Jünger	<i>The Disciples</i>
Die Kirche	<i>The Church</i>
Die Kreuzigung	<i>The Crucifixion</i>
Das Kreuz	<i>The Cross</i>
Die Kreuzzüge	<i>The Crusades</i>
Die Krippe	<i>The Crib, Manger</i>
Der Messdiener	<i>The Altar Boy</i>
Die Offenbarung	<i>The Revelation</i>
Ostern	<i>Easter</i>
Der Papst	<i>The Pope</i>
Der Pfarrer	<i>The Pastor, Vicar</i>
Der Priester	<i>The Priest</i>
Der Pope [-poe'peh]	<i>The Priest (derisive slang)</i>
Der Schweinepriester	<i>The Scumbag (derogatory)</i>
Die Taufe	<i>The Baptism</i>
Der Teufel	<i>The Devil</i>
Das Wunder	<i>The Miracle</i>
Verdammt!	<i>Damn!</i>
Die Verdammung	<i>The Condemnation, Doom</i>
Weihnachten	<i>Christmas</i>



Football – The Other German “Religion”

"Football is a simple game. 22 men chase a ball for 90 minutes and in the end the Germans always win."

English football-legend Gary Lineker (*1960) after the *Three Lions'* semi-final exit against Germany at the 1990 World Cup in which Germany became world champion for the third time.

Okay, before we even start talking about football, let's make one thing clear from the outset: The game is called “football”, or „Fußball” in German, because it is played with a ball that is kicked with your feet, and not with an egg-shaped bladder that is carried around the field in your hands.

For the same reason, the word “soccer” isn't a thing in German, because German doesn't need to make a distinction between real football and the American game that should better be called “hand-egg” but simply keeps its name of “American Football” in German.



With this out of the way, let's talk ball.

What's in a Game?

For a start and so that you actually know what this is all about, let's first unveil some important numbers and facts from the multi-faceted world of German football, to give you an inkling of the astounding



relevance of the game for the German nation. In order to judge the actual significance of football in Germany realistically, you only need to consider the fact that there are round about 24,300 football clubs with circa 30,000 registered teams in Germany as of 2024, with a total of over 7 million club-members or almost 8% of the entire German population. Incidentally, these numbers make the *Deutsche Fußball Bund* (DFB – German football association) also the largest professional sports association of any kind in the world. In other words, it genuinely isn't an exaggeration when you call *Fußball* the “other religion” in Germany.

But what's all this big hullabal(l)oo really about? Well, including the 8% of Germans who're actively participating in one of the most enjoyable team sports ever invented by the British, you will find that a staggering number of no less than 46 million self-professed German football fans are eagerly awaiting the kick-off of their team's weekly match

every Friday, Saturday, or Sunday afternoon, (depending on the match-schedule), and who are thusly considerably outweighing that other group of Germans who anticipate their next Sunday church service equally enthusiastically.

On each of these three days, countless millions either join the huge crowds in the stadiums to see a live game, or who switch off their phone and doorbell to watch the matches on telly from their sofa with snacks and beer in easy reach, or who meet up with friends at a bar, restaurant, or pub and cheer for their home team viewed on a large flatscreen in a companionable atmosphere with freshly tapped German beer.

No matter how and where Germans follow the weekly football matches though, the ultimate dream of every fan and the fervent ambition of each of the 18 teams in the 1st league remains winning the German Championship by finishing first in the league table at the end of the season.

In order to determine the German champion each season, professional German football is organised in several leagues, with the highest league being the *Erste Bundesliga*, (i.e., first federal league), equivalent to the British *Premier League*, the Italian *Serie A*, or the Spanish *La Liga*. In 2025/2026, the following 18 teams played in this top league:

Table: Die 1. Bundesliga – The German 1st Football League

1.	FC Bayern München	- Bayern
2.	FC Augsburg	- Bayern
3.	Bayer 04 Leverkusen	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
4.	Borussia Dortmund BVB	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
5.	Borussia Mönchengladbach	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
6.	1. FC Köln	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
7.	Eintracht Frankfurt	- Hessen
8.	Hamburger SV	- Hamburg
9.	FC St. Pauli	- Hamburg
10.	VfB Stuttgart	- Baden-Württemberg
11.	Sport-Club Freiburg	- Baden-Württemberg
12.	1. FC Heidenheim 1846	- Baden-Württemberg
13.	TSG Hoffenheim	- Baden-Württemberg
14.	VfL Wolfsburg	- Niedersachsen
15.	1. FSV Mainz	- Rheinland-Pfalz
16.	1. FC Union Berlin	- Berlin
17.	SV Werder Bremen	- Bremen
18.	RB Leipzig	- Sachsen

- **Borussia** – (*Latin name of the former German kingdom of Prussia*)
- **BVB** – Ballspielverein Borussia (*Ballgames Association*)
- **Eintracht** – (*German word for 'Concord, Unity, Harmony'*)
- **FC** – Fußball Club
- **FSV** – Fußball- und Sportvereinigung (*Football and Sports Association*)
- **RB** – RasenBallsport/Red Bull (*Lawn ball sport/Red Bull™ [Energy Drink]*)
- **SV** – Sportvereinigung (*Sports Association*)
- **TSG** – Turn- und Sportgemeinschaft (*Gymnastics and Sports Association*)
- **VfL** – Verein für Leibesübungen (*Club for Physical Exercises*)
- **VfB** – Verein für Ballspiele (*Club for Ball Games*)

While the four highest-ranking teams in the 1st *Bundesliga* will

have their tickets punched at season's end for the *UEFA (European) Champions League*, (and with this also for millions of Euro in additional revenue from advertising-deals and playing at home against the top-teams in Europe), the three teams at the bottom of the final league-table will be unceremoniously relegated to the *Zweite (2nd) Bundesliga* and will simultaneously experience a substantial loss in revenue from broadcasting rights, prize money, and advertising.

However, for one specific *1st Bundesliga*-team, namely the team precariously ending up in 16. place, one last chance remains to save their bacon and to stay first class after all.

All they need to do for this miracle to happen is to play an additional two matches against the one team in the *2nd Bundesliga* which ultimately ended up in thankless 3. place. The overall winner of these two relegation matches, (*Relegationsspiele*), will then either remain in or will advance to the *1st Bundesliga*, while the loser will either remain in or will be relegated to the *2nd Bundesliga*.

By and large, the current 36 teams in the *1st* and *2nd Bundesliga*, (Season 2025/2026) make up the vast majority of the *Mannschaften*, (teams), you need to know in Germany, with a few notable teams from the *3rd Liga* thrown in down below. In order to complete your knowledge of the modern-day equivalent of medieval tournament-knights fighting for their city or state, here are therefore also the 18 teams playing in the *2nd Bundesliga* as of 2025/2026:

Table: Die 2. Bundesliga – The German 2nd Football League

1.	Eintracht Braunschweig	- Niedersachsen
2.	Hannover 96	- Niedersachsen
3.	Holstein Kiel	- Schleswig-Holstein
4.	VfL Bochum 1848	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
5.	Fortuna Düsseldorf	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
6.	SC Paderborn 07	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
7.	1. FC Schalke 04	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
8.	SC Preußen 06 Münster	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
9.	Arminia Bielefeld	- Nordrhein-Westfalen
10.	SpVgg Greuther Fürth	- Bayern
11.	1. FC Nürnberg	- Bayern
12.	SV Elversberg	- Saarland
13.	Hertha BSC Berlin	- Berlin
14.	1. FC Magdeburg	- Sachsen-Anhalt
15.	Karlsruher SC	- Baden-Württemberg
16.	1. FC Kaiserslautern	- Rheinland-Pfalz
17.	SG Dynamo Dresden	- Sachsen
18.	SV Darmstadt 98	- Hessen

- **Arminia** – (Based on Arminius (also known as Hermann the Cheruscan) – a Germanic tribal leader who defeated the Roman legions in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD.)
- **BSC** – Berliner Sport Club
- **Eintracht** – (German word for Concord, Unity, Harmony)
- **FC** – Fußball Club
- **Fortuna** – (Latin word for Luck and the goddess of good fortune)
- **Hertha** – (Name of a Berlin excursion-steamboat in 1892)

- **SC** – Sport Club
- **SV** – Sportvereinigung (*Sports Association*)
- **SSV** – Spiel- und Sportvereinigung (*Games and Sports Association*)
- **SpVgg** – Spielvereinigung (*Games Association*)
- **TSG** – Turn- und Sportgemeinschaft (*Gymnastics and Sports Association*)
- **VfL** – Verein für Leibesübungen (*Club for Physical Exercises*)

Notable teams of the 3rd *Bundesliga* with long traditions, a more glorious past in upper leagues, and/or with chances to advance to the 2nd league include:

• SSV Ulm 1846	- Baden-Württemberg
• SV Sandhausen	- Baden-Württemberg
• FC Erzgebirge Aue	- Sachsen
• SpVgg Unterhaching	- Bayern
• FC Ingolstadt 04	- Bayern
• 1860 München	- Bayern



While the two 2nd *Bundesliga*-teams coming in first and second place at the end of the season will switch leagues with the last and next-to-last teams of the 1st *Bundesliga*, the relegation matches between the 16. of the first and the 3. of the second league are in fact often more nerve-wracking and thrilling than the final battles for the championship fought out at the top of the table. Still, both struggles usually

lead to equal states of week-long general excitement and heated discussions in German pubs, offices, and streets during the latter half of May when the football-season ends.

Each *Bundesliga*-Saison usually lasts nine months, from August of one year to May of the following year, with a short winter-break of about one month give or take, and a longer summer-break in June and July.

However, if you now think that the summer break of the *Bundesliga* will finally give you some well-deserved respite from „*König Fußball*“, (“King Football”), then you’re sadly mistaken, since the summer months are reserved for international championships in every even-numbered year.

That’s because the *Football World Championship* as well as the *European Championship* take place every four years, and since the events are arranged in two-year-intervals, you can joyfully look forward to each summer in any even-numbered year, when „*Die Mannschaft*“, (“The Team”, as the German national football team is sometimes imaginatively called), will ritually transform all of Germany for a maximum of four weeks into a seething cauldron of exuberantly happy or desperately unhappy football-maniacs.

The Natural Behaviour of the Common German Football Fan

But let us for a moment go back to the weekly football routine during the *Bundesliga*-season. Should you either already live or are soon going to live amongst 48 million German football enthusiasts, it certainly



won't hurt to familiarise yourself with some of the fascinating habits and behaviours of the common German football fan, whom you're inevitably going to meet sooner or later in the German wilderness.

I. Pre-Game

If you have ever been to Germany for more than a week, you will surely have noticed at least once the droves of (mostly) men of all ages who tend to assemble in and in front of pubs and bars, in parks, on city-squares and at bus-, tram-, and train-stations in the afternoons of Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays. Easily recognisable by their jerseys, scarfs, hats, and vests in their team's colours as well as by the frequently carried flags with football club colours and emblems, any emergence of such a group of common German football fans in their natural pre-game habitat indicates to the routine observer that it is this time of the week again, when half the population of Germany tends to drop everything and go wild for the remainder of the day.

On such occasions, your common German football fan will habitually start their routine by gathering with other members of their tribe at a watering hole in convenient proximity to mass transport facilities. Here, the specimens of the genus *Fanus Germanicus* will leisurely wet their parched throats with copious amounts of the local brand of German beer to better prepare for an upcoming 90 minutes of singing, shouting, moaning, yelling, and hopefully vociferously celebrating a home win.

At a certain time before kick-off, depending on the distance to the local stadium, the slightly buzzed troop will then collectively start moving towards public transport stations. Once the tram, bus, *U-Bahn* (Underground) or *S-Bahn* (regional train) stops at the station, the group will board the vehicle and confidently occupy all available and non-available sitting- and standing places. As soon as the transport vehicle begins to move, brought-along bags and rucksacks will miraculously divulge a seemingly endless amount of recyclable aluminium containers whose contents, (beer), are diligently emptied during the journey to the final destination (and then equally diligently collected to return to the supermarket for recycling – and for the 25 cents refund per can.)

Other humans who deem it absolutely necessary to embark on a public transport vehicle during such a migration of the common German football fan should be warned that they act at their own peril and run the high risk of being caught in the middle of this collective force of nature.

There are even rumoured stories telling the tale of some innocent travellers who, while having survived the ordeal largely unharmed, have nonetheless been jovially coerced into rhythmic jumping on the spot together with the entire fan-tribe while simultaneously performing some popular fan chant, for instance the undying, „Zieht den Bayern die Lederhosen aus!“



which is sung by fans of all other football clubs whenever their team plays against *Bayern München* and which demands from their team to “pull the lederhosen off the *Bayern*-players!”

Once the singing troupe has finally reached the entrance to the stadium, official supervisors will then meticulously separate the opposing camps and direct their respective members to their designated seating- or standing-areas according to their affiliation. This strict separation is owed to the lamentable truth that in order to guarantee peaceful proceedings of the game, the only effective measure to do so seems to be keeping the two groups apart from each other by a slightly wider distance than that of an average flagpole-throw.

Unfortunately, certain fan-bases foster a long-standing beef with fans of other teams, which usually means a state of high alert for the ever-present police forces during such matches. For you as a newbie in *Fußball*-Germany, however, it signifies foremost to tread lightly whenever talking about football and individual teams with your new acquaintances in Germany.

And since there is zero chance of avoiding the topic of *Fußball* during your residence in Germany, below you find 15 essential rules of thumb to go by as an uninitiated *Fußball*-newbie when you’re unexpectedly pulled into a *Fußball*-conversation. (Ignore them at your peril.)

15 Tips to Survive in Football-Germany

1. Don’t spurt anything negative about any German football club before you haven’t sussed out your conversation partner’s team-affiliation, lest you want to get off on the wrong foot right from the kick-off. After such an early deficit it’s often difficult to still turn the game around.
2. Do not utter certain sacrilegious sentences, (even if you think them), such as, for instance, “*I’m not interested in football*”, “*Football is boring!*”, or “*[insert other sport] is much more interesting than football*”. With 46 million football fans in Germany, you’ve got a 55 to 45 chance for starting a riot that way.
3. When you are inevitably asked about the team you are supporting, best bet on a safe horse and choose your hometown team, particularly if you are asked while finding yourself in your hometown. (If the same question arises anywhere else, proceed according to rule 11.)

4. Memorise the name of your hometown team.
5. Get to know the colours of your home team.
6. It will only take five minutes to prepare yourself for the unavoidable office discussions on Monday morning at the coffee machine or during breakfast or lunch break regarding the performance of your home team on the weekend. Simply check the game-results on the internet and look at the current ranking of your team in the *Bundesliga-Tabelle* on Sunday evening or Monday morning and you can avoid being thoroughly ignored by your *Fußball*-enthusiastic colleagues each Monday.
7. Teach yourself about the offside rule.
8. Almost everyone outside of Bavaria loathes the team of *Bayern München*. This makes the fancy-pants club an ideal topic for some (almost) safe trash-talk, (after observing rule no. 1).
9. Learn the number of German world championship titles, (it's 4), and the years in which they were won, (1954, 1974, 1990, 2014).
10. Get to know the colours of the German national team, so that you don't need to ask the groans-inducing question: "*And which one is the German team now?*"
11. Read up on the most famous traditional enmities between certain Bundesliga-clubs. Then apply this knowledge strategically, either to forge instant new friendships or to avoid unnecessary confrontations.
12. Get to know the nicknames of the clubs with nicknames.
13. Watch a recording of the 2014 world cup match *Deutschland – Brasilien*. With its final score of 7:1, this was the highest defeat in the semi-finals of any football World Cup ever and remains a national trauma for Brazil to this day. In Germany, on the other hand, simply mentioning „*Sieben zu Eins*“, ("seven to one"), at the right moment can still earn you a free beer or at least a cordial slap on the back.
14. For extra brownie-points you can also memorise the names of some of Germany's most legendary *Fußballspieler*, (football players), including, (but not limited to) Helmut Rahn, Fritz Walter, Franz Beckenbauer, Gerd Müller, Paul Breitner, Sepp Maier, Günther Netzer, Rudi Völler, Lothar Matthäus, Miroslav Klose, Oliver Kahn, Thomas Müller, Toni Kroos, and Manuel Neuer.
15. Finally, it is pronounced [~foos'ball], with the "u" in „*Fuß*“ stretched in a long English "oo"-sound, like in "moose", while the "a" in „-ball“ is spoken short and pronounced like in the English word "bark" and not as in the English "ball". It's *Fußball*, not "fuzzboal", alright?

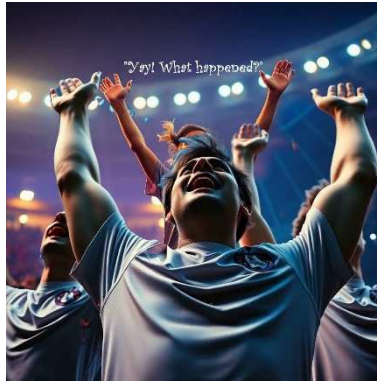
II. In-Game

Now, as soon as the fans have taken their seats or are standing tightly packed in the so-called *Süd-* or *Ostkurve*, (the South or East bend in every stadium where the hardcore fans of the various fan-clubs with their seasonal tickets have their reserved standing room), the traditional pre-game celebration can begin.

Some fan-clubs have elevated this pre-game ceremony to a fine art nowadays, often unfolding massive banners across the entire seating

area behind the goal, displaying the club's emblem or other currently important graphics or messages. The unfolding and presentation of these banners is accompanied by further full-throated singing of the club's hymn and other fan-favourite songs as well as rhythmic jumping on the spot and clapping. Particularly the fans of *Eintracht Frankfurt* have become famous for their elaborate choreographies in this regard, and this spectacle alone is often already worth the price of admission.

Following the kick-off, you might think that you can now settle back into your purchased seat and enjoy the game in comfort, naturally. Well, think again. Because you probably won't remain seated for more than five minutes at a time. Fans all around you will jump from their seats at the slightest prospect of a possible goal, at every foul, whenever a player is substituted, at any goalkeeper parade, when the referee gives a yellow or especially a red card, when a defender makes a successful sliding tackle, and at every goal, of course, as well as whenever some stalker is running onto the field.



Logically therefore, if you do want to see what's happening on the pitch you will have no other choice but to also jump up every other minute. Which won't bother you at all, however, since it usually doesn't take long to fall under the game's spell anyway, making you soon jump up all by yourself in excitement, even before all the others.

As the first half of the match is nearing its end, you will notice an increasing unrest in the audience, with many people getting up from their seats before the referee even whistled for half-time, starting a mass-migration into the passageways of the stadium where the toilets and beer- and food-stalls are generally situated.

While there's the real risk of missing a goal in the last few minutes plus added time, you should nonetheless follow these fans' example. At least, that is, if you want to empty your bladder before the second half is halfway over, or if you would like to purchase an overpriced beer and an equally expensive *Bratwurst* without missing most of the remaining game. This said, don't even think about jumping the queue, since the British aren't the only nation where such a behaviour is regarded as unforgivable and is immediately penalised by loud and aggressive shouts right in your face.

Due to injury time, the second half of the match will usually also last a few minutes longer than the scheduled 45 minutes. Spectators who, against all common sense, arrived by car, will nonetheless often leave some minutes earlier in order to avoid the inevitable post-game traffic jam. Since most drivers adhere to the same reasoning, however, they are mostly going to end up in the large pile-up anyway, often while missing a last-minute goal. Everyone else will leave after the players have finally disappeared in the catacombs and will set off together towards the public transport stops, either jubilantly singing or subduedly hanging their heads.

III. Post-Game

After the game is over, there are naturally three possible outcomes. Either your home team won, it lost, or the match was a draw.

In the first scenario, when your team won 3 precious points, you can expect your hometown-fans, returning from the stadium or leaving the crowded pubs, to loudly sing and bawl and happily holler their team's name and sing ritual victory chants. But don't you worry, the elevated noise-level will likely subside in the later evening and until then you'll do well to simply shrug it off as an endearing part of local folklore.

In exceptional circumstances, however, for instance when your team won against its most despised rival or if your *Heimmannschaft* was victorious in a game that was decisive for remaining in the division or for getting ahead in the final sprint for the championship, things may become a tad more raucous and exuberant. In such cases, better prepare yourself for hour-long car parades and honking-concerts as well as large groups of noisy fans singing and dancing down the main streets until the early hours of the morning and anticipate that, for this night, you might need to sleep with your windows and shutters closed.

Should your team have lost, on the other hand, then you can look forward to a quiet evening, leave the windows open and listen to the birds chirping at the rising moon. At these occasions you will rarely hear fans of your losing home team become loud and aggressive, while supporters of the winning away-team will generally celebrate in an overall decent manner while engaging in a bit of pub-hopping before boarding the special fan-train that will bring them back to their home turf.

Finally, if the game ends in a draw, both teams will go home with one point each and the fans of both sides tend to feel equally somewhat deflated. Of course, all this can change if one point has been enough for winning the championship, advancing to the first league or saving the players' asses from being relegated to a lower league.

However, (and this is a big 'however'), none of the above applies as soon as two arch-enemies fight it out on the field. Below you find some quite legendary and long-standing feuds between certain German football clubs- Whenever these rivals meet on the pitch and their fans clash in and around the stadium, all bets are off regarding your undisturbed sleep or even your usually safe evening stroll.

Enemies, Frenemies, and Nemeses

Although most *Bundesliga*-teams have at least one declared "archenemy", there are some clubs which cultivate a particularly close enmity with a specific rival, (and vice versa, of course), which goes far beyond the customary mutual bantering.

Reasons for these long-running feuds are manifold, yet most of the beef either has its roots in the two clubs' close geographic proximity, in some perceived slight that happened on or off the pitch in the past, or in diametrically opposed political viewpoints, or simply in being *Bayern München*.

Bundesliga-clubs with neighbourhood beef that's played out on

the pitch in so-called derbies, (*Derby, das*), or with a strong competitive rivalry, a historic feud, or socio-political disparities include in particular:

• Borussia Dortmund ⇔ Schalke 04	(history, local)
• Borussia Dortmund ⇔ Bayern München	(competitive)
• Hamburger SV ⇔ Werder Bremen	(history, regional)
• Hamburger SV ⇔ FC St. Pauli	(local, history, political)
• Eintracht Frankfurt ⇔ Offenbacher Kickers	(local, history)
• Eintracht Frankfurt ⇔ 1. FSV Mainz 05	(regional, history)
• Hertha BSC Berlin ⇔ 1. FC Union Berlin	(local, political)
• Hertha BSC Berlin ⇔ Schalke 04	(weirdly one-sided)
• VfB Stuttgart ⇔ Karlsruher SC	(history, regional)
• Borussia Mönchengladbach ⇔ 1. FC Köln	(history, regional)
• Bayern München ⇔ Everyone else	(Because reasons)

The most famous and oftentimes most dynamite-spiked derby of all, with a deep-rooted enmity that has now lasted over decades and generations, is indubitably the one between *Borussia Dortmund* ('The Black-and-Yellows') and *Gelsenkirchen-Schalke 04* ('The Miners').

While it only takes about 35 minutes to drive the 38 kilometres between the two cities of Dortmund and Gelsenkirchen, it is nonetheless a journey between two worlds. The bitter rivalry between the two clubs, founded in 1904 (*Schalke*) and 1909 (*BVB*) respectively, began to unfold in 1972, when *die Borussia* was relegated to the second league, although *Schalke 04* found itself waist-deep involved in a recently uncovered scandal about postponed matches and was therefore widely regarded as having unfairly retained its place in the first league, thus forcing Dortmund into the lower league.

This perceived unfairness was felt deeply by *BVB*-fans, and this fire was further stoked during the late 1970s, when rival right-wing fan-clubs of both sides repeatedly clashed during match-days. But although these



groups of political agitators have fortunately long since disappeared, the deep-seated animosity between *Schalke* and the *BVB* seems nonetheless here to stay.

For any newbie, the best course of action when confronted with fans from either side of such irreconcilable divides, (who usually try to draw some contemptuous remark about their enemy from you), remains once again to stay out of such feuds entirely, either by confessing your allegiance to your own home team or, if that doesn't do the trick, by redirecting the conversation to *Bayern München* and your "befuddlement" about the apparent fact that every German football fan and their granny's cat seem to despise them so much. Then you just need to lean back and listen to the lengthy and emotional explanation for why *Bayern* utterly deserves such universal disdain. Problem solved.

Unless, that is, you come across one of the club's 300,000 members, of course. Or talk to one of the roughly 365,000 fans, (as of 2021), who are organised in around 4,500 *Bayern München* fan clubs, or when speaking with any of the countless national and international non-organised *Bayern*-fans who frequently distinguish themselves by their preference for frequently winning teams. So, just keep in mind that no other club in Germany has as many registered supporters as *Bayern München* and that therefore a certain degree of caution is advisable.

This unsurpassed number of official fans notwithstanding, however, according to the Statista European Football Benchmark survey amongst 3,000 German football fans, *Bayern München* simultaneously also holds the negative record of the most unpopular club in Germany, a title the club regularly "defends" against *RB Leipzig*, (who claims the "RB" stands for „*RasenBallsport*" [*"TurfBallsport"*] while it is in fact a 99% subsidiary (capital-wise) of the energy drink company *Red Bull™ GmbH*.)

41% of interviewees stated that they either "dislike" or "hate" *Bayern München*, compared to which *RB Leipzig* – often also derisively called the 'Fizzy-Drink Club', („*Der Brause Club*") – comes off lightly with "only" 28% of "most disliked club"-votes.

Side note: The *SC Freiburg* landed on the positive end of the spectrum in the survey, with the fewest "enemies" and the most positive image among German football fans.

Of course, in a country where everything is regarded as somehow "political", football is predictably no exception to this rule. Which is also why your affiliation to a certain football club will usually be seen also as a commitment to a specific political current. This isn't to say that every fan of *FC St. Pauli* will automatically be left-wing, or that every supporter of *RB Leipzig* will only vote for right-wing parties, of course. Nevertheless, when Statista asked 2,711 German football fans in 2018 about their political stance, the following top 3 list crystallised on the two sides of the political spectrum.

Top 3 Clubs with Most Right-Wing Fans

- *RB Leipzig* – 26%
- *Borussia Mönchengladbach* – 22%
- *1. FC Köln* – 21%

Other Bundesliga clubs with a more right-leaning fan-base

- *Borussia Dortmund*
- *Dynamo Dresden*
- *Eintracht Braunschweig*

Top 3 Clubs with Most Left-Wing Fans

- *SV Werder Bremen* – 36%
- *Hertha BSC* – 33%
- *VfB Stuttgart* – 29%

Other Bundesliga clubs with a more left-leaning fan-base

- *FC St. Pauli*
- *Eintracht Frankfurt*
- *SC Freiburg*

No doubt, politics play a role in almost every corner of German society. Yet, a large majority of football fans are just that: fans, plain and simple. And that's why most of them will always prefer discussing the last or next match of their team instead of having any politically coloured meta-debates. Sure, it helps to be aware of the preferential political orientation of a club's fan-base when you're looking for your own place in the labyrinthine jungle of German football and it may also give you an indication of how open you can or want to be about your own political views when you meet for example a *Dynamo Dresden* or a *FC St. Pauli* fan. But that's about it. In other words, as they say in German: „*Halt einfach den Ball flach.*“, literally translating to: “Just keep the ball low.”, meaning: “Just keep it smooth and don't make a fuss about it”.

Club Nicknames

While keeping a low profile when it comes to politics is certainly a wise move, modern-day football clubs still need to present themselves as a strong brand to gain and retain supporters. And yet, despite this marketing truism, most teams in all divisions of the *Bundesliga* are still perfectly content to be known and called simply by their hometown's name, unlike e.g. American hand-egg teams with their fancy names, like: ‘*Jacksonville Jaguars*’, ‘*Tennessee Titans*’, or ‘*Washington Commanders*’.

German football fans will instead simply say, for example: „*Heute spielt Stuttgart gegen Mainz*“, (“Stuttgart plays against Mainz today”), or „*Freiburg hat gegen Leipzig gewonnen*“, (“Freiburg has won against Leipzig”).

This notwithstanding, certain Bundesliga-teams have earned themselves specific nicknames, either due to their city's historical heritage, like „*Die Schanzer*” = the “Rampart Men” of FC Ingolstadt 04, or because of their origins, e.g., „*Die Knappen*” = “the Miners” of Schalke 04, or due to their mascot, e.g. „*Die Geißböcke*” = the “Billy Goats” of 1. FC Köln and „*Die Adler*” = the “Eagles”, of Eintracht Frankfurt, or because of their team-colours, e.g. „*Die Schwarz-Gelben*” = the “Yellow-Blacks” of Borussia Dortmund, or even in memory of a historically famous young team like „*Die Fohlen*” = the “Fillies” of Borussia Mönchengladbach.



Then there is also a third group of clubs, which are instead called by their abbreviated club-name, for instance „*Die Bayern*”, [~dee Bai'ern] (Bayern München), „*Die Hertha*”, [~dee Hair'ta] (Hertha BSC Berlin), or „*Die Eintracht*”, [~dee Ayn'tracht] (Eintracht Frankfurt). A typical mistake that newbies are prone to make is to call these teams repeatedly by their full name, thus immediately revealing one's state of blissful *Fußball*-ignorance.

And as if all this wouldn't be confusing enough, certain club-nicknames are almost never used in normal conversations and remain

exclusively the domain of TV-football commentators and pundits, some of whom are known to ride these names to death, (including „*Die Werkself*“ = the “Factory Eleven” for Bayer 04 Leverkusen, „*Die Wölfe*“ = the “Wolves” for VfL Wolfsburg, or „*Die Kiezkicker*“ = the “Players from the Hood” for the FC St. Pauli, who are at home in Hamburg’s fabled amusement and red-light district of the same name.

Admittedly, it’s all rather complicated. Therefore, the list of team-nicknames and their meanings below will give you almost all commonly used nicknames together with an indication whether to use the nickname in conversations about the club, (**bold**), or whether the name is mostly used in newspaper-headlines, TV-comments, pundit-analyses, and YouTube™-thumbnails, (not bold). If only the city-name is written in bold then that’s the only name you use, while if both are in bold you have the choice between city-name and nickname.

Table: Nicknames of the Bundesliga Clubs

Club	Nickname	English
FC Bayern München	Die Bayern ; Die Roten	<i>The Bavarians</i> <i>The Reds</i>
Bayer 04 Leverkusen	Bayer ; Die Werkself; Die Unbesiegbaren	<i>The Factory Team</i> <i>The Invincibles</i>
1860 München	1860 ; Die Löwen; Die Blauen	<i>The Lions</i> ; <i>The Blues</i>
Borussia Dortmund	Der BVB ; Die Borussia , Die Schwarz-Gelben; Gelbe Tiger	<i>The Black-and-Yellows</i> <i>The yellow Tigers</i>
VfL Stuttgart	Die Roten	<i>The Reds</i>
Borussia Mönchengladbach	Gladbach ; Die Borussia , Die Fohlen	<i>The Fillies</i>
1. FC Köln	Der 1. FC ; Die Geißböcke	<i>The Billy Goats</i>
Eintracht Frankfurt	Die Eintracht ; Die Adler; Die launische Diva vom Main; Sport-Gemeinde Eintracht SGE	<i>Concordia</i> , <i>The Eagles</i> , <i>The moody Diva from</i> <i>the Main</i>
SV Darmstadt 98	Die Lilien	<i>The Lillies</i>
VfL Wolfsburg	Der VfL ; Die Wölfe	<i>The Wolves</i>
1. FC Union Berlin	Union ; Die Eisernen	<i>The Iron Ones</i>
1. FC Schalke 04	Schalke ; Die Knappen; Die Königsblauen	<i>The Miners</i> <i>The Royal Blues</i>
1. FC Nürnberg	Der Club	<i>The Club</i>
MSV Duisburg	Die Zebras	<i>The Zebras</i>
Hertha BSC Berlin	Die Hertha ; Die alte Dame	<i>The Old Lady</i>
1. FC Kaiserslautern	Lautern ; Die roten Teufel	<i>The Red Devils</i>
RB Leipzig	Die roten Bullen	<i>The Red Bulls</i>
FC Ingolstadt 04	Die Schanzer	<i>The Rampart Men</i>
SV Werder Bremen	Werder ; Die Kanarienvögel	<i>The Canaries</i>
FC St. Pauli	Pauli ; Die Kiezkicker	<i>Kickers from the Hood</i>
Hamburger SV	Der HSV , Die Rothosen; Die Dinos	<i>The Red Pants</i> <i>The Dinosaurs</i>
Fortuna Düsseldorf	Die Fortuna ; Tuna ; Flingeraner	<i>(Flingern = district of</i> <i>Düsseldorf)</i>

*No guarantee for completeness

Smalltalk on Selected Clubs

- **FC Bayern München**

The German football club that's most hated by other German fans. However, since the *FCB* usually wins the German championship (already 31 times, as of 2025), the *Bayern* also play regularly in the *Champions League*, the annual tournament of the best European teams which they've won 6 times, (with 11 participations). And curiously, whenever *Bayern* plays in the semi-finals or finals of the Champions League, it often seems as if all animosities are forgotten for the moment and the *Bayern*-team is suddenly raised to the status of "Team Germany".

- **Hamburger SV**

The HSV was the only 1st *Bundesliga*-team which had never been relegated to the 2nd league, having played in the top division for almost 55 years and hence being rightfully nicknamed the "*Bundesliga* dinosaur". However, this lucky streak took a dramatic turn in 2018, when nothing could stop Hamburg from becoming second class. From then on, and to the utter despair of the club's fans, the *HSV* [~Ha-Ess-Fow] became something of a permanent fixture in the 2nd division, having narrowly missed out on a return to the German topflight four times in a row – until the miracle happened and the *HSV* finally returned to its natural habitat in the first league in the 2025/26-season. There's not much that can upset a typical Hamburger, but if there is, then it's mentioning to him or her the disgrace of *HSV*'s prolonged stint in the second Bundesliga.

- **Bayer 04 Leverkusen**

Sports-journalists, who are always in search for another idiom, nickname, or euphemism to attach to a club, have long since decided to label this club "*die Werkself*", (the "Factory Eleven"; „*Elf*" (11) being a common euphemism for a football-team), since the club is a subsidiary of the giant chemical company Bayer™ AG, inventor of the famous painkiller Aspirin™, as well as of the today rather less favourably regarded substance Heroin™, (which incidentally takes its name indeed from the "heroic" feeling that some test-subjects claimed to have felt after having been administered this "innovative new morphine derivate painkiller". However, to be fair, Bayer™ genuinely had the best interests of pain-patients at heart and no idea of the long-term effects at the time.)

Anyway, when *Bayer*, (not to be confused with the *Bayern* from Munich, written with an "n" at the end, since the chemical company was named after its founder *Friedrich Bayer*), started into the 1st *Bundesliga* in 1979, (and never left the top-league since then), the club was still regarded as a kind of „*Retortenclub*", ("plastic club"). However, this image has long since disappeared, also due to the almost continuous top-performance of the club which earned them five runner-up finishes in the 1st *Bundesliga* and the positive nickname „*Bayern-Jäger*", ("Bayern-hunters", "-chasers"), as well as the rather less flattering nickname „*Vizekusen*", ("Vicekusen", since they so often made the 2nd place in the league).

In season 2023/2024, however, another nickname was added in respect for *Bayer*'s outstanding performance throughout the season and its ultimate win of the German Championship without having been beaten even once: „*Die Unbesiegbaren*", (the "Invincibles" or "Undefeatables").

- **FC Heidenheim 1846**
- **TSG Hoffenheim**
- **RB Leipzig**

These three clubs are often called „Retortenclubs“, (“plastic clubs”), indicating that they are relatively new and don’t have any long history or tradition, instead having been financially boosted by private sponsors to rise in record time to the 1st division.

In the case of 1. FC Heidenheim 1846, this boost came in 2007 when millionaire and envelope manufacture company-owner Klaus Mayer (1965 – 2022) became founding president and later chairman of the club’s supervisory board and “aided” the team financially.

At TSG Hoffenheim, SAP co-founder Dietmar Hopp was the ATM in the background, whose financial support between 1990 and 2008 enabled the club to rise from the regional league A all the way to the 1st Bundesliga.

Lastly, RB Leipzig represents presumably the most obvious case of a „Retortenclub“. Founded in 2009 on the initiative of the Red Bull™ GmbH, the club took over the starting rights of the small club SSV Markranstädt in the fifth-tier Oberliga Nordost, (Upper League North-East), in the season b2009/2010. Only four years later, the team was promoted to the 2nd Bundesliga, and at the start of the 2016/2017 season, the Red Bull™ club had made it into the 1st Bundesliga and continues to outperform far older and larger clubs. (As of 2024, 99% of the RasenBallsport Leipzig GmbH – ‘Turf Ball Sport’ Leipzig Ltd – is owned by the Red Bull™ GmbH and 1% by the club itself. Make of that what you want.)



Die Nationalmannschaft – The German National Team

„Aus! Aus! Aus! – Aus! – Das Spiel ist aus! Deutschland ist Weltmeister!“

„It’s over! Over! Over! – Over! – The game is over! Germany is world champion!“

Herbert Zimmermann, (1917 – 1966), German radio-reporter, after Germany won the final of the 1954 World Championship against Hungary with 3:2 in Bern, Switzerland.

In the summer of each even-numbered year you will get to know a very different side of Germany. 84 million “head coaches”, (including the other half of Germans who are usually not interested in the Bundesliga), will then discuss at length the matches of the German National Team in either the World Championship (WM) or the European Championship (EM), will celebrate each victory with copious amounts of beer in parks and streets,



and will organise outdoor-parties to watch the game live on large screens or flood the pubs and bars to feverishly follow each match, while setting up office betting lists and for once having no qualms waving the German flag and adorning their cars, houses, and balconies with the Black-Red-Gold that's normally almost completely absent from everyday life in Germany.

Admittedly, though, the heydays of the *DFB*-team, (*Deutscher Fußball Bund*; German Football Association), seemed to have been over in the years leading up to the 2024 European Championship in Germany.

In both the World Cup in Russia in 2018 and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the *Nationalmannschaft* was kicked out of the tournament in the first round. And in the Europe-wide organised European Championship in 2021, (due to Corona having taken place in an odd-numbered year), the team didn't make it past the 15. place.

However, German fans of the National Team are whining at a very high level, since the German team has won no less than 4 („vier“) World Championships and holds 3 („drei“) European Championship titles.



Weltmeisterschaften (World Championships)

Year	Venue	Final	Result
★ 1954	Bern, Switzerland	Germany - Hungary	3:2
★★ 1974	Munich, Germany	Germany - Netherlands	2:1
★★★ 1990	Rome, Italy	Germany - Argentina	1:0
★★★★ 2014	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Germany - Argentina	1:0

Europameisterschaften (European Championships)

Year	Venue	Final	Result
1972	Brussels, Belgium	Germany – Soviet Union	3:0
1980	Rome, Italy	Germany - Belgium	2:1
1996	London, United Kingdom	Germany – Czech Republic	2:1

Incidentally, nobody says „*Weltmeisterschaft*“ in German. Instead, you almost always abbreviate this to „*WM*“ [~Veh'Emm], simply pronouncing the two letters in German. At that, the sound for the German „W“ is close to the English “V”, but the „E“-sound that comes with pronouncing the German “name” of the letter „W” differs from English, resembling not an “[ee]” like in “bee”, but rather the lower-voiced “[e]” like in “elder”. The „M” on the other hand is spoken like in English. The same goes for the Euro Cup, with the “E” again pronounced like in “elephant”, just stretched a bit longer, hence, [~Eh'-Emm].

Now, if there are two games in the long history of the German National Team in World Cups that every halfway football-interested German knows, then it is the following two matches. You will hear both mentioned frequently and should at least be familiar with the key points.

Two Memorable German Matches to Memorise

1954 – World Cup Final: Hungary – Germany 2:3



A match that went down in German history as „*Das Wunder von Bern*“, (“The Miracle of Bern”). To truly appreciate the significance of this German victory against Hungary and of winning the world championship in 1954 one needs to consider several aspects, all coming together and culminating in this one final match.

For one, the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland had been the first international football tournament after the Second World War in which the German football team was allowed to play again, after having been reinstituted as a member of the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) in 1949.

For many Germans, this was in some ways an even bigger deal than the recognition of the new Federal Republic of Germany by the United Nations. It proved to Germans in a hands-on way that the disgrace and dishonour the country had brought upon itself had been, if not forgiven then at least partially suspended and wouldn’t make the country a pariah for all time.

On the sporting side of things, the miracle came in two steps. Firstly, it was already seen as a feat previously considered impossible for the team under the legendary German head coach *Sepp Herberger* to even reach the final of the first World Cup for Germany after the war. Winning this final was therefore almost unimaginable.

Secondly, Germany had already lost catastrophically in the preliminary round against Hungary, back-then the best team in the world, with a humiliating 3:8. Only the greatest optimists still believed therefore in a German victory in the final. Furthermore, the pessimists seemed to be proven right when Germany was down 2:0 after only eight minutes into this final match. Not a big surprise for any football fan at the time, since the Hungarian “Golden Team” was considered simply unbeatable, having not only won the 1952 Olympics but also having lost not one single match out of 32 games since 1950.

And yet, Germany came back into the game and equalised to 2:2 even before the break. In the following second half, all of Germany sat in front of their radios or listened through open doors and windows while standing in droves outside flats, radio shops and pubs, everyone biting their nails while breathlessly following radio-reporter *Herbert Zimmermann’s* emotional live-report. Finally, in the 84. minute, Zimmermann yells: „*Aus dem Hintergrund müsste Rahn schießen ...!*“ („From the background, Rahn should shoot...!“) and second later German winger *Helmut Rahn* scores the 2:3 goal for Germany. What followed were the most nerve-wracking six minutes in German football-history until all of Germany finally heard Zimmermann's cathartic and now legendary scream: „*Aus! Aus! Aus! – Aus! – Das Spiel ist aus! Deutschland ist Weltmeister!*“ And the rest is history.

2014 – World Cup Semifinal: Brazil – Germany 1:7



The World Cup 2014 was held in Brazil and although Germany later won the final against Argentina with 1:0, the by far more memorable if not to say legendary match of this world championship was the semifinal game against the host nation in the Mineirão stadium of Belo Horizonte.

Germany went into the game with self-confidence, but also with a good amount of respect for the reigning world champion and five-time world cup winner Brazil. However, half the world watched in utter disbelief and with dropped jaws and bulging eyes when only 29 minutes after kick-off, the *Nationalmannschaft* had already scored five goals against the *Seleção*.

The television pictures of crying and jersey-pulling Brazilian fans in the stadium went around the world. But it was about to get even worse for the country where football is even more of a “religion” than in the nation whose team was about to immortalise itself in the second half of the match. In the next 45 minutes, Germany scored two more goals, leading to a final score of 7:1, (after Brazil scored its “honorary goal” in the 90. minute) and plunged all of Brazil in a sea of tears, while in Germany all hell broke loose.

When the game was finally over, not many fans in Germany cared in that moment for the fact that the *DFB*-team had just punched its ticket to the world cup-final against Argentina. Instead, everybody knew that they had just witnessed a genuinely historic football event that would be spoken of in awe for generations to come. In the following days, there was no other topic among colleagues, friends, and strangers in Germany than the immediately legendary “*Sieben zu Eins*”.

Already during the game, 66 million Facebook™ users interacted more than 200 million times on the topic of the match, making this a new record for the platform during World championships. And on Twitter™, 35.6 million tweets made the game the most discussed sports event ever. When Germany scored the fifth goal, the global Twitter™-community sent out almost 10,000 comments each second, or 580,000 in one minute alone, setting another new record for the internet at the time.

Following the final whistle, some Brazilian cities experienced sporadic lootings and brawls, while unknown perpetrators even set 15 busses aflame in a depot in Sao Paulo. The historic defeat quickly got the nickname “*Mineiraço*” in Brazil, roughly meaning “The Shock of Mineirão”, as the stadium in Belo Horizonte is called, and the Portuguese head coach *José Mourinho* predicted: “*In 50 years’ time, children will still know that Brazil lost 7:1 against Germany on their home turf.*”

One day later, New York City paid its respect to the German team by illuminating the Empire State Building in the colours Black, Red, and Gold, while two days after the match, the term “7:1” had already been patented at the German patent office.

In a survey among the *DFB* All-Stars in June of 2023, the exclusive club of former and present-day German national players elected the

match with 41.6% of the votes as the best game of the German National Team ever. A result most Germans will probably wholeheartedly agree with while remembering German head coach *Joachim "Jogi" Löw* explaining his team's historic victory in his inimitably succinct manner after the match by laconically stating: *"We encountered the deep emotions of the Brazilians with perseverance, calmness, clarity, and persistence. ... By the time it was 2:0, it was clear that the Brazilians were a bit disoriented. Well, and we just clinically exploited that situation."*

Table: Fußball Glossary

Deutsch	English
Das Spiel	<i>The match/game</i>
Der Anstoß	<i>The kick-off</i>
Der Abpfiff	<i>The final whistle</i>
Der Ball	<i>The ball</i>
Das Tor	<i>The goal</i>
Der "Kasten"	<i>The "box" (goal)</i>
Die Latte	<i>The crossbar</i>
Der Pfosten	<i>The goalpost</i>
Der Elfmeter	<i>The penalty kick</i>
Das Elfmeterschießen	<i>The penalty shootout</i>
Der Elfmeterpunkt	<i>The penalty spot</i>
Der Freistoß	<i>The free kick</i>
Das Foul	<i>The foul</i>
Die gelbe Karte	<i>The yellow card</i>
Die rote Karte	<i>The red card</i>
Der Platzverweis	<i>The sending-off (from field)</i>
Das Handspiel	<i>The handball</i>
Die Schwalbe	<i>The dive (simulation)</i>
Der Einwurf	<i>The throw-in</i>
Der Eckball / Die "Ecke"	<i>The corner-kick</i>
Der Fallrückzieher	<i>The bicycle kick</i>
Der Kopfball	<i>The header</i>
Der Pass	<i>The pass</i>
Die Flanke	<i>The cross</i>
Der Konter	<i>The counterattack</i>
Das Abseits	<i>The offside</i>
Die Mannschaft	<i>The team</i>
Der Torwart	<i>The goalkeeper</i>
Der Spieler	<i>The player</i>
Der Stürmer	<i>The forward/striker</i>
Die Abwehr	<i>The defence</i>
Der Abwehrspieler	<i>The defender</i>
Der Angriff	<i>The attack</i>
Das Mittelfeld	<i>The midfield</i>
Der Trainer	<i>The coach/manager</i>
Die Verlängerung	<i>The extra time (overtime)</i>
Die Halbzeit	<i>The halftime</i>
Die Halbzeitpause	<i>The halftime break</i>
Die Verletzung	<i>The injury</i>
Die Auswechslung	<i>The substitution</i>
Der Auswechselspieler	<i>The substitute player</i>
Der Schiedsrichter / Schiri	<i>The referee / ref</i>
Der Torjubel	<i>The goal celebration</i>
Der Torschütze	<i>The goal scorer</i>
Der Jungspund	<i>The young talent (rookie)</i>
Der alte Hase	<i>The seasoned veteran</i>
Die Heulsuse	<i>The cry-baby</i>
Der Simulant	<i>The diver (pretends injury)</i>

That Damn German Language!

Ein Tor schießen	<i>To score a goal</i>
Der Sieg	<i>The victory</i>
Die Niederlage	<i>The defeat</i>
Das Unentschieden	<i>The draw</i>
Der Ausgleich	<i>The equalizer</i>
„Deutschland vor, noch ein Tor!“	<i>„Germany forward, ((score) another goal!“</i>
„Steht auf, wenn ihr Deutsche seid!“	<i>“Stand up if you’re Germans!”</i>
„Oh, wie ist das schön! Oh, wie ist das schön!“	<i>„Oh, how nice this is! Oh, how nice this is!“</i>



Swearing in German – An Art in Itself

"With respect, Mr President, you are an arsehole."

Joseph Martin "Joschka" Fischer, from 1998 to 2005 Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, in 1984 as an MP for the Green Party to the then Vice-President of the German Parliament Richard Stücklen during a parliamentary debate.

Perhaps you already knew this, (if so, you'd be a damn **„Klugscheißer“**, i.e., "smartarse", of course), but Europe is divided into four distinct groups when it comes to the subtle art of swearing and insulting.

In this respect, the largest group of European countries, including the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, Finland, Estonia, Ireland, Portugal, and the Ukraine is prone to base their expletives and swearwords predominantly on sex-related terms, (famous amongst them is of course the English "fuck").

People from countries in a smaller second group, however, prefer to use instead cuss words from the apparently fascinating world of prostitution, like for instance in Russia, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, or Slovakia.

In stark contrast to this, the third cluster, comprised of a northern alliance with Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Latvia, and Lithuania and a southern branch with Hungary and Bulgaria, tends to dish out swearwords with a religious background. And only the fourth group, with the Balkan states and the three German-speaking countries of Austria, Switzerland, and Germany, base their expletives solidly on faecal matter.



I. The Scatological Sediments

This odorous fact concerning the preferred swearing-matter in the three German-speaking countries is surely true – but only, if you consider exclusively the garden-variety of everyday German expletives, which are indeed so ubiquitously used that they're usually taken in stride by the "insultee" without even properly registering as an insult in many cases.



In the following you find a list with just these few scatological expletives that you will frequently hear on German, Austrian, and Swiss streets, in traffic and in pedestrian zones, in pubs and party-zones, and sometimes even at work.

But be aware that from here on out, no quarter will be given, and all boundaries of good taste and proper parlance will inevitably fall. Hence, should you be easily affronted or have a particular aversion to foul and/or not particularly politically correct language, then you might

perhaps want to skip this 'Not Safe For Work' (NSFW) chapter. You've been warned.

A List of the Bare Necessities of Faecal Insult Matters

Deutsch	Literally	English	Severity
(die) Scheiße	shit	<i>shit, fuck</i>	3-5/10
(die) Kacke	shit	<i>shit, damn</i>	2-4/10
(der) Mist	dung, animal shit	<i>shit, damn</i>	1-3/10
(der) Dreck	dirt	<i>damn</i>	1-2/10
(der) Arsch	arse	<i>arse, idiot</i>	5-8/10
(das) Arschloch	arsehole	<i>arsehole</i>	5-9/10
(der) Klugscheißer	smartshitter	<i>smartarse</i>	4-8/10
(der) Scheißdreck	shit-dirt	<i>damn, shit, bad</i>	3-7/10

Looking at these mostly "harmless" (i.e., anything below a severity of 6/10) faecal insults German-speakers apparently hurl at each other non-stop, you'd be forgiven to think that the DACH-population clearly must be a particularly vulgar people who aren't much higher up on Darwin's evolutionary ladder than those endearing chimpanzees in the zoo who like to fling their faeces at each other for chimpanzee reasons.

But most German-speakers would beg to differ in this regard. Because, aside from an occasionally shouted „**Arschloch**“ in traffic or when cyclists and pedestrians clash over the right of way, most of these expletives and insults are generally uttered in a good-natured and well-meaning manner.

Sounds odd? Perhaps. Nonetheless, Germans exclaim the first four entries on the above list usually in the same way in which English speakers use "fuck!", "shit!", or "damn!", for instance when you hit your thumb with a hammer, or when your paper shopping-bag breaks on the way to your car, or when your computer suddenly starts to initialise a Windows™-update while your urgent deadline is fast approaching.

On the other hand, by combining the first noun-syllables „*Kack-*“, „*Dreck-*“, or „*Mist-*“ with other nouns, for example with the names of animals like „*-Sau*“, ("sow") or „*-Kuh*“ ("cow"), or with other terms like „*-Kerl*“, ("bloke", "guy", "dude"), you will immediately raise the severity-level considerably closer to boiling point.

Deutsch	Literally	English	Severity
(der) Dreckskerl	dirt-guy	<i>bastard</i>	5-9/10
(die) Drecksau	dirt-pig	<i>filthy swine</i>	8-10/10
(die) Dreckskuh	dirt-cow	<i>damn cow</i>	8-10/10
(der) Drecksack	dirtbag	<i>dirtbag</i>	1-6/10

Oddly enough, while the first three revilements above, and particularly the second and third, can be perceived as potentially lethal insults, the term „**Drecksack**“, ("dirtbag") has actually taken a different route and has even become somewhat of a "pet-name" among blokes, dudes, guys, and mates in Germany today and is often used in an endearing, if not even respectful manner.



From the previous list of basic scatological insults, however, there are only two expletives that you should probably use rather sparingly, unless you are out for serious trouble. You will have guessed it already, these two terms are „**Arsch**“ and „**Arschloch**“, which have a heightened potential to explode in your face when uttered in honest anger or rage. With this said, however, both terms can also be exclaimed with a pronounced ironic undertone, as if to pay the addressee a backhanded compliment such as, “*Well, aren’t you a clever sneaky asshole, you!*” In case you want to use the most popular German insult in this way, however, you best don’t forget to do so with an actual smile or grin on your face as well as a light tone in your voice. Keep in mind that there is a thin red line between a backhanded compliment and a straight-up insult, and you should know pretty well where this red line runs before you even go near it.

As a direct and serious insult, however, the word „**Arschloch**“ is most frequently used to criticize and point out an insultee’s antisocial behaviour in a particular situation or their morally dubious stance or unfair decision, (as was the case with MP *Fischer* and parliamentary vice-president *Stücklen*), or simply to call the asshole out on their blatantly obnoxious behaviour.

II. The Routine Revilements

While the insults and exclamations in the previous chapter are found at the bottom of the German swearword-pile and are often exclaimed willy-nilly and without any actual venom, you will find that the insults on the coming list certainly pack a far harder punch.

Those are the classic insults that have been around in German parlance for decades, if not even centuries, while still having lost none of their inherent attractiveness to the average German swearer. Just like with „**Arschloch**“, the uncrowned king of German cuss words, these insults are hurled quite deliberately at any “instant-enemy”, whether while being stuck in traffic or while fighting over the last lobster at the supermarket’s seafood-counter or while hating the goalie of the opposite football team or the neighbour with his nitpicking insistence on the “correct” blade-length of the grass. Furthermore, they share with „**Arschloch**“ the dubious quality of quickly transcending that red line that marks the border to the realm of legally punishable defamations.

But before we dive into these costly discourtesies, let us quickly run through the three most common German derogatory adjectives, which you can find on their own and as part of numerous compound noun-insults. These three adjectives are „**dumm**“, „**doof**“, and „**blöd**“.

„dumm“ – The deliberate “dumb, stupid, thick”

„**Dumm**“, (spoken like [~doo]), but with a shorter and quicker “oo”-sound than in “moose” and a hard “M” at the end), is one of the oldest derogatory terms in the German language, coming all the way from the “pre-Babylonian” times of Proto-



Germanic, where the word „*dumbaz*“ designated a dumb, deaf, or silent person, i.e., a person who is unable to speak. (Strangely enough, in recent years the insult „*Dumbatz*“, mostly used as a harmless banter-term targeted at a slightly dense or clumsy person, is actually making a comeback among younger Germans).

You also might find it noteworthy that the modern Standard High German word for “silent”, i.e., being unable to speak, is the adjective „*stumm*“ [ˈʃtʊm]. You don’t need a linguistic detective to point out the obvious connection to the adjective „*dumm*“ here, thus indicating the type of mindset prevalent in times when being mute was seen as synonymous to being dumb. And yes, incidentally, the English adjective “dumb” shares the same slightly unsavoury property, since the term once meant “mute” as well as “stupid”, with the former meaning having simply become outdated over time.

Linguists who’ve studied these things in excruciating detail postulate that „*dumbaz*“ itself originates from another Proto-Germanic term called „*dheub*“, which stood for “confusion, stupefaction, dizziness” and which in turn has its roots in the word-stem „*dheu-*“, designating “dust, mist, smoke, vapor”, indicating the idea of a “clouded mind” In Old High German.

This later transformed into „*tumb*“ which subsequently became „*tump*“ in Middle High German. Both adjectives derived from „*toum*“, the noun for “smoke”, and meant “clouded” or “with dull senses”, ultimately coming down to “dull-witted”. Finally, in the transition to modern Standard High German, the Middle High German „*tumb*“ or „*tump*“ became „*dumm*“ and the adjective’s meaning transformed exclusively into a derogatory insult signifying “stupid, dumb, daft, thick”.

Generally, you should know that the three terms „*dumm*“, „*doof*“ and „*blöd*“ are nowadays used almost interchangeably, and many German-speakers would be hard put to explain the exact differences between the three words. However, there are actually quite clear distinctions in their meanings and uses. In this regard, the word „*dumm*“ is certainly the most severe term in the trifecta and expresses predominantly the sentiment that the insulted person is either a). someone born with a discernibly low I.Q., b). an often-clueless person who is slow on the uptake, or c). a wilfully ignorant douchebag.

Common insults featuring „*dumm*“ as an adjective or compounded with a noun include, (but are not limited to), in ascending order of severity:

• „ Du Dummkopf! “	“ <i>Blockhead!</i> “
• „ Du dumme Gans! “	“ <i>Stupid goose!</i> “
• „ Du dumme Kuh! “	“ <i>Stupid cow!</i> “
• „ Du dummes Schwein! “	“ <i>Fucking pig!</i> “
• „ Du dumme Sau! “	“ <i>Fucking sow!</i> “



One variant of „*Du dumme Kuh!*” in particular deserves special mention in this context, namely the phrase, „*Du blinde Kuh!*”, [ˌdoo blɛnˈde coo]. (“You blind cow!”). This insult is exclusively targeted at women who (allegedly) drive carelessly and (allegedly) take your right of way in traffic – and it is usually answered by the female insult-recipient either by yelling back a heartfelt: „*Blödes Arschloch!*”, (“Stupid arsehole!”), in case the insulter is male, or by a less ferocious, „*Selber blinde Kuh!*”, (“Blind cow yourself!”), if the motorised complainer turns out to be a fellow female driver.

Coincidentally, (or perhaps not), the term „*Blinde Kuh*” is also the German name for the hide-and-seek game “blind man's bluff”, where the seeker is blindfolded.

„blöd” – The off-hand “daft, stupid, ignorant”

„*Blöd*”, spoken like the English [ˌbleɪd] but with the untranslatable Umlaut-sound “*Ö*” instead of “*ee*” while stretched just as long, has its roots in the Old High German „*blōdi*”, meaning “clueless”, “ignorant” or “shy”, and the subsequent Middle High German „*blæde*”, (with “*æ*” being the equivalent to today’s Umlaut-“*Ö*”), used to describe a “weak”, “soft” or “ignorant” person.

While in the 1800s „*blöd*” was still used as a clinical description for mentally handicapped or mentally weak patients, in present-day Standard High German the perceived severity-level of the common insult „*blöd*” now could be said to rank somewhere between „*dumm*” in first and „*doof*” in third place and is most often employed as an adjective in combination with an animal name. Depending on the type of animal (or object), however, the severity of the insult can vary considerably and can supersede the general meaning of „*blöd*” as “ignorant”, “daft”, or “stupid” quicker than you can say „*Entschuldigung!*” (“Sorry!”).

However, just as with the word „*doof*”, also the adjective „*blöd*” is often used to harmlessly curse at an object, making it all but interchangeable with „*doof*”. The only difference between „*doof*” and „*blöd*” would be that saying „*Doofes Kleid*” will express your personal dislike of that hideous dress in a slightly more “innocent” and “childlike” manner, while saying „*Blödes Kleid*” could be perceived as a minutely more “sharp” and “serious” verdict – however, both expressions will make it abundantly clear that you think that this dress definitely sucks.

Common insults featuring the term „*blöd*” include in ascending order of severity:

• „ Blödi ”	“Little jerk” (harmless, mostly kids)
• „ Blödian ”	“Jerk” (harmless, kids or kind banter)



• „Blödmann“	“Fool; Annoying person!”
• „Blöde Kuh!“	“Daft cow!”
• „Blöde Gans!“	“Obnoxious goose!”
• „Blöder Sack!“	“Idiot!”
• „Blödes Schwein!“	“Moronic pig!”
• „Blöde Sau!“	“Fucking sow!”

„doof“ – The all-purpose “daft, silly, stupid”



English speakers will quickly notice that the word „doof“ looks and sounds quite similar to the English term “deaf”. And indeed, that’s exactly the word’s original meaning in its native Low (or: ‘Dutch’) German, coming from the Middle Low German „dōf”. However, while in modern English this „dōf” has turned into “deaf”, simply indicating the inability to hear, in German the development of the term’s meaning took a different turn. Today, ‘being

deaf’ is described in German by the word „taub”, while „doof” has taken on the exclusive role of a mild(ish) insult.

Although German-speakers also sporadically use the term „dumm” to address inanimate objects in anger, as in, „Du dummes Auto!” (‘‘You stupid car!’’), „doof” is the preferred alternative whenever you want to express your misgivings about things like, „Doofer Film”, (‘‘stupid movie’’), „Doofes Kleid”, (‘‘ugly dress’’), „Doofer Tag”, (‘‘awful day’’), or „Doofes Wetter”, (‘‘shitty weather’’).

Even when applying the terminus „doof” instead to a person, the meaning changes only slightly. To call your colleague „doof!” doesn’t say much about your evaluation of their intelligence but much rather indicates that you simply don’t like him or her, or that you don’t find their jokes funny at all, or that their demeanour is simply not your cup of tea. Of the trifecta „dumm”, „blöd” and „doof”, the term „doof” is therefore also the least insulting when uttered in the direction of your counterpart. In fact, „doof” is often the first “insult” many German kids discover for themselves and then love to incessantly call it at each other across the playground.

Common cuss-phrases featuring „doof”, (spoken like [ˌdoo] with its long “O”-sound, only with an “F” instead of an “R” at the end), include:

• „Du bist doof!“	“You’re daft!” (mainly kids)
• „Mann, bist du doof.“	“Dude, you are so stupid.”
• „Doofmann!“	“Daft dude.” (Kids only)
• „Doofkopf!“	“Dumbhead!” (Kids only)
• „Doofes Schaf!“	“Daft sheep!” („sheeple”)
• „Doofe Kuh!“	“Dumb cow!” (semi-severe)

So, to recap the trifecta of German insult-adjectives:

➔ **doof** – The mild cuss word

- Very colloquial
- Often soft, playful, or emotional
- Can sound almost childlike

„Das ist doof“ often means “That’s annoying” or “That’s unfortunate”. „Doof“ is frequently used for things or situations, not to insult someone’s intelligence, while „Du bist doof!“ (“You are daft!”) is mainly meant in a playful manner in light banter.

➔ **blöd** – The medium-strength swear word

- Still colloquial
- Stronger and more direct than „doof“
- Can sound irritated

„Das war blöd von dir“ means: „That was stupid of you“. Depending on your tone, this can feel like real criticism — but it's still everyday language. The same goes for „Du bist blöd“, which is mainly perceived as a mild insult.

➔ **dumm** – The strongest insult

- Most serious in meaning
- Directly targets intelligence
- Can be genuinely insulting

„Das war dumm“ means: “That was moronic/idiotic” and often implies a lack of intelligence or very poor judgment on the part of the offended party. Which is why a straight-faced delivery of „Du bist dumm!“ will most likely also be perceived as a rather strong insult.

Now, with this newly acquired knowledge of the German trifecta of insult-adjectives in mind, let’s jump right into the list of derogatory terms that can cost you a monthly salary if the insulted party turns out to be anything but the typically open-minded, humorous, and forgiving German, Austrian, or Swiss citizen, but instead someone who will actually report you to the police for attacking their honour.

Don’t worry, though, in most cases when there is no genuine malice or intention to hurt involved, i.e., when the insult is uttered in the spur of the moment or as a form of rebuff or admonishment, no German-speaker would even entertain the idea of complaining to the constabulary.

Despite the increasing sensitivity displayed by many younger people today and their desire for “safe spaces”, it is generally still frowned upon in the three countries if you show an inability to take a verbal punch to the nose and run crying to the cops instead of paying your insulter back in equal verbal coin. This said, the following insults nevertheless shouldn’t come all too lightly over your lips, as they have been known not only to result in hefty fines but also in instantaneous fisticuffs and bar-brawls. (But as usual, you do you, of course.)

A List of Core German Cuss Words

Deutsch	Literally	English	Severity	Target
(der) Idiot	idiot	<i>idiot</i>	4-6/10	♂ ♀
(der) Vollidiot	full idiot	<i>idiot</i>	5-7/10	♂ ♀
(der) Dummkopf	dumb head	<i>airhead</i>	1-5/10	♂ ♀
(der) Depp	dork	<i>dork, dolt</i>	4-5/10	♂
(der) Trottel	moron	<i>moron, dork, jerk</i>	2-5/10	♂ ♀
(der) Volltrottel	full moron	<i>moron, dork, jerk</i>	4-5/10	♂
(der) Mistkerl	dung dude	<i>scumbag</i>	7-8/10	♂
(die) Dumme Kuh	stupid cow	<i>silly cow</i>	6-8/10	♀
(die) Blöde Gans	daft goose	<i>silly goose</i>	6-7/10	♀
(die) Blöde Ziege	daft goat	<i>silly bitch</i>	7-8/10	♀
(das) Sackgesicht	sack face	<i>dickface</i>	4-9/10	♂
(der) Wichser	wanker	<i>wanker</i>	6-9/10	♂
(der) Spast	spastic	<i>spastic</i>	10/10	♂
(die) Fotze	cunt	<i>cunt</i>	11/10	♀
(die) Hure	whore	<i>whore</i>	10/10	♀
(die) Nutte	whore	<i>whore</i>	9-10/10	♀
(die) Schlampe	slut	<i>slut</i>	8-10/10	♀
(die) Dumme Sau	stupid sow	<i>fucking arsewipe</i>	9-10/10	♂
(der) Hurensohn	whore-son	<i>son of a whore</i>	2-10/10	♂

As is the case with the aforementioned term „*Drecksack*“ so too can some terms on this list be used in vastly different levels of severity, ranging from a seriously hateful insult all the way to an endearing pet name or insider joke.

At that, the friendly if not even lovingly uttered variations of some of these terms usually come in their diminutive form, (that is, with the ending „-chen“ or „-lein“), or with a relativising adjective up front. Particularly the two terms „*Dummkopf*“ and „*Trottel*“ fall into this category and are regularly used by couples and parents in either a micro-aggressive or honestly endearing way.

For instance, if your boyfriend or husband forgot to switch off the cooker again and the fire brigade arrives at your front door for the hundredth time, you would chide him with a sardonic smile and a friendly „*Mein Trottelchen*“, [ˈmɛyn tʁɔtɐlˈtʃɛn], (“my little moron”), while when your girlfriend or wife forgot once again to tighten the bolts on the right rear wheel of your family-Porsche™, you would just look at her lovingly from the passenger seat and whisper, „*Mein kleiner Dummkopf*“ or „*Mein Dummköpfchen*“, (“my little airhead”), before you plough into the undergrowth next to the *Autobahn*.

Additionally, when parents have some befriended couples over for a barbeque and beers and their hyperactive toddler bangs his head for the fifth time against the window-glass of the patio door, the parents might tell their amused friends with a pained grin, „*Ja, unser kleines Trottelchen ist gerade in einer schwierigen Lernphase*“, (“Yeah, our little dork is currently going through a difficult learning phase”).

Further to be counted into this ambivalent category is the term „*Depp*“, although the diminutive form „*Deppchen*“ or „*kleines Deppchen*“ are both a tad more on the micro-aggressive side compared to the previous two entries and thus used less frequently. And yes, no German-speaker has failed to realise that there is in fact a famous actor with the same surname. However, by now the joke has grown just as old as the entire ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ franchise.

Moving on, the four animal-insults to be found on the above list, (plus an exclusive one for police officers, but more on that later), are in comparison a rather different breed of cantankerous cats altogether.

For one, all four insults are gender-specific, with the first three being exclusively used to insult women. At that, „**Dumme Kuh**“, „**Blöde Gans**“, and „**Blöde Ziege**“ have slightly different areas of application in daily life. While „**Dumme Kuh**“, (“stupid cow”), is the most generic insult and applied in all sorts of situations, (once again most often in traffic), „**Blöde Gans**“, (“obnoxious goose”), on the other hand is tailored predominantly to younger women and those who behave especially airheaded or insufferable. Finally, „**Blöde Ziege**“, (“daft goat”), is more often employed with older women and those who love to nag or complain for no rhyme or reason. In fact, the German word for “bleating”, i.e., the sound a goat makes, is „**meckern**“, which does double duty also as the German term for “nagging” and “complaining”.

On the other side of the gender-aisle and although the insult „**Dumme Sau**“, (“stupid sow”), implies a female pig, (or perhaps precisely because of that), this term is almost exclusively used for men, as are its variations of „**Alte Sau**“, (“old sow”), and „**Blöde Sau**“, (“daft sow”). And while the three female-centric animal-expletives are bad enough and shouldn’t be used at all in polite society, „**Dumme Sau**“ and its surrogates take it up another notch and then some.

In other words, you’d do well to refrain from using these insults in German in general. On the other hand, though, you might in fact want to keep an ear out for having any of those expletives hurled at you, since this could mean quick and easy money.

That’s because all you need to do to make some fast Euros is to get yourself insulted, know the identity of your offender and be familiar with the fact that in Germany the offence of insulting someone constitutes under Section (§) 185 *StGB* a so-called “honour offence”, meaning that your legal interest here is (seriously) the protection of your personal honour. And that’s no small matter in Germany.

You see, according to German law, if you deny someone their honour by calling them „**Dumme Kuh**“ or „**Blöde Gans**“, or even just by “showing them the bird”, („*den Vogel zeigen*“, i.e., tipping a forefinger to your forehead, not as in “flipping the bird”, since in German showing the middle finger is called „*den Stinkefinger zeigen*“), it will in fact represent a punishable “offence with intend”, (since there’s no such thing as an accidental insult. Duh.). Keep in mind, however, that such insults can only be prosecuted under criminal law if a corresponding criminal complaint has been made, which means that you will need to go to the next police station and register a complaint, ideally with some proof at hand.

Once you did your due diligence, (and perhaps got yourself a lawyer), you can expect a lengthy waiting period until the court will, if all goes well, finally decide in your favour. Your insulter can then expect “*a fine or a prison sentence of up to one year, or up to two years if the insult is physical*”, (§185



StGB), meaning that it can get genuinely hairy for the insulting party if they, for instance, have cut off your hair or have spitted on you.

But assuming the insult remained in the verbal domain, then how much cash could you expect to receive, (or, of course, would need to pay)? Well, while the amount of the fine may vary slightly from court to court and from case to case, penalty fees that have already been paid for similar offences can give you at least a ballpark idea of the likely amounts.

A List of Fines for Selected Insults

„Dumme Kuh!“	300 €	345 £	348 \$
„Blöde Gans!“	300 €	345 £	348 \$
„Blödes Schwein!“	500 €	575 £	580 \$
Tapping forehead	750 €	862 £	870 \$
„Idiot!“	1,500 €	1.725 £	1.740 \$
„Arschloch!“	1,500 €	1.725 £	1.740 \$
Showing middle finger	4,000 €	4.600 £	4.638 \$

**(As of 17 January 2026 – rounded figures – no guarantee)*

And should you absolutely crave that special thrill that comes with insulting a German police officer, you better have some spare change tucked away as well. While the English-speaking world has come up with the word “pigs” as a derogative term for their police forces, the German equivalent to this is „Bullen“, meaning “bulls”, i.e., uncastrated male bovine animals. Or at least that’s what most Germans believe it to mean, although it is more likely that the term „Bullen“ actually originated in the 18th century, when gendarmes were called „Landbohlwer“ or „Bohler“, names that themselves derive from the old Dutch word “Bol”, meaning “clever man”, (although that’s still up for debate), and which morphed over time into today’s „Bulle“.



Perhaps that’s why calling a German police officer „Bulle“ in itself is generally not regarded as a disparagement of the police officer and therefore also not an offence against Section (§) 185 of the German Criminal Code (StGB). However, be aware that this isn’t legal advice, and since Police matters are the exclusive responsibility of the individual federal states, what is true in one state isn’t automatically true in another.

In any case, one fact applies equally to all states and that’s that it is definitely considered a punishable offence to call a police officer „Bullenschwein“, (“bull-pig”). This little word will set you back by about 600 to 1,500 Euros, as will, incidentally, addressing a police officer in the informal „Du“-form.

So, as you’ve just seen, attacking the honour of another person in Germany can quickly lighten your wallet considerably. And that’s certainly also true für the following 10/10-insults, which are all up there in the thousands-of-Euros-range if reported to the police and prosecuted by the court.

Tackling the worst of the lot first then, and with a little detour into English for comparison, you’re probably aware that the term “cunt” represents the peak of foul-mouthed insults in any English-speaking country. And presumably you will also agree that even though the ubiquitous overuse of this insult in the past decades has somewhat diminished its actual severity, it is, (or

at least, it should be), still a taboo, even in the most heated moments of an argument.

Well, the exact same goes for this expletive's German counterpart of „**Fotze**“, denoting in the same foul manner the same part of the female anatomy. This insult stands out even among the rich list of German vulgarities and should remain safely inside your angry head, no matter how furious you may be at that moment. If you hear this word uttered at all, then it is mainly by juveniles and teenage wannabe-gangsters in a show of faux bravado, or because they have clearly never learned good manners and proper respect for women.

The same assessment can also be transferred one-to-one to the next two insults, namely „**Hure**“ and „**Nutte**“. Both terms represent derogatory substitutes for the word „*Prostitutierte*“, (“prostitute”), and both aim equally at demeaning their female addressee, as does the third insult in this unsavoury category, „**Schlampe**“ (“slut”). Unfortunately, the currently fashionable ‘Gangsta’-rapper- and street thugs culture ensured the proliferation of those demeaning insults among juveniles, which should nonetheless be no excuse for anyone with two functioning brain cells to make use of these expletives, regardless of the circumstances. As Germans are used to say in ‘*Denglish*’, (German interspersed with pseudo- and actual English words), these terms are an „*absolute No-Go!*“ And to complete the taboo-list, the same is also true for the term „**Spast**“, short for „*Spastiker*“, or “spastic” in English, for reasons that hopefully don’t need any further explanation.

Finally, a special place on this list of ‘Routine Revilements’ belongs to the term „**Hurensohn**“ with its wide-spanning severity-score of 2-10/10. Literally, the term means “son of a whore/bitch”, but this once rather extreme insult has undergone a remarkable transition in German since the turn of the millennium.

Don’t get me wrong, if you’re calling someone a „*Hurensohn*“ in a pub- or club-environment, on the streets or in other public places, this will still result in a high probability of having your face intimately introduced to the insulted person’s fist or flat hand, of course. However, if you search for the term on the German-speaking part of the internet, its abundant appearance in all kinds of comment sections, chats, and memes will probably surprise even well-versed German-afficionados.

Particularly on Reddit™, 9GAG™, and other meme-sites, you will come across this expletive most often as part of the sentence „*Sprich Deutsch, du Hurensohn!*“, i.e., “Speak German, you son of a bitch!”. A phrase that has become commonplace among younger German commentators, either as a reply to postings or comments with overly nationalistic contents or undertones coming from users in English-speaking countries, (... cough, the States, cough, cough ...), or in a self-deprecating way to make fun of the perceived and frequently criticised German dominance in some comment sections and subreddits. Occasionally, the sleight is also aimed at another German-speaking commenter who is using ‘*Denglish*’ phrases or is trying to sound all-too American or British, while in some other memes the word is used to ironically boast about some German “achievement” or other.

Rest assured, however, that you as a non-native speaker are certainly the last one who will ever hear or read this sentence addressed to you in a serious manner. Contrary to common belief, German-speakers are generally some of the nicest people on international online-platforms and will welcome

anyone with open arms who will make the herculean effort of wrangling the dreaded German language into a coherent sentence.

III. The Putdown Phrases

As well as its standard one-word expletives, German also boasts a vast arsenal of insults in the form of full sentences that could easily fill an entire ordnance depot. However, to help you travel light while still being equipped with the most common putdown phrases, the following list provides you with everything you need for your everyday battles.

A List of Partially Painful Putdowns

Deutsch	Literally	English
Bei dir piept's wohl!	You seem to have a bird tweeting in your head.	<i>You're mental!</i>
Du hast wohl nicht alle Tassen im Schrank!	You seem to be missing some cups in the cupboard.	<i>You're one sandwich short of a picnic.</i>
Du hast sie wohl nicht mehr alle!	You seem to be missing something (up there).	<i>You're obviously mental!</i>
Du hast wohl 'ne Schraube locker!	You seem to have a screw loose.	<i>You've got a screw loose!</i>
Bist du noch zu retten!?	Are you still salvageable!?	<i>Are you mental!?</i>
Spinnst du!?	Are you yarning?	<i>Are you stupid!?</i>
Du spinnst wohl!	Seems like you're yarning!	<i>Hey, are you crazy or what!</i>
Dir geht's wohl zu gut!	Looks like you feel too well!	<i>Take it down a notch, pal!</i>
Sag mal, geht's noch!?	Say, are you still properly functioning!?	<i>Hey, watch it! / What the fuck are you doing!?</i>
Du bist wohl bescheuert!	Seems like you're scrubbed!	<i>Are you stupid or what!?</i>
Bist du blind, oder was!?	Are you blind, or what!?	<i>Are you blind or what!?</i>
Was für 'ne Scheiße!	What a shit!	<i>What a fuck-up/mess!</i>
Was'n Scheiß!	What a shit!	<i>How lame/fucked up!</i>
Da geb' ich einen Scheiß drauf!	I give a shit about that!	<i>I don't give a shit!</i>
Erzähl keinen Scheiß!	Don't tell shit!	<i>Don't talk bullshit!</i>
Leck mich!	Lick me!	<i>Fuck you! / Fuck off!</i>
Leck mich am Arsch!	Lick me on my arse!	<i>Fuck you! / Fuck off!</i>
Verpiss dich!	Piss (yourself) off!	<i>Piss off!</i>
Fick dich!	Fuck you!	<i>Fuck you!</i>
Hau ab!	Get lost!	<i>Get lost! Piss off!</i>
Mecker' nicht!	Don't complain!	<i>Stop nagging!</i>

Even if some of the more elaborate cuss-phrases up here might appear somewhat peculiar to speakers of non-Germanic languages, it's presumably safe to say that they're all self-explanatory. The only aspect that may confuse non-Germans, non-Austrians, and non-Swiss in this regard might be the little word „*wohl*“ that shows up in several of the phrases above.

If you ask the dictionary, it will provide you with an entire list of translations for this term, including: “probably, indeed, well, perhaps, possibly, surely and doubtlessly”. And while all these meanings find their justification in certain circumstances, in the specific case of cuss-phrases, the meaning of „*wohl*“ is most closely related to the idea of “probably” as if to say, “*I wonder if that's the case – and I'm pretty sure that it is.*”

Interlude: "He Shall Lick Me in the Backside!" – Götz von Berlichingen

If there is one expression on the above list that deserves its own chapter, then it is undeniably the phrase, **„Leck mich am Arsch!“**, ("Lick me on the arse!") and its surrogate short form of **„Leck mich!“**. Because it is not only the most common expletive phrase in German, equivalent to the English "Fuck you!" or "Fuck off!", but it also comes with the most endearing and peculiar origin story.

Unbeknownst to most Germans outside of the German region of Swabia, the origins of this phrase, also called the "Swabian Charm", are even older than the famous medieval robber baron to whom the phrase is usually attributed. In fact, historians are quite certain that the expression of "Lick my arse!" originally arose from an old defence spell, based on the belief that showing your bare buttocks to a witch, a demon, or a personal enemy would make you immune to their nefarious curses. (Incidentally, you still find remnants of this sentiment in the modern-day practice of "mooning"). Furthermore, kissing the behind of another person was regarded as a gesture of submission. Hence, showing your bare bum to a foe was a demonstration of your dominance.

Medieval graphic depictions of this defensive charm-gesture can still be admired today, since you can find bum-proffering figures chiselled in the finest stone on the walls of several German castles as well as on the cathedrals in Strasbourg, Ulm, and Freiburg, but also in other European cities like La Rochelle in France, Bologna in Italy, and Salamanca in Spain.

But not only the physical gesture of exposing your buttocks dates to the early days of the German Middle Ages – also the spoken expletive goes at least as far back as 1454 AD. We know this thanks to the historic minutes of the medieval Bamberg city court, which recorded in that year the comment of a certain Agnes Schwanfelder, labelled as a "gardener's wife" in the court records, who, according to the court notes, appears to have said to some clerical gentleman during a trial and in front of the judge, that he may "lick her arse". But Agnes was by no means done yet. In fact, that's when she really got going. As the record continues to describe, she then continued to explain that she would also *"shit on his bald head, so that the broth would run down his cheeks and into his foul mouth"*, (Hats off, Agnes. A highly vivid and colourful sentence that brings the described situation truly to life in the mind's eye.)

In German, Agnes's masterpiece sounds even more emphatic, as the court scribe noted: *„Er möge sie ,am Arse lecken‘, zudem würde sie ihm ,auf die Platten scheißen, dass die Brühe über die Backen in sein Maul rinne‘.* [From: *„Das Original Bamberger Götzzitat der Agnes Schwanfelder“*, Franz H. Jakubaß, 2005].



While, lamentably, good old Agnes's picturesque description of her intentions and use of the Swabian charm has been almost forgotten today, most modern-day Germans won't hesitate to instead attribute the famous

phrase, „*Aber er, sag ihm, kann mich am Arsch lecken*” to a particular robber baron and imperial knight named *Gottfried “Götz” von Berlichingen zu Hornberg “mit der eisernen Hand*”, (‘with the iron hand’). A truly unique character, whose adventurous life between 1480 and 1562 AD would make any documentary film about his adventures look like the wildest Hollywood fantasy. (But that’s a story for another day. However, should you be interested in learning more about one of the last German imperial knights („*Ritter*”) and his life as a tricky robber baron („*Raubritter*”), reluctant peasant revolt-leader, frequent political prisoner and genuine swashbuckler, you can find plenty of books on Götz von Berlichingen in German and in English in the usual online-bookshops.)



For now, though, suffice it to say that this proud owner of an elaborate iron hand-prosthesis is widely believed to have hurled his immortal phrase, “*But he, tell him, can lick my arse!*”, straight into the face of *Marx Stumpf von Schweinsberg*, an emissary of *Albrecht of Brandenburg*, himself by profession the Archbishop and Elector of the free city of Mainz, during an encounter in 1516 AD at the foot of *Krautheim Castle* in Baden-Württemberg, (Swabia). A location

that may very well have played a role in the fact that subsequently the famous phrase became also known as the „*Schwäbische Gruß*”, the “Swabian salute”.

Nevertheless, should a German tell this story to you in this manner, (probably to show off his or her detailed knowledge of German language-history), then you can safely interrupt and correct him or her, because that’s not what Old Götz actually yelled at the emissary on that day. Instead, historians and linguists profess that *von Berlichingen* himself told the story to someone else who wrote his account apparently down verbatim. And according to the chronicler, Götz had said in fact: „*Da schriehe ich wider zu ime hinauff, er soldt mich hinden leckhenn.*“, which translates from medieval German to modern English into: “Then I shouted back up to him that he should lick me in the back”.

As a matter of fact, following the historical encounter of *von Berlichingen* and *von Schweinsberg*, it then took another 257 years as well as two of the greatest German geniuses of their respective crafts, who each erected their personal artistic monument to *Ritter Götz*, (Knight Götz), before the phrase as it is known today became widely popular and found its way into common German parlance.

The first to introduce *Ritter Götz* to the wider German public was none other than German luminous literary figure and patron saint of German authors, *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*. The polymath immortalised the old robber baron in 1773 in his play ‘*Götz von Berlichingen*’, wherein Goethe finally makes the knight say indeed the line, „*Aber er, sag ihm, kann mich am Arsch lecken!*”. To the utter delight of the German population, by the way, thus giving birth to an instant classic that was eagerly adopted by German intelligentsia and common folk alike.

The other luminary who felt deeply inspired by the words of the old robber baron was unsurprisingly the musical *enfant terrible* of his time and probably the greatest composer of all times, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*.

In 1782, Mozart took his own shot at the then already famous *Götz*-quote by composing his canon titled, „*Leck mich im Arsch*“. In this masterpiece, Amadeus assigned to the choir a specific poetic line that indubitably would have been shocking to any wealthy clientele who would pride themselves in attending a performance of yet another masterpiece by the “scandalous” Mozart. And once again, Wolfig didn’t disappoint, letting the choir ring out as clear as a bell: „*Leck mich im Arsch, g’schwindi, g’schwindi!*“, thus giving the audience the clear invitation to “lick me in the arse, swiftly, swiftly!”



In another version written by Amadeus, the text is no less direct. Here he commands:

*„Leck mir den Arsch fein recht schön sauber,
Leck mir den Arsch fein recht schön sauber,
Leck mir den Arsch fein recht schön sauber,
Leck mir ihn, leck ihn mir doch sauber!“*

[“Lick my arse quite fine and nicely clean,
Lick my arse quite fine and nicely clean,
Lick my arse quite fine and nicely clean,
Lick it for me, will you lick it clean for me!”]

Mind you, Mozart wrote the canons KV 231 („*Leck mich im Arsch*“) and KV 233 („*Leck mir den Arsch fein recht schön sauber*“) predominantly for private social gatherings, not for public performance. In the post-Baroque Classical era in which Amadeus (1756-1791) created his music, the Viennese upper class had a tradition to come together in private circles of good friends and sing in canon crude, sometimes obscene “table canons” – as drinking games, singing competitions or humorous interludes. And Wolfig was a star here too, of course.

And so it came to pass that, thanks to the two giants of German culture, Goethe and Mozart, a phrase that might at first have seemed merely vulgar turned out to be one of the most precious gems in the German language. Steeped in history, „*Leck mich am Arsch*“ was elevated from the gutter to the highest literary and musical spheres by two of the greatest German-speaking luminaries of all time.

And if Mozart (or Goethe, for that matter) knew that the „*Götzzitat*“ (“*Götz*-quote”) is still on everyone's lips today, mainly thanks to their works, they would probably react with a heartfelt: „***Ja, da leck mich doch einer am Arsch!***“ (= “Well, wouldn't someone lick my arse for that!”). Since that's how German speakers express respect, awe, surprise or recognition — equivalent to the English “Damn, that's dope!” or “Bloody hell, that's brilliant!”

IV. The Idiosyncratic Insults

Up to this point, we have dealt almost exclusively with what we might call 'standard German insults'. You will hear these uttered daily in one way or another in Germany, either as genuine insults or in a less serious sense as friendly banter, slight slights in passing or even as an expression of respect, for instance: „Du hast es geschafft, du verdammter Mistkerl!“ (= „You did it, you damn bastard!“) or „Du bist ein kleines Arschloch, aber du bist mein kleines Arschloch.“ (= “You're a little arsehole, but you're my little arsehole”).

However, from here on out we will be entering the realm of the uniquely “customised” German insults, the fine art form of compound noun expletives that has such a long and rich tradition in the German-speaking world. And although you, as an advanced reader of this book, are by now familiar with the ease of German compound noun creation, chances are that the wild creativity, sheer scope, and utter weirdness of the following examples will still exceed even your informed expectations. No doubt, you might be silently smirking now, thinking that German can't possibly throw anything at you that could still surprise you. But that would just make you an „Aprilwetterregenschirmzuhauselasser“, (“April-weather-umbrella-at-home-leaver”, i.e. someone who thinks they know better although all experience points to the contrary).

Before we start into this final list of German insult-examples, which incidentally contains merely a fraction of tailor-made German disparagements, once again the fair warning that you're entering a “Politically Incorrect”-zone. Any sensitive minds should therefore better skip the next pages. Still here? Great, then let's have some fun.

A List of Astonishingly Artful Affronts

Table Legend

Article	German Term	Literal Translation	English Equivalent/ Explanation
	<i>Safe Use : 🌟/ Severity</i>	<i>Frequency and Popularity</i>	<i>Target-Gender</i>
Serious:	🌟🌟🌟🌟 0-10/10	★ – ★★★★★★	♂ ♀
Banter:	🌟🌟🌟🌟 0-10/10		

die	Arschgeige		Arschgeige
S: 🌟8/10 – B: 🌟5/10			
Arse Violin			
★★★★★			
An insufferable person.			
♂ ♀			

der Achselhaarflechter	Armpit-Hair Braider	<i>A person pretending to be fashionable while lacking basic hygiene.</i>
S: 🌱*2-3/10 – B: 🌱*1/10	★	📷👤
das Arschlochkind (<i>also: das AK</i>)	Arsehole Child	<i>A kid that is naturally nasty, a bully, or in other ways obnoxious.</i>
S: 🌱*7/10 – B: 🌱*5/10	★★★★★	📷👤
der Arschkriecher	Arse-Crawler	<i>Brown-noser, sycophant.</i>
S: 🌱*8/10 – B: 🌱*7/10	★★★★★	📷👤
der Backofenvorheizer	Baking-Oven Preheater	<i>Person who always does things by the book.</i>
S: 🌱*3/10 – B: 🌱*1/10	★	📷👤
das Backpfeifengesicht (<i>also: das Ohrfeigengesicht</i>)	Slap-Face	<i>Person whose face just begs for a proper slap.</i>
S: 🌱*5/10 – B: 🌱*2/10	★★★	📷👤
die Bakterienschleuder	Bacteria Slingshot	<i>Someone who spreads germs uncontrollably.</i>
S: 🌱*4/10 – B: 🌱*2/10	★★★★★	📷👤
die Blindschleiche	Blind Lizard	<i>Person driving w/o paying attention; someone blind to what's in front of them.</i>
S: 🌱*4-6/10 – B: 🌱*2-4/10	★★★	📷👤
die Bordsteinschwalbe	Kerbstone Swallow	<i>Relatively harmless euphemism for a prostitute.</i>
S: 🌱*4-7/10 – B: -/-	★★★	👤
die Brillenschlange	Spectacles-Snake	<i>Bully-term for a person wearing glasses, akin to "four-eyes".</i>
S: 🌱*4-8/10 – B: 🌱*5/10	★★★★★	📷👤
der Chromosomenfasching	Chromosome Carnival	<i>"Ugly/stupid" person whose chromosomes had a wild party and got 'scrambled'</i>
S: 🌱*4-7/10 – B: 🌱*4/10	★★	📷👤
der Dampfplauderer	Steam Confabulator	<i>Male chatterbox.</i>
S: 🌱*4-7/10 – B: 🌱*3/10	★★★	📷
der Diplomverkehrsinsel- bepflanzer	Qualified Traffic Island Plants- Equipper	<i>Someone who got their diploma only to now do the most menial jobs or tasks.</i>
S: 🌱*4-5/10 – B: 🌱*3/10	★★	📷

der Duckmäuser S: 🌟6-8/10 – B: 🌟7/10	Crouch-Mouse ★★★★★	Person who is overly compliant or servile, a yes-man. 📷
der Dünnbrettbohrer S: 🌟6/10 – B: 🌟5/10	Thin-Plank Driller ★★★★★	Lightweight, someone who lacks depth or substance; a wannabe. 📷
der Evolutionsbremsen S: 🌟5-7/10 – B: 🌟3-4/10	Evolution-Brakeman ★★	Someone who slows down evolution by their mere existence. 📷
der Geizkragen S: 🌟6-9/10 – B: 🌟5-8/10	Avarice Collar ★★★★★	Miser, skinflint. 📷👤
die Gewitterziege S: 🌟6-9/10 – B: 🌟5-8/10 Thunderstorm Goat ★★★★★ Woman who is always looking for a fight, who instantly starts arguing. 👤		
die Beleidigte Leberwurst S: 🌟6/10 – B: 🌟4/10	Insulted Liver-Sausage ★★★★★	Person who sulks/ pouts exaggeratedly; Someone who is easily offended. 📷👤
der Giftzwerg S: 🌟7-9/10 – B: 🌟5-6/10 Poison Dwarf ★★★★★ A small but malicious or nasty person. 📷👤		
der Glückspilz S: 🌟0-2/10 – B: 🌟0/10	Luck-Mushroom ★★★★★	Fortunate person, someone who's particularly lucky. 📷👤
der Grobmotoriker S: 🌟6/10 – B: 🌟5/10	Uncoordinated Motion-Skills Person ★★★	Clumsy person, a klutz, someone with little ability to handle delicate tasks. 📷

das	Hanswurstgesicht	Hans Sausage-Face	Buffoon face, douchebag; “Hans Wurst” being a pathetic person.
S: 🍌🌟5-7/10 – B: 🍌🌟6/10	☆☆☆	♂	
der	Hosentrompeter	Trouser-Trumpeter	Someone who farts a lot and/or loudly.
S: 🍌🌟3-4/10 – B: 🍌🌟2-3/10	☆☆	♂	
der	Hungerhaken	Hunger-Hook	A malnourished, very thin person, (e.g., a fashion model).
S: 🍌🌟8/10 – B: 🍌🌟6/10	☆☆☆	♀♂	
der	Jammerlappen	Lamentation Cloth	Whiner.
S: 🍌🌟7/10 – B: 🍌🌟7/10	☆☆☆☆☆	♂	
die	Kichererbse	Giggle Pea	“Chickpea”; A person who is easily amused; Someone who giggles a lot.
S: 🍌🌟2/10 – B: 🍌🌟0/10	☆☆☆☆	♀♂	
der	Korinthenkacker	Currants-Shitter	Nitpicker, a stickler for rules.
S: 🍌🌟6-8/10 – B: 🍌🌟5/10	☆☆☆☆☆	♂♀	
die	Labertasche	Babble Bag	Chatterbox, someone who talks excessively and chews your ear off.
S: 🍌🌟6/10 – B: 🍌🌟3/10	☆☆☆☆☆	♀♂	
die	Lästerzunge	Slander-Tongue	Person who bad-mouthes others behind their back; S.o. who spreads rumours.
S: 🍌🌟7-8/10 – B: 🍌🌟5/10	☆☆☆	♀♂	
der	Lakritzschneckenabroller	Liquorice-Snail Unroller	Wimp; douchebag.
S: 🍌🌟4/10 – B: 🍌🌟2/10	☆☆	♂♀	
der	Lustmolch		
S: 🍌🌟8/10 – B: 🍌🌟6/10			
Lust-Newt			
☆☆☆☆☆			
Creep with an excessive sexual desire, a lecher.			
♂			

der Latexallergievortäuscher S: 🍌7/10 – B: 🍌3/10	Latex-Allergy Pretender ★	<i>Man, who tries to have unprotected intercourse with women.</i> 📷
der Maulheld S: 🍌7/10 – B: 🍌5/10	Snout-Hero ★★★★★	<i>Braggart, someone who is only a hero with his mouth.</i> 📷
die Naschkatze S: 🍌2-3/10 – B: 🍌1/10 Sweets-On-the-Sly-Eating Cat ★★★★★ <i>Sweet tooth, someone who likes to nibble sweet stuff like cake or chocolate.</i> 📷📷		
der Neidhammel S: 🍌7/10 – B: 🍌6/10	Envy Mutton ★★★★★	<i>Jealous person who maliciously envies others their fortune or wealth.</i> 📷
die Nervensäge S: 🍌7/10 – B: 🍌5/10	Nerve Saw ★★★★★	<i>Someone sawing on your nerves, i.e., goes on your nerves, (mostly for kids).</i> 📷📷
die Netzhautpeitsche S: 🍌9/10 – B: 🍌9/10	Retina Whip ★★	<i>Ugly person whose looks hurt the retina, („Netzhaut“).</i> 📷📷
der Pantoffelheld S: 🍌6/10 – B: 🍌5/10	House-Slipper Hero ★★★★★	<i>Wimp, man submissive to his wife or partner.</i> 📷
der Pechvogel S: 🍌3/10 – B: 🍌2/10	Resin/Bitumen Bird ★★★★★	<i>An unlucky person; Pech = black sticky resin as well as the German word for “bad luck”.</i> 📷📷
der Quälgeist S: 🍌6/10 – B: 🍌2/10	Torture Ghost ★★★★★	<i>Someone who constantly goes on your nerves, mostly kids, toddlers, colleagues.</i> 📷📷
der Satansbraten S: 🍌5/10 – B: 🍌3/10	Satan's Roast ★★★	<i>Term for a particularly unruly and malicious child.</i> 📷📷

die	Rabenmutter	
S: 🍷 9/10 – B: 🍷 7/10		
Raven-Mother		
★★★★★		
A neglectful mother, a mother who treats her child(ren) badly.		
♀		

der	Schiffsschaukelbremser	Ship-Swing Brakeman	(A menial job at old-fashioned funfairs); A dolt, man with a low-IQ job.
S: 🍷 4/10 – B: 🍷 2/10	★★★★	📷	

die	Schlafmütze	Sleep Cap	Sleepyhead; Person who reacted too late.
S: 🍷 3/10 – B: 🍷 1/10	★★★★★	📷 ♀	

der	Schlappschwanz	Limp Dick	Wimp, weakling, someone who gives up prematurely.
S: 🍷 7/10 – B: 🍷 6/10	★★★★★	📷	

der	Schluchtenscheißer	Ravines-Shitter	Derogatory but not very serious German term for Austrians and/or the Swiss.
S: 🍷 4/10 – B: 🍷 1/10	★★	📷 ♀	

der	Schluckspecht	Gulp-Woodpecker	Boozehound, someone who drinks excessively.
S: 🍷 7/10 – B: 🍷 5/10	★★★★★	📷	

der	Schlüpferschnüffler	Panties-Sniffer	“Polite” term for a little pervert or a man overly infatuated with women.
S: 🍷 7/10 – B: 🍷 3/10	★★★	📷	

der	Schmutzfink	Dirt-Finch	Mainly harmless term for a messy and/or dirty person.
S: 🍷 4/10 – B: 🍷 2/10	★★★★★	📷 ♀	

die	Schreckschraube	Fright-Screw	A horrible woman (by looks and/or demeanour)..
S: 🍷 8/10 – B: 🍷 6/10	★★★★★	♀	

der	Spargeltarzan	Asparagus-Tarzan	A tall and very thin man.
S: 🍷 5/10 – B: 🍷 2/10	★★★★★	📷	

die	Spinatwachtel	Spinach Quail	An ungainly or oafish woman.
S: 🍷6/10 – B: 🍷3/10	☆☆☆	♀	
der	Toilettentieftaucher		
S: 🍷4/10 – B: 🍷2/10			
Toilet-Deep-Sea Diver	☆☆☆		
Person who spends an excessive amount of time on the toilet.			
📷			
das	Trampeltier	Stamp-Animal	A klutz, s.o. who's loud, uncoordinated and breaks all the China in the shop.
S: 🍷6/10 – B: 🍷3/10	☆☆☆☆	♀ 📷	
der	Turnbeutelvergesser	Gymnastics-Bag Forgetter	Pathetic person, someone who regularly fails at minor tasks; often forgets things
S: 🍷5/10 – B: 🍷2/10	☆☆☆	📷	
der	Unglücksrabe	Misfortune Raven	Jinx; Someone who either brings or has a lot of bad luck.
S: 🍷4/10 – B: 🍷3/10	☆☆☆☆☆	📷 ♀	
der	Warmduscher	Warm-Showers Taker	Wimp, douchebag.
S: 🍷7/10 – B: 🍷2/10	☆☆☆☆☆	📷	
der	Witzbold		
S: 🍷4/10 – B: 🍷1/10			
Joke-Gnome	☆☆☆☆☆		
A prankster; A person telling (lame) jokes, often laughing the loudest about them.			
📷 ♀			
der	Zipfelklatscher	Knob-Slapper	Used for an idiot, a moron, or a good friend.
S: 🍷5/10 – B: 🍷1/10	☆☆	📷	



German Interjections – Seemingly Senseless Sounds of Significance

"After all, the most human thing we have is language."

Theodor Fontane, (1819 – 1898), German Author, Journalist, and Critic

Like most other languages, German boasts a wide variety of peculiar grunts, noises, and single-term-exclamations that are called *interjections* and which frequently resemble less of an actual word and more of a sound made by a chain-smoking goat or a cat with severe bronchitis but have nevertheless distinct meanings in the language.



For example, where an Englishman goes "Ooph!" when getting an elbow rammed into the stomach during a football match, a German player will instead exhale with a pained „Puuh!“ or „Boah!“. And where an American college girl who had a bucket of pig's blood dumped on her during prom night as a "prank" would express her disgust with an emphatic "Yuck!" or "Ick!", her German cousin in the same situation would elicit instead a disgusted „Bäh!“, „Igitt!“, or „Pfui!°.

Although most German interjections do have an English equivalent, there are still some uniquely German expressions which are best described by the situation in which they're usually used. You can find the most common of these exclamations in the list below, which also provides you with an approximate English pronunciation where necessary.

When in Austria, Germany, or Switzerland, you will encounter many of these interjections daily in everyday-situations. Considering their ubiquitousness in spoken German, you therefore might want to make yourself familiar with them sooner rather than later – and if necessary, even by neglecting your study of German adjective-declensions. After all, German-speakers are prone to have entire conversations with each other by using predominantly interjections and you'd be hard put to make any rhyme or reason of them without some insider-knowledge about German "grunting" and one-syllable sentences. To give you an example, just listen in on the conversation of two acquainted 30-something guys meeting on the local Saturday's farmer's market:

Bernd: „Na.“	“Hey, how are you? Long time no see.”
Frank: „Na.“	“Hey yourself.”
Bernd: „Und sonst?“	“So, how's life treating you these days?”
Frank: „Muss ja.“	“Well, you know, complaining doesn't help.”
Bernd: „Jo, jo, muss.“	“Yeah, I know, we just have to keep going.”
Frank: „Du?“	“And how about you? What's up?”
Bernd: „Auch.“	“Same old, same old as well.”
Frank: „Tja.“	“Well, what can you do, right?”

Bernd: „Tja.“	“Indeed, nothing you can do about it.”
Frank: „Frei heut?“	“So, do you have a day off today?”
Bernd: „Hm-hmm.“	“Yes.”
Frank: „Nett.“	“Good for you.”
Bernd: „Du?“	“And how about you?”
Frank: „Äh-Äh.“	“No, I don’t.”
Bernd: „Sondern?“	“Oh, okay, so, what’s then going on instead?”
Frank: „Naja, krank.“	“Well, you see, I’ve taken a sick leave.”
Bernd: „Ach?!“	“Really? And what’s wrong with you?”
Frank: „Hämorrhiden.“	“Haemorrhoids.”
Bernd: „Am Arsch!“	“No way!” - (But also literally: “On the ass!”)
Frank: „Wo sonst.“	“Where else.”
Bernd: „Krankenhaus?“	“Shouldn’t you go to the hospital?”
Frank: „Ach was!“	“No way! Not because of such a trifle.”
Bernd: „Besser wär’s.“	“Well, it would be the right decision.”
Frank: „Nee, wird schon.“	“Nah, it’ll get better on its own for sure.”
Bernd: „Na gut. Ich muss.“	“Well, alright then. Sorry, but I’ve gotta go.”
Frank: „Hm-Hm.“	“Sure, take care.”
Bernd: „Kopf hoch.“	“Chin up, mate.”
Frank: „Klar.“	“Sure thing. Thanks.”
Bernd: „Tschö.“	“Bye.”
Frank: „Tschö.“	“See ya’.”

As you can see from the conversation between Bernd and his bum-burning friend Frank, German interjections can be divided into two main categories. On the one side you’ve got your genuine grunts, hums, and bleats, and on the other side there are the one- or two-syllable terms that actually resemble proper German words.



Since this is a book and not a language-app, podcast or YouTube™ video, the best way to learn the correct sounds made by these interjections is to have a German-speaker demonstrate them to you. Don’t be shy to ask. In the end, the worst that can happen is for them to say „Äh-Äh“ to you.

Uniquely German Grunts, Sighs, and Bleats

German	English	Pronunciation
„Äh-Äh.“	“Uh-Uh.” No	Umlaut “Ä” rapidly produced twice in the same pitch with slightly open mouth.
„Äh-Hää.“	“Uhm-Hm.” Yes	First Umlaut “Ä” semi-long, followed by “HÄ”-sound in slightly higher pitch, mouth slightly open.
„Mm-Mmm.“	“Uh-Uh.” No	“Hum”-sound in back of throat twice, first in higher, second in lower pitch, both stretched long, mouth shut.

„Hm-Hmm.“	<i>“Uh-Hm.”</i> Yes	“Hum”-sound in back of throat, followed by a longer, higher pitched “hum”, both with closed mouth.
„Ah-Haa!“	“Ah, I see!”	Slightly open-mouthed first “A”-sound, then longer “HAA”-sound in higher/louder pitch.
„Hää?“	<i>“Huh?”</i> “What?” “What the f...?”	Open-mouthed “H” together with either short or long-stretched, “Ä”-sound (depending on level of confusion), pitch rising.
„Äh ...“	<i>“Uhm ...”</i> Thinking stopped	Short “Ä”-sound with slightly open mouth. Used when a person doesn’t know what to say next.
„Ähm.“	<i>“Uhm ...”</i> Mild embarrassment	Open-mouthed “Ä” combined with short “M”, pitch lowering. Used when you want to get the attention of someone or are slightly embarrassed by someone’s comment.
„Oh!“	<i>“Oh!”</i> Mild shock	Short, explosive “O”-sound. Used when you’re surprised (or want to pretend that you’re surprised).
„Hmmm.“	<i>“Hum.”</i> Doubt	Long “hum”-sound in low key with lips closed. Used when you’re not sure about something and want to make this clear.
„Hrrrm.“	<i>“Grrr.”</i> Anger	Rattling throat-sound, pressing air through constricted vocal cords, closed mouth. Used when you’re pissed off.
„Hmm ...“	<i>“Hm ...”</i> Pondering	Longer humming sound with slightly lowering pitch, closed lips. Used when you want to signal that you’re still thinking.

Whenever a conversation demands more than a mere humming or grunting, German offers its speakers also a wide variety of terms that may even be considered proper words, ranging from declarations of surprise, contradiction, or disgust to uniquely German expressions that might hint at a general world-weariness or express a humble resignation to fate.



a

German Exclamations – Bäh, Pfui, Autsch, Ach ...

German	English	Explanation
„Also, ...“	“So, ...”	Nothing to do with the English “also”! In German, this is merely a starter-word, like “So,” in English. Spoken with a long “O” at the end.
„Pass auf, ...“	“Listen, ...”	Literally “Watch it”, but at the sentence-start merely an attention-grabber, if spoken without urgency or warning undertone.
„Du, kannst du ...“	“Hey, could you ...”	„Du” is the <i>informal</i> 2 nd person singular “you” address of a person. At the start of a sentence, it is used as an attention-getter.
„Wie auch immer, ...“	“However,” / “Anyway,”	Used to dismiss what’s been said before and to indicate a change in topic or conclusion.
„Wie dem auch sei,	“Anyway,”	More polite version of „Wie auch immer”, used to politely indicate that the previous

...		topic has come to an end.
„So, dann lass uns ...“	“Well, then let’s ...”	At the beginning of a sentence, „So“ is used just like “Well” in English when in the same position.
„Das ist so: ...“ / “Ah, so ist das!”	“It’s like this: ...” / “Ah, that’s how it is!”	However, „so” in a sentence has often also the meaning of “like this” or “in that way”, hence playing a slightly more important role than in English.
„So, so.“	“I see.”	Used like “I see” when you want to express a certain doubt in your partner’s statement. Spoken quickly and with a raised eyebrow.
„Na.“	“Hey, how are you.”	Shortest greeting in German, spoken short and in a neutral tone with a little upbeat at the end.
„Naaa?”	“What’s going on?” / “How is it going?”	When stretching the “A”-sound and raising the pitch at the end, „Na” becomes a question, asking “What’s up?” or “How is your progress going?”
„Na!”	“Hey, stop it!”	Expressed in a raised and pitched short tone, the same word becomes a warning or an admonishment.
„Naja.“	“Well, ...” / “So-and-so.”	When spoken more stretched, „Naja” indicates a “so-and-so” or “not-really-great”-sentiment. Short spoken it’s more of a “Well, okay then.”
„Ach, ...” / “Ach ja, ...”	“Oh well, ...” / “Oh, really?” “Wait, hang on, ...”	„Ach” is kind of a German sigh, used to indicate either that things aren’t so great or that you’re surprised. With „ja”, it can also mean “Wait, I forgot to say ...”.
„Ach was!?”	“Oh, really?”	“Ach” is spoken with a hard “CH”-sound. In combination with „was” and as a question it indicates greater astonishment or surprise than „Ach” on its own.
„Hast Du was?”	“Is something the matter?”	„Hast Du was?” asks if there’s something the matter with you. Important: „was” is <u>not</u> “what” in this case, but the abbreviation of „etwas” = “something”.
„Is’ was?”	“Something wrong?”	Here as well, „was” derives from „etwas”. When someone addresses you with this phrase in an unfriendly manner, they’re usually out for a confrontation.
„Mann!”	“Damn!” / “Idiot!”	Yes, „Mann” in German means “man” in English. However, as an exclamation it’s used to indicate frustration or anger about a person or situation.
„Echt?”	“Really?”	Literally, „echt” means “true”, “genuine” or “really”. As a question it is used to express surprise or a slight disbelief in a statement.
„Muss.”	“Needs must.” / “Got to go.”	Typical German answer to “How is it going?”, missing the subject „es”, as in “it must”. / With an invisible „ich” in front, it turns into: “I must (go)”.
„Huch!”	“Yikes!”	A bit old-fashioned, nowadays mostly used to indicate mock surprise, (e.g., with kids). Spoken [~hooch] with a hard “CH”.
„Hoppla!”	“Upsy-Daisy!”	Similarly out-of-date nowadays and more used as an informal type of apology without really apologizing after spilling a drink on her dress or hitting his crown jewels by accident
„Und?!“ / „Und?”	“So what?!“ / “So, what happened?”	Said in an aggressive tone, it clarifies that the speaker doesn’t give a shit. / Said with a genuine question mark, it’s an invitation to elaborate.

„Und sonst?“	“So, what’s new?”	Typical German way to inquire about a person’s well-being and general life. (Literally: “And otherwise?”)
„Pfui!“	“Yuck!”	“Formal” judgemental disgust, mostly used after hearing about someone’s disgusting behaviour or about an unappetising or immoral situation or outcome.
„Bah!“	“Ugh, gross!”	Expression of disgust in the moment, a visceral reaction to a bad taste or smell or upon seeing something gross.
„Igitt!“	“Yuck, disgusting!”	Deliberate expression of disgust to let others know how icky you find something that you’ve just heard or have seen or been shown.
„Hmmm, lecker!“	“Hmmm, delicious!”	„Lecker” on its own is more akin to “tasty”, while “delicious” would be “köstlich”. However, combined with the “Hm”-sound it’s high praise for the cook.
„Hurra!“	“Hurray! Yay!”	Another old-fashioned expression that’s nowadays mostly used in an ironic or sarcastic manner.
„Los, los!“	“Go, go! Hurry up!”	Spoken quick and with force, this is the ultimate demand to get going and not to dawdle.
„Alter!“	“Dude!”	Spoken in an exclamatory manner, it’s used to express surprise, a warning, or disbelief. Otherwise, it’s used like “Dude”. (Literally: „Alter” = “Old guy”).
„Pass auf!“	“Watch it!” / “Watch out!”	Unlike the first „Pass auf, ...” above (which is a mere attention grabber), as an exclamation the phrase indicates a genuine and urgent warning.
„Pass doch auf!“	“Are you blind or what!?”	While „Pass auf!” warns you <i>before</i> something happens, this phrase will be thrown at you <i>after</i> you almost ran over the person yelling it at you.
„Au!“ / „Aua!“ / „Autsch!“	“Ouch!”	„Au!”, is more often used by adults for smaller injuries, while „Autsch!” and „Aua!” are more kids-speak and used by adults rather to express sympathy.
„Puuh!“	“Phew!”	Expressed after an exhaustive activity or after having been narrowly missed by a speeding car. Sounds just like Winnie the “Pooh”.
„Selber!“	“No, you yourself!”	Typical German kids-speak used to tell the insulting party that they themselves are in fact a bum hole. Sometimes ironically used by adults.
„Endlich!“	“Finally!”	Used like the English exclamation “Finally!”. As stand-alone or placed in front of different words like „Endlich fertig” (“Finally finished”) or „Endlich geschafft” (“Finally done”).
„Sondern?“	“So, what then instead?”	„Sondern” is a special form of “aber” (“= “but”), which is used to express “not this, <u>but instead</u> this”. As a question, it asks for the alternative.
„Korrekt!“	“That’s right.”	“Affirmative!” Used as an answer either in jest to confirm a rhetorical question or in genuine affirmation if you want to be 100% clear.
„Stimmt.“	“That’s right.”	Affirmation to the typical “..., isn’t that right?”-question. Also used as a quick way to tell the waiter or waitress to keep the change as a tip.

„Genau.“	“That’s right.”	Literally meaning “ <i>exactly</i> ”. Used as a general affirmation to indicate your agreement or the correctness of a statement.
„Tja.“ *	“Well”	See below.
„Doch.“ *	“On the contrary”	See below.
„Ja.“ *	“As you know.”	See below.
„Gerne.“ *	“With pleasure.”	See below.

„Tja“ – The German Verbal Shoulder Shrug

Entire articles and treatises have been written about the small German word „Tja“, which is spoken with a hard tongue-clicking “T” directly followed by a hard “J”, (like the English “Y” in the word “Yacht”), and a short “A” at the end, (unlike the German „Ja“, where the “J” is a tad softer and the open “A” is stretched a bit longer).

The official consensus regarding the meaning of „Tja“ varies slightly depending on who you ask, but linguists have generally determined that a person will express with „Tja“ a kind of resignation and humble acceptance of a negative outcome or occurrence. In other words, you tell yourself and others with „Tja“ that “*it is what it is*”, and that you aren’t going to lose much sleep over it or will try to change the outcome, as in, “*Well, that happened. ... Okay, let’s move on.*”

When the term is placed at the beginning of a sentence, it usually indicates that your subsequent statement will either disappoint (or surprise) your listener, or that you really don’t give a flying fig about whatever was said previously. A typical German sentence with „Tja“ at the beginning would be, „Tja, da kann man nichts machen“, (“Well, there’s nothing you can do about that”), frequently used by smartphone service-desk staff when you try to complain about the unresponsive touchscreen of your new „Handy“ (“smartphone”) that you just bought from them last week.

But by far the best explanation for the meaning of „Tja“ in existence today is the one given by a popular internet-meme, which laconically describes its meaning as: „Tja.“ – “A German reaction to the apocalypse, dawn of the gods, nuclear war, an alien invasion, or no bread in the house.”



„Doch“ – The Magic Four-Letter Word

Despite the uniqueness of „Tja“, it is nonetheless this other little word, **„doch“** [~doch – with a hard “CH”], that represents the strongest contender for the title of “most confusing word” in the German language. Which wouldn’t be a big problem, if „doch” would just be one of those obscure and rarely used peculiarities that every language features in the depths of its vocabulary.

Unfortunately for all German-students, however, this is not the case with „doch”, since, as a popular meme states: “All these ‘untranslatable words’ which English doesn’t have, like ‘Weltschmerz’ and ‘Zeitgeist’. But y’all still forgetting the most important one ‘doch’.”

At first glance, this might appear to be a little exaggerated. But honestly, no other German term comes readily to mind that could so easily claim not only the title of “number one confusing word” but can at the same time also demand the crown for German’s “most important word”. In fact, this claim for the all-surpassing importance of „doch” only gets further boosted if you consider just the sheer number of „doch’s” possible uses.

Should you already have encountered „doch” in the wild, you might understandably have concluded that the word predominantly fulfils the task of being either a fill-word, an emphasiser, or just this one-word contrary answer to a negatively phrased question. Unfortunately, though, nothing could be further from the truth. You see, „doch” comes in almost a dozen distinctly different meanings and uses, each considerably varying from the next, but all essential to the transfer of the intended information. And since there is no gentle way to break it to you, the hard truth is that you only have one option to learn the most common uses of „doch” – and that’s by exposing yourself to German conversations as extensively as you dare.

Only by encountering „doch” in its natural habitat will you be able over time to create your own personal user-manual for this ultimate German four-letter word. However, to at least provide you with a little head start, in the following you’ll find the 10 most common and important uses of „doch” summarised for your convenience.

The 10 Most Common Ways to use „doch” in German

1. „Doch” in the meaning of “but”

Using „doch” as a replacement or substitute for the German „aber” (“but”) is considered slightly old-fashioned nowadays, while at the same time it has a reputation for being the more distinguished and elegant form of “but”. However, overusing „doch” in its meaning of “but” in spoken German can easily make you appear as a pretentious wanna-be “intellectual”. Ideally, therefore, you use „doch” in this meaning sparingly and reserve it for moments when you want to specifically emphasise the contrast between two things, since „doch” has a slightly stronger “on-the-contrary” ring to it than „aber”.

This notwithstanding, in grammatical terms you can of course always replace „aber” with „doch” in a sentence, (and the sentence structure remains the same), whenever you need to indicate some kind of limitation, contradiction, or additional information.

🙄 *„Ich mag die Frau im Blumenladen, **doch** ich traue mich nicht sie anzusprechen.“*

🙄 „I like the woman in the flower shop, **but** I don't dare speak to her.“

2. „Doch“ in the meaning of “anyway; despite of it; still; nonetheless”

One inherent attribute of „*doch*“ is its contradictory nature. In one way or another, this shines through in many of its uses, although almost never as strongly as when it replaces „*trotzdem*“ (“anyway”, “still”, “despite of it”, “nevertheless”). In direct comparison, „*trotzdem*“ represents the stronger contradiction, if only because „*der Trotz*“ is the German noun for “defiance in an irrational/childish manner”. As such, „*trotzdem*“ will immediately conjure up the image of an obstinate person or immovable position. Using „*doch*“ instead of „*trotzdem*“ will therefore lower the intensity of contradiction in a sentence and turn the heat down to a more agreeable level.

🙄 *„Er hatte Angst, die Blumenladenfrau anzusprechen, aber er ging **doch** zu ihr.“*

🙄 “He was afraid to speak to the flower shop lady, but he went to her **anyway**.”

3. „Doch“ as an “on the contrary”-answer

[“Yes, you do/will/are!” - “Yes, I do/will/am!”]

„*Doch's*“ probably most famous use comes in the shape of a one-word contradictory answer. In English, the only feasible way to contradict a negatively phrased question like, “Don't you want some more cake?”, is the slightly confusing, “Yes, I do!”, i.e., “On the contrary, I do want the rest of the cake!”. German, on the other hand, provides with „*Doch!*“ the same answer in one word, particularly when enunciated with a certain emphasis, thus leaving no doubt whatsoever that the opposite of the questioner's negative assumption is in fact true.

You can think of „*doch*“ in this context as the Swiss Army-knife of contradictive answers, employable as, “Yes, you will!”, or “Oh yes, of course you do!”, or “No, sure I do! What are you insinuating!”, or “Yep, you are! Don't deny it!”

However, there exists also a practical downside to this type of „*Doch!*“. This becomes immediately evident as soon as young German kids („*Kinder*“) begin to discover the magical word for themselves. Young parents will start to hate and curse this answer two minutes after their little bundle of joy realised for the first time that it could drive *Mami* and *Papi* up the wall with this uniquely succinct defiant reply.

Not only will young moms and dads get to hear the cursed word incessantly blared at them in defiance whenever they carelessly phrase a ban, prohibition, or admonition in a way that can be answered by a rebellious „*Doch!*“, for instance: „*Du isst jetzt keine Schokolade mehr!*“ – „*Doch!*“, (“You don't eat anymore chocolate now!” – “Yes, I will! Try to stop me if you can!”), but the same parents will completely despair at the



latest when they have provided their little snotty-nosed brat with an even smaller version of itself in the shape of a little brother or sister – because the newly founded “*duo infernale*” will then happily engage in hour-long verbal battles fought out almost exclusively by hurling „*Doch!*” at each other.

	Maximilian (6 y.o.): „ Du bist blöd! ”
	Paulina (4 y.o.): „ Nein, bin ich nicht! ”
	„ Doch. ”
	„ Nein! ”
	„ Doch! ”
	„ Neeein! ”
	„ Doooch! ”
	„ Nein! Nein! Nein! ”
	„ Doch! Doch! Doch! ”
	„ NEEEIN! ”
	„ DOOOOOOCH! ”
	„ MAAAMAAA! ”

With this said, even when they have grown out of the so-called „*Trotzphase*” (“phase of defiance”) and have finally become so-called valuable members of society, native German-speakers are nonetheless still prone to use the term more frequently than any other German word or phrase as their preferred expression of contradiction. Fortunately, however, they will do so in a less eardrum-shattering volume – well, most of the time.

	“Hast du dich nicht getraut, die Frau im Blumenladen anzusprechen?”
	"So, you didn't dare speak to the woman in the flower shop?"
	„ Doch. Und wir gehen morgen zusammen Kaffee trinken.“
	"Yes, I did. And we're going for coffee together tomorrow."
	“Hatte der Blumenladen gestern nicht geschlossen?”
	"Wasn't the flower shop closed yesterday?"
	„ Doch, doch. Aber ich habe sie auf dem Bauernmarkt getroffen.“
	"Yeah, it was. But I met her at the farmers' market."
	“Aber du ziehst besser nicht deine alte Jeans an!”
	"But you better not wear your old jeans!"
	„ Oh doch, ich werde mich nicht für sie verkleiden.“
	"Oh yes, I'm not going to dress up for her."
	“Na, wie du meinst. Sag mal, isst du deine Pommes nicht mehr?”
	"Well, whatever you say. Say don't you eat your fries anymore?"
	„ Doch! Lass deine Finger von meinen Pommes!“
	"Yes, I do! Keep your hands off my fries!"

4. „*Doch*” as an essential indicator for a “friendly suggestion” or “request”

It might sound like a cliché, but the German beast really likes to make use of the so-called *Imperative*, the “command form” of a sentence, comparable to the English: “Sit down!”, “Eat!”, “Don’t make a mess!”, “Go to bed!”, “Sleep!”, “Dream!”.

Contrary to popular belief, however, the ubiquitous German use of the *Imperative* is in no way related to any unholy historic alliance between the German people and their military leaders during a certain era in the twentieth century. Rather, and this may come out of left field for many, the *Imperative* in German is mostly used to express friendly suggestions, to kindly prompt an action or to make respectful requests.

“Huh? And how does that fit together now? There’s no such thing as a ‘friendly command’, so how do you order people around in a ‘kind’ and ‘respectful’ manner?”, you’ll perhaps ask yourself at this point. Well, you see, that’s where the little word „*doch*” comes back into play.

The Grammatical Imperative – The Nicest Way to Give a Command

Before you discover the most meaning-changing of all the many roles of „*doch*”, though, first a brief introduction to the *Imperative*, which will allow you to acknowledge the full potential of „*doch*” in this context.

The first point you need to know about German *Imperative*-sentences is that they are the only German sentences where the verb appears always in first position. (While in “normal” main clauses, the verb takes the second position and in subordinate clauses the last position).

Secondly, logic dictates that you can only give commands either to an informal “you” („*Du*”), a formal “you” („*Sie*”- singular), a group, („*ihr*”/ „*sie*”- plural), or a group you’re a part of („*wir*”). Hence, there are also only five grammatical verb-conjugations in the *Imperative*: **1].** 2nd person informal singular („*Du*”). **2].** 3rd person formal singular („*Sie*”). **3].** 3rd person formal plural („*sie*”), **4].** 2nd person informal plural („*ihr*”). **5].** 1st person plural („*wir*”). Here’s an example with the verb „*gehen*”, („to go”):

Table: The Grammatical Imperative Case

Person	Imperative Verb / [Rule]	English equivalent
Du (informal “you”)	Geh! [cut: -en]	Go (away)!
Sie (formal singular “you”)	Gehen Sie! [add: Sie]	Go (away)!
Sie (formal plural “you”)	Gehen Sie! [add: Sie]	Go (away)!
Ihr (informal plural “you”)	Geht! [cut: -en + add -t]	Go (away)!
Wir (“we”)	Gehen wir! [add: wir]	Let’s go!

As you can probably imagine, enunciating such literal commands in even just a neutral tone, (let alone in a harshly barking manner), will indubitably make these sentences come across as anything but a friendly, kind, or respectful “suggestion”.

So, how then can you turn an *Imperative*-sentence from a harsh order into a well-meaning recommendation? Yes, that’s right, you guessed it: By employing the little magical word „*doch*”, of course.

Let’s say e.g. that your friend Max has been sick for a while and doesn’t know what else to do after already having taken sixteen different kinds of homeopathic globules and having drunk seven litres of caraway-aniseed tea.

Now you could, (totally understandably), rudely dismiss his pleas for help by simply barking: „*Geh zum Arzt!*”, (“Go to the doctor!”), thus clearly indicating your annoyance by using a “pure” *Imperative*.

On the other hand, you could also forgive Max for his ignorance and show some sympathy to his plight by kindly suggesting, „*Geh doch zum Arzt.*”

English speakers often phrase the same friendly recommendation in question form, i.e., "Hey, why don't you go to the doctor?"

👤 "Wäre schon toll, mal mit Sabine, der Blumenladenfrau, einen Kaffee trinken zu gehen ..."

👤 "It surely would be great to have a coffee with Sabine, the flower shop lady, sometime ..."

👤 „Dann frag' sie!“ ❌

👤 "Then ask her!"

👤 "Wäre schon toll, mal mit Sabine, der Blumenladenfrau, einen Kaffee trinken zu gehen ..."

👤 "It surely would be great to have a coffee with Sabine, the flower shop lady, sometime ..."

👤 „Dann frag' sie doch.“ ✅

👤 "Then why don't you just ask her?"

While the use of „*doch*“ as the German equivalent of "on the contrary" may be the most prominent role of „*doch*“ in everyday German life, once you have familiarised yourself with the function of „*doch*“ in imperative sentences, you will probably find that this role is even more important for tonality-appropriate communication in German. After all, without „*doch*“, any well-meaning suggestion can easily become a command, and any polite request can be perceived as a barked order – which makes life certainly a lot harder.



For example, picture your friend Max, (who has finally recuperated), on the phone with his new love-interest Sylvia, wanting to ask her to come over to his place for some 'Netflix & Chill'. In the first scenario, he says: „*Komm vorbei, wir können 'was auf Netflix gucken.*“, ("Come over, we can watch something on Netflix!"). Then all you can hear is Sylvia's mocking laughter through the telephone receiver before she hangs up.

Alternatively, however, Max could also say: „*Komm doch vorbei. Wir können doch was auf Netflix gucken.*“, ("Why don't you come over? We could perhaps, if you like, watch something on Netflix."). Then all you can hear is Sylvia's giggling through the telephone receiver before she hangs up – only to ring back five minutes later and agree to come over later.

5. „*Doch*“ in the meaning of "and yet"

The versatility of „*doch*“ becomes even further pronounced when you look at its deployment as an "and yet" equivalent. Here, „*doch*“ takes on another role in combination with the word „*und*“, ("and"). By using „*und doch*“ in a sentence, you indicate that something unlikely or unforeseen has nonetheless happened or has come true, just like the English "and yet".

👤 "Ich hatte beim Date meine alte Jeans an **und doch** hat sie meinen Stil gelobt."

👤 "I wore my old jeans on the date **and yet** she praised my style."

6. „Doch“ in the meaning of “after all”

The English expression “after all” certainly comes closest to this particular meaning of „*doch*“. Nonetheless, it lacks some of the intensity with which the German „*doch*“ makes clear that something ultimately took place or came true after everything was said and done and despite all prior indications to the contrary. Still, both expressions generally do their job equally well, „*und das reicht doch, oder?*“, (“and that’s enough after all, isn’t it?”)

🗣️ *“Ich wollte Sabine zum Essen einladen, aber sie ist dann anscheinend **doch** lieber nicht ans Telefon gegangen.”*

🗣️ "I wanted to invite Sabine to dinner, but she apparently didn't want to answer the phone **after all**."

🗣️ *„Also **doch** kein zweites Date, was?“*

🗣️ "So, no second date **after all**, eh?"

7. „Doch“ as emphasiser for a question, statement, request, hope, or wish

Admittedly, you weren’t completely wrong in thinking that „*doch*“ is (also) used to emphasize statements. In its role as a booster underlining the urgency or importance of a question, statement, hope, request, or wish, „*doch*“ then sheds any intrinsic meaning and instead serves solely as an emotional turbocharger for your message.

Such an open and direct enhancement of a sentence’s impact may appear rather crude and “uncivilised” to the average reserved English speaker, which is why this use of „*doch*“ often doesn’t translate well or can only be expressed in approximation by employing English emphasisers in translation, such as, “surely”; “of course”; “naturally”; “actually”; “really”; “seriously”; or “in fact”.

🗣️ *“Sabine meldet sich gar nicht bei mir. Es wird **doch** nichts passiert sein?“*

🗣️ "Sabine doesn't contact me at all. **Surely** nothing has happened?"

🗣️ *„Nein, davon hätten wir **doch** bestimmt gehört. Außerdem war sie gestern **doch** noch im Blumenladen. Aber was ich gehört habe, ist, dass Frank wohl auch Interesse an ihr hat ...“*

🗣️ "Nah, I'm sure we would have heard about it. Besides, she was **still** in the flower shop **just** yesterday. But what I have heard is that Frank is probably interested in her too ..."

🗣️ *„Was, Frank? Komm, der ist **doch** eine Luftnummer.“*

🗣️ "What, Frank? Come on, **everybody knows that** he's an airhead."

🗣️ *„Tja, aber vielleicht mag Sabine **doch** lieber Männer mit Bügelfalte in den Jeans.“*

🗣️ "Well, perhaps Sabine **rather** prefers men with creases in their jeans, **who knows**."

🗣️ *“Jetzt komm **doch** mal her, ich muss dir was zeigen.“*

🗣️ "Come over here **for a moment**, I've got to show you something."

🗣️ *„Ja **doch**! Was ist denn?“*

🗣️ "Yes, **dammit**, what is it now?"

🗣️ *„Mach **doch** die Augen auf. Da drüben ist Sabine mit Frank.“*

🗣️ "Dude, open your eyes, **will you**. Sabine is over there with Frank."

🗣️ *„Das kann **doch** nicht wahr sein! Was machen die denn da!?“*

🗣️ "That **surely** can't be true! What are they doing over there!?"

👤 „Na, das siehst du **doch**. Die turteln.“

👤 "Well, you can see that, **can't you?** They're having a fling."

👤 „Das kannst du **doch** gar nicht wissen ...“

👤 "Well, you can't **really** know that **for sure** ..."

👤 „Dann geh **doch** hin und frag sie einfach.“

👤 "Then **why don't you** just go and ask her?"

👤 „Nee, das kann ich **doch** nicht machen!“

👤 "Nah, **come on**, I can't **really** do that, **can I?**!"

8. „Doch“ as an emphasiser for indignation, displeasure, astonishment or for surprise, joy, happiness in exclamatory sentences

Another type of emphasis expressed by „*doch*“ comes in the shape of enhancing the severity of negative emotions like annoyance, exasperation, disgust, dissatisfaction, frustration, disgruntlement, uneasiness, disapproval, disappointment, indignance, consternation, anger or bafflement – as well as their opposite positive counterparts.

👤 „Hi Frank. Na, wie?“

👤 "Hi Frank. How'ya doin'?"

👤 „Na du. Gut, und selbst?“

👤 "Hey, you. Good, and yourself?"

👤 „Muss. Hey, man hört da **doch** so einiges über dich und Sabine ...“

👤 "Needs must. Hey, **you know**, there are **quite some** rumours **one can't help** but hear going around about you and Sabine ..."

👤 „Na, das ist **doch** die Höhe! Das ist **doch** alles Blödsinn!“

👤 "What? That's **seriously** insulting! **Really**, that's all rubbish!"

👤 „Komm, du hast **doch** gestern mit Sabine offen geturtelt.“

👤 "Come on, **after all**, you openly fooled around with Sabine yesterday."

👤 „Na dann verklag mich **doch**!“

👤 "Then sue me, **why don't you!**"

👤 „Hör auf, das ist **doch** jetzt dumm. Ich freu mich **doch** für euch.“

👤 "Come now, stop it, that's **rather** stupid, **don't you think?** **In fact**, I'm **actually** happy for you."

👤 „Echt? Das glaub ich jetzt **doch** eher nicht ...“

👤 Really? Hard to **truly** believe that ...

👤 „**Doch**, wirklich ... Hey du, ich muss. Sag **doch** bitte Sabine einen lieben Gruß von mir.“

👤 **No**, honestly. Look, I've got to run. Please say hello to Sabine from me, **won't you?**"

👤 „Hm-hmm. Klar **doch**.“

👤 "Uh-hm. **Yeah, sure.**"

9. „Doch“ in a question as an emphasiser for the hope of approval or denial

In situations when you really, really, really want to get something from another person – whether it's a the cute little Cartier™ watch, a PlayStation™ 5 or just that they don't leave you alone overnight in this haunted mansion, but under no circumstances want to appear to be demanding, overly begging, or desperately pleading, then „*doch*“ offers you the option to phrase your request in form of an open question.

In English, such open questions often receive add-ons like: “..., will you?”; “..., don’t you?”; “..., do you?”; or “..., right!?” , for example: „*Du liebst es doch, mich mit diesem süßen Diamantring zu sehen, oder, Liebling?*”, (“You do love to see me with this cute diamond ring, don’t you, darling?”) , [looking for positive affirmation], or „*Du wirst mich doch nicht an die Monster hier verfüttern?*”, (“You’re not going to feed me to the monsters here, right?”), [looking for negative affirmation].

In German, you can achieve the same “passive-aggressive” effect by inserting „*doch*” in your sentence – followed by a „*nicht*” (“not”) in case you’re looking for negative confirmation.

As a further emphasiser, you can finish your open question additionally with a questioning „..., oder?”. Usually, this is the German word for “or”, (like in “this or that”). However, when placed at the end of a question and in combination with „*doch*” in your sentence, it serves as a further enhancement of the rhetorical question that is in English: “..., won’t you?”; “..., don’t you?”; etc.



For example, when winter is around the corner and your partner suddenly starts to hastily throw summer-clothes into his or her suitcase and rummage for their passport, after a while you might stand next to them and ask with a cutting undertone: „*Was machst du da? Du fliegst doch nicht ohne mich in den Süden, oder?*” (“What are you doing there? You surely won’t fly South without me, will you now?”).

In this position, „*oder*” is in fact the abbreviated form of the phrase „..., oder doch!?”, in English: “..., or will you after all?”, or: “..., or do you now?”. In this case, „*doch*” is left out because it would only be an unnecessary repetition.

On the other hand, „*doch*” can also be used in questions if you want to achieve the opposite effect, i.e., if you need to downplay the urgency or importance of the matter at hand. Then, the added „*doch*” will serve as an indication for waiving or dismissing the topic as “unimportant” or as a given, like in English when you insert a “surly” or “certainly”, like in, “*Ich habe aber nur ein Ticket für den Flug. Das verstehst du doch, oder?*”. (“But I only have one ticket for the flight. Surely, you do understand, don’t you now?”)

Importantly, in both cases – i.e., the intensifying as well as the downplaying version – a question with „*doch*” will take a different grammatical form than the usual two types of questions in German. To get you up to speed in the question of German question-types, here’s a quick overview of the three ways in which you can ask a question in German.

Table: The Three Different Question-Types in German

Question-Type	Example	Explanation
1]. W-Fragen	Wer ist das? Wo bin ich? Wann kommst du? Wie heißt du?	Questions with question-words (W -words) begin with the question-word. The verb always follows in 2 nd position.
W-Questions	Who is that? Where am I?	All question-words in German start with a “W”.

	<i>When do you come? How is (what's) your name?</i>	
2]. Ja/Nein-Fragen	Ist das Bernd? Bin ich zuhause? Kommst du morgen? Gehst du, Sabine?	Yes/No -questions can only be answered with 'yes' or 'no' or their variations. The verb sits always in 1 st position.
<i>Yes/No-Questions</i>	<i>Is this Bernd? Am I at home? Do you come tomorrow? Are you leaving, Sabine?</i>	The verb is conjugated according to the subject.
3]. „Doch“-Fragen	Das ist doch Bernd? Ich bin doch eingeladen? Du kommst doch mit? Du gehst doch nicht, Sabine?	„Doch“ -questions take the grammatical sentence-form of a German main clause , with the verb in 2 nd position. By inserting „ <i>doch</i> “ and adding a question mark, you'll get a proper question.
„Doch“-Questions	<i>Hang on, isn't that Bernd? I am invited, right? You're coming with me, no? You're not leaving, are you, Sabine?</i>	„ <i>doch</i> “ is usually inserted after the verb (or after the object).

Table: What're the W-Question-Words in German?

Question-Word	What it is used for	English
wer	asks about a person (subject/Nominative)	who
wen	asks about a person in Accusative	who
wem	asks about a person in Dative	who
wessen	asks about possession/belonging	whose
was	asks about a thing	what
wann	asks about time	when
wie	asks about manner (<i>but also used like "like"</i>)	how
wo	asks about a place	where
woher	asks about the origin/direction of sth.	wherefrom
wohin	asks about direction/destination	where to
warum	asks about reason	why
wieso	asks about reason	why
weshalb	asks about reason	why
weswegen	asks about reason	why
wie viel	asks about quantity (uncountable)	how much
wie viele	asks about number (countable)	how many
wie lange	asks about duration	how long
wie oft	asks about frequency	how often
wie alt	asks about age	how old
wie spät	asks about the time	what time („ <i>how late</i> “)

- 👤 "Hey, du kommst **doch** heute Abend zum Fußballschauen mit den Jungs zu mir?"
- 👤 "Hey, you're coming to my place tonight to watch football with the boys, **right?**"
- 👤 „Ja klar.“
- 👤 "Yeah, sure."
- 👤 „Und du bringst **doch** auch ein paar Bier mit?"
- 👤 "And you're bringing a few beers, **aren't you?**"
- 👤 „Dafür müsste **doch** Paul verantwortlich sein.“
- 👤 "Shouldn't Paul be **actually** responsible for that?"
- 👤 „Du willst mir **doch** nicht sagen, dass Paul das Bier allein kaufen soll?"
- 👤 "You're not telling me that Paul should buy the beer on his own, **are you?**"
- 👤 „Nee, schon gut. Sag mal, Frank kommt **doch** auch, oder?"
- 👤 "Nah, that's all right. Hey, say, Frank's coming too, **isn't he?**"
- 👤 „Ja, soweit ich weiß. Du kommst **doch** aber trotzdem?"
- 👤 "Yes, as far as I know. But you're coming anyway, **no?**"
- 👤 „Logisch. Ich dachte nur, weil Frank **doch** Hämorrhiden hat ...“
- 👤 "Of course. I just thought, you know, because **apparently** Frank has haemorrhoids ..."
- 👤 „Was, echt!? Haha! Die kann ihm ja dann Sabine eincremen!“
- 👤 "What, really? Haha! Well, Sabine can put some crème on them, I'm sure."
- 👤 „Ha, ha, sehr witzig. Aber ernsthaft, sie wird ihn **doch** deswegen trotzdem nicht links liegen lassen, oder?"
- 👤 "Ha, ha, very funny. But seriously, she's still not going to leave him out to dry because of that, **is she?**"
- 👤 „Hmm. Abwarten und Tee trinken.“
- 👤 "Hmm. Let's wait and see."

10. „Doch“ in interrogative sentences as an indication that the questioner is asking about something familiar but can't remember it now.

You would think that whenever you are asking about something you have momentarily forgotten, such an inquiry should already be perfectly communicated just by asking about it with a straightforward question, right? For instance, when you hear the song 'Skyfall' but can't remember the name of the singer, you'd just ask: „Wie heißt die Sängerin?", ("What's the name of the singer?"). Surely, there's no need for any extra-word just to further point out that you've forgotten Adele's name.

And yet, posing this question in German without any extra adage will generally appear to be somewhat rude. Even in English, where you would usually ask, "What was that singer's name again?", adding "again" indicates that you knew the name but have temporarily forgotten it. This implies a polite request to help you remember the name.

In German, adding such as "politeness"-emphasiser is even more important, since without it your question will sound much more like a "demand" for an answer than a friendly request for help. This is why you insert "doch" and ask: "Wie hieß doch gleich die Sängerin?" In this way, you inform your conversation partner that you did know the singer's name but that you've just gone blank right now, so would your partner please relieve you of the terrible brain-pain caused by your vexing inability to remember.

Frequently, Germans won't even leave it at merely employing „doch“ in such cases but will add some further "alleviating" terms, such as „nochmal“

or „gleich“. These are equivalent to the English “once again”; “again”; or “right now”, as in: “What was the singer’s name once again, can you tell me right now?” Both, „nochmal“ and „gleich“, can be used in combination with „doch“, but also be employed without „doch“ on their own as well as used together without „doch“ or in a trifecta together with „doch“.

In this way, you can construct variations such as: “Wie hieß doch gleich die Sängerin?“, „Wie hieß gleich die Sängerin?“, „Wie hieß nochmal die Sängerin?“, or „Wie hieß doch gleich nochmal die Sängerin?“. Your choice depends mainly on the level of intensity you want to employ to express your cluelessness and your “plea” for memory-assistance.

German-speakers who leave out these little “helpers” can quickly appear rude, demanding, or even harshly interrogating to their conversation partner. As you’ve seen in point 4., the little word „doch“ can make all the difference between barking a harsh order or providing a friendly suggestion. The same goes for this type of questions, which would sound like you’re “demanding” an answer instead of uttering a polite request if you leave „doch“ out of them. To achieve sounding friendly instead of demanding, you will therefore need to include the “verbal softeners” of „doch“, „gleich“, and „nochmal“.

Omitting them from an apparently simple question such as „Wer war das?“ (“Who was that?”) which your new partner might ask you after you meet an old flame on a Sunday stroll would be interpreted almost instinctively by any German-speaker as interrogatory and Gestapo- or Stasi-like, as if demandingly questioning: “What’s her name?”, („Wie heißt sie?“), “Where does she live?”, („Wo wohnt sie?“), or “Her bra size?” („Ihre BH-Größe?“).



If your new boyfriend or girlfriend omits the use of “doch” in such „Wer war das?“-questions, they only have one other option to avoid their immediate mental transformation into a „Gestapo Offizier“, („Geheime Staatsppolizei“, the Nazis’ Secret Police) or „Stasi Offizier“ („Staatssicherheit“, the East-German Secret Police). Namely, to considerably sweeten their tone and to accompany the inquiry by a particularly clueless, innocent, and sweet facial expression. But faced with the risk of being seen as “the Gestapo-bride” or “the Stasi-idiot” from now on, inserting the words „doch gleich” when posing the question appears certainly the better alternative.

By asking, „Wer war das doch gleich?“, your new partner will transmit to you the “subliminal” message that they know that they should know your old flame, but that they have “unfortunately misplaced” their name right now, although they are dead certain that you must have told them about this hot gal or handsome dude in the past. „Und das hast Du doch auch, oder?“ (“And you have done so, of course, didn’t you now?”)

👤 “Hi, Sabine! Du bist ja „**doch**“ gekommen. Das freut mich!”

👤 "Hi, Sabine! You came **after** all. Glad you made it!"

👤 „Ja, freut mich auch. Ich hab’ erst überlegt, ,Wie war **doch gleich nochmal** die Hausnummer?“, ha, aber dann hab ich’s **doch** gefunden.“

- 👤 "Yes, I'm glad too. Well, at first, I thought, 'What was the house number **again?**', ha, but then I found it **after all.**"
- 👤 „Prima. Komm rein! Hey, du kennst **doch** noch Bernd?“
- 👤 "Great. Come on in! Hey, you still know Bernd, **don't you?**"
- 👤 „Natürlich. Der ist **doch** auch immer bei euren Fußballabenden dabei, **oder?**“
- 👤 "Of course. He's also always here at your football evenings, **isn't he?**"
- 👤 „Ja. Da drüben sitzt er übrigens. Geh **doch** schon mal rein und sag Hallo.“
- 👤 "Yes. He's sitting over there, by the way. **Why don't you** go in and say hello?"
- 👤 „Mach ich **doch** glatt. Bis gleich.“ ... „Hey, Bernd! Na, wie geht's?“
- 👤 "No problem **at all.** See you in a minute." ... "Hey, Bernd! How are you?"
- 👤 „Hi. Äh, warte ... wer bist du **doch gleich nochmal?**“
- 👤 "Hi. Er, wait ... who are you **again?**"
- 👤 „Haha, sehr witzig. Und wer hat mich **doch gleich** nie zurückgerufen!?“
- 👤 "Haha, very funny. And who was it **again** who never called me back!?"
- 👤 „Wie bitte? Sabine, ich hab' **doch** tausend Mal bei Dir angerufen nach unserem ersten Date. **doch** du bist nie drangegangen!“
- 👤 "Excuse me? Sabine, **but** I called you a thousand times after our first date. **But** you never answered!"
- 👤 „Ach komm, das wüsste ich **doch** wohl! Moment ... hast du die 12 34 56 gewählt?“
- 👤 "Oh come on, I would **surely** know that! Wait ... did you dial 12 34 56?"
- 👤 „Warte, ich hab' deine Nummer **doch** in meinem Handy gespeichert Oh Gott, nein! Hier steht 12 24 56!“
- 👤 "Hang on, I've saved your number in my mobile phone, **didn't I** Oh God, no! It says 12 24 56!"
- 👤 „Mann, Bernd! Du bist **doch** ein Trottelchen! Naja, egal. Hast du Lust auf ein Abendessen bei mir morgen Abend?“
- 👤 "Gosh, Bernd! You're **sometimes really** a little twat! Well, never mind. Do you fancy dinner at my place tomorrow night?"
- 👤 „Äh, klar **doch**! Aber, äh ... was ist mit Frank?“
- 👤 "Er, of course! But, er ... what about Frank?"
- 👤 „Der soll sich seine Hämorrhiden **doch** selbst eincremen!“
- 👤 "He can cream his haemorrhoids himself, **for all I care.**"
- 👤 „Ha, der war gut!“
- 👤 "Ha, nice one!"
- 👤👤👤 “Na siehste, geht **doch.**”
- 👤👤👤 "See, all's well that ends well."



„Ja“ – The Well-Known Hidden Face of “Yes”

Yes, „ja“ means “yes” in German when it is used as a so-called “response particle”. And as such, the word is naturally an expression of confirmation – which is why the term has also been assigned a secondary role as a confirmatory amplifier, (i.e., as a modal particle or a modifier particle), in certain German sentences.

For newcomers to the German language, this hidden face of the two-letter word might easily lead to some confusion, since it can suddenly pop up

in the middle of a phrase, seemingly without any rhyme or reason, especially if you translate it in these cases to its primary meaning of “yes”.

So, how exactly does „ja“ amplify the message or subtext of a sentence? You’ll find the answer listed below with the five important areas of deployment for the most well-known German affirmation-word.

The 5 Most Common Ways to use „Ja“ in German

1. „Ja“ in the meaning of “yes”.

Yes.

2. „Ja“ in the meaning of “as you know”; “as is well-known”, or: “of course”, “naturally”.

When speaking German, you might want to insert „ja“ in a sentence whenever you want to let your conversation partner know that your statement is just a repetition of something that you both know already, or if you would like to make clear that you are aware of the fact that they already know what you’re about to say.

For instance, you might say: „Ich weiß ja, dass ich Sebastian Dir gegenüber nie erwähnt habe“, and would mean: “I know, of course, that I never mentioned Sebastian to you before”. The same goes for situations in which you assume, admit, or insinuate that your conversation partner is already aware of the fact or information you’re about to transmit, e.g.: „Wie Du ja weißt, will ich alles über Deine Exes wissen!“ = “I know that you know this already, but again, I want to know everything about your exes!”

You might have noticed that in these cases the verb „wissen“, (“to know”), in its conjugated forms is a preferred companion of „ja“. Other verbs that often show up together with „ja“ in its use as a modal particle are „kennen“, (“to be familiar with”), as in, „Du kennst ja Sebastian“, (“You know/are familiar with Sebastian, of course.”); as well as „glauben“, (“to believe”), as in, „Du glaubst ja nicht, wen ich gestern getroffen habe“, (“You will definitely not believe whom I’ve met yesterday”); and „sich vorstellen können“, (“to be able to imagine”), as in, „Du kannst Dir ja vorstellen, was passiert, wenn wir Sebastian das nächste Mal treffen“, (“You can certainly imagine what will happen the next time we meet Sebastian”).

Naturally, the use of „ja“ as a modal particle in this manner is not limited to “passive-aggressive” statements. In fact, it is most often used as a friendly reminder to make your conversation partner aware of some fact that they might have forgotten, equal to the English “as you know”.

🗨️ “Du weißt ja, dass ich Frank nicht mag.” ✓

🗨️ “Well, as you know, I don’t like Frank.”

🗨️ „Ja, weiß ich, hast Du mir ja oft genug gesagt.” ✓

🗨️ “Yes, I know, you’ve told me so often enough, as you will remember.”

Leaving „ja“ out of your phrase in such cases will result in a similar tone-shift as when omitting “as you know” in English, turning the statement into a rather harsh and unfriendly admonishment, as in:

🙄 *“Du weißt, dass ich Frank nicht mag.” ❌*

🙄 "You know that I don't like Frank!"

🙄 *„Okay, okay, kein Grund gleich schnippisch zu werden!“*

🙄 "All right now, there's no need to get snippy!"

Similarly, your answer to this friendly reminder (or rude admonishment) will equally change in tonality if you add a „ja“, then turning it from a simple acknowledgement to a far more conciliatory reply.

😊 *„Beim Dinner heute Abend will ich neben Sebastian sitzen, okay?“*

😊 "At dinner tonight, I want to sit next to Sebastian, alright?"

🙄 *“Ja, das weiß ich.” ❌*

🙄 "Yes. I know that."

😊 *„Beim Dinner heute Abend will ich neben Sebastian sitzen, okay?“*

😊 "At dinner tonight, I want to sit next to Sebastian, alright?"

😊 *“Ja, das weiß ich ja.” ✔️*

😊 "Yes, **of course** I know, **don't worry**, I've got you."

3. „Ja“ as an amplification or verification-booster like “really” or “very”

The most often employed variant of „ja“ outside of its primary role as a simple response particle (“yes”), comes with its use as a substitute for the term „wirklich”, i.e. the German word for “really”; “genuinely”; “honestly”; or “truly”, when it becomes a so-called ‘modifier particle’. As such, you can also often hear it in the question, „Ach ja?”, meaning, “Oh, really?”

However, the two words „ja” and „wirklich” can also appear together in a sentence if you want to emphasise that something is really, truly, honestly the case, like in: „Na, das ist ja wirklich schade!” = “Well, that’s really, truly a shame!”. (Incidentally a sentence that nowadays seems to be most often used in an ironic or sarcastic manner – but that’s the modern world for you, I guess.)

🙄 *„Ich hab’ Onkel Bernd gestern mit Sabine Eis essen gesehen.“*

🙄 "I've seen Uncle Bernd eat ice cream with Sabine yesterday."

😊 *“Na, das ist ja interessant!”*

😊 "Well, isn't that (a **revelation** and **certainly very**) interesting!"

In a slight shift of tonality and with the general meaning of “very”, „ja” is also used e.g. by parents or partners to clarify that you should regard their statement once and for all as the final word in the matter, (as most German kids can testify).

🙄 *„Na gut, dann räum’ ich eben mein Zimmer auf.“*

🙄 "All right, then I'll tidy up my room."

😊 *“Gut, dann ist das ja geklärt.“*

😊 "Good, then that's **finally** settled **once and for all**."

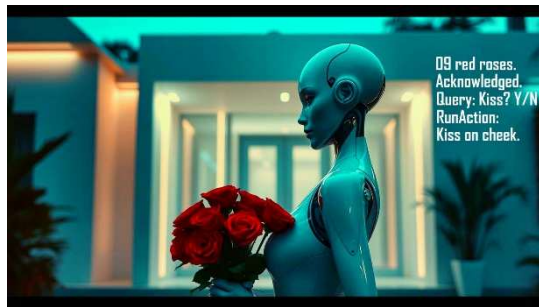
4. „Ja” as an amplifier of a statement’s sincerity, seriousness, or correctness

Imagine a scene that has repeated itself a billion times in history all over the world: A nervous guy knocks on the door of a nice girl. When she opens, he shakily stretches his arm out to present her with the bouquet of flowers that he priorly took hours to select at the local flower shop. The girl smiles, takes the bouquet and enchantedly declares: “They are beautiful!”

So far, so common. But although this undying sentence translates in German directly to: „*Die sind schön!*”, you will almost certainly never hear a German-speaking woman utter this phrase in the described scene in this exact manner. Why? Well, because a simple declaration about the beautifulness of the flowers will sound to German ears almost inevitably like a purely rational assessment, as if in English you would say: “These flowers have the attribute ‘beautiful!’”

Obviously, at least under normal circumstances, it isn’t in the interest of the girl to give her suitor the impression of such an emotionless reaction that could only be countered by an exaggeratedly joyful enunciation coupled with the broadest smile, i.e., with a very un-German-like behaviour. Which is why „ja” enters the stage here.

By saying „*Die sind ja schön!*”, the person receiving the bouquet expresses the sincerity of her statement, as well as a moderate level of surprise (whether real or fake), and her gratitude for her suitor's thoughtfulness in bringing her flowers. (Yes, all this meaning is crammed into the two-letter word „ja” in this case.) For the sake of completeness, it should also be mentioned that „*aber*” (“but”) is often used instead of „ja” in such sentences, which gives the statement a more “surprise”-oriented touch.



Similarly, „ja” is also used as a modifier particle to underline the veracity or the insistence of a statement or to point out that something was or is very obviously the case, as in, „*Das war ja schon immer die schönste Art, Zuneigung zu zeigen.*” = “As everyone knows, this has always been the nicest way to show affection.”

👤 „Das ist **ja** ein starkes Stück! Frank feiert am gleichen Tag wie wir eine Party.“

👤 "Wow, that's **really** rich! Frank is having a party on the same day as us."

👤 “Das hab’ ich dir **ja** gleich gesagt. Der Typ ist **ja** so eine beleidigte Leberwurst.“

👤 "Didn't I say that from the beginning? **Honestly**, that guy is such an easily hurt cry-baby."

5. „Ja” as an indication, affirmation, or reminder of shared knowledge



In certain situations, particularly in a business environment, it can be rather awkward if you need to remind your friends or colleagues about a fact that you know they (should) already know.

Nonetheless, sometimes you will need to do

so anyway, either to recap a fact or to summarise previously gathered information, or simply as an introductory sentence to your speech. In English, you would presumably not merely state the fact in question without letting your colleagues know at the outset that you know that they already know the fact but instead would begin with a phrase like: “As you know, ...”, or “As you’re certainly aware of, ...”.

In direct German translation such so-called ‘discourse markers’ would come out as: „Wie sie wissen, ...”, (“As you know”), respectively, „Wie Ihnen bekannt sein sollte, ...”, (“As you should be aware of”). However, similar to the examples under point 2., making such statements without any “alleviating” addition can be easily perceived as rather rude or even reproachful, as if you’d say, “As you would know, if you’d have paid any attention, ...”, or “As anyone except you knows, ...”.

But don’t you worry, since once again „ja” comes to the rescue. By inserting „ja” into the above phrases, e.g. „Wie sie **ja** wissen”, „Wie **ja** allseits bekannt ist”, you can turn a potential passive-aggressive accusation into a friendly and unfrontational reminder, while simultaneously including the subliminal message that you know very well that everyone else in the room (or in general) is just as aware of the facts as you are, and that you’re just summarizing or recapping the situation, facts, or information for everyone’s convenience.



„Wie ihnen **ja bekannt** ist, verehrte Kollegen, leidet der Patient an starken Hämorrhiden. Wir sind uns daher **ja sicher** auch alle einig, dass wir ihn nicht guten Gewissens nachhause entlassen können.“



"As you **already** know, **of course**, dear colleagues, the patient is suffering from severe haemorrhoids. We are therefore also **surely, I take it**, all in agreement that we can’t discharge him with a clear conscience, **right?**"

In a closely related yet slightly different situation, „ja” is also employed to emphasize that you’ve told your friend Max at least twice already that you definitely don’t want to join him and Monica on their camping trip, („Das habe ich Dir **ja** schon mehrmals gesagt!” = “As you will surely remember, I’ve already told you this several times!”

Finally, you can also make use of „ja” to express a certain degree of superiority if



you want to indicate that you knew all along that the camping trip with Monica would be a disaster, but Max just didn't want to listen. „Mann, das war ja¹ klar! Du kannst ja² nicht mal eine Dose öffnen!“ = „Dude, I knew it¹, that was so obvious! After all, we both know² that you can't even open a tin can!“

🗣️ “Aber ich hatte **ja** eine große Party am Wochenende geplant, Herr Doktor!”

🗣️ "But Doctor, **as I've told you**, I had a big party planned for the weekend!"

🗣️ „Nun, Frank, Sie wissen **ja**, wir machen **ja auch nur** unseren Job. Und Hämorrhiden sind **ja nun mal** kein eingerissener Fingernagel.“

🗣️ "Well, Frank, as you **very well** know, we're only doing our job, **naturally**. And, **as everyone knows**, haemorrhoids aren't just a torn fingernail."

...

🗣️ “Hallo Bernd? Hier ist Frank. Du, ich wollte euch nur persönlich sagen, dass ich meine Party **ja** jetzt absagen musste, weil ich noch im Krankenhaus bleiben muss. Ich hoffe, ihr freut euch!”

🗣️ "Hello Bernd? This is Frank. I just wanted to tell you in person that I've **obviously** had to cancel my party because I have to stay in hospital. I hope you're happy! "

🗣️ „Hey Frank. Nö, das tut mir echt leid. Aber mal ehrlich, das war **ja klar**. Ich hab' dir **ja** damals schon **gesagt**, dass du ins Krankenhaus gehen solltest. Jetzt **siehst du ja**, was dein Trotz dir gebracht hat.“

🗣️ "Hey Frank. Nope, I'm really sorry for you. But to be honest, that was **so obviously** the only outcome. I told you already back then that you should go to the hospital, **didn't I?! Of course, now you can see** what your defiance has brought you."

🗣️ „Hm-hm, **ja**. Na, jetzt weiß ich's **ja**. Viel Spaß mit der Party.“

🗣️ "Hm-hm, **yes**. Well, now I know, **obviously**. Have fun with the party."

🗣️ „Wir kommen dich morgen mal besuchen, **ja**? Bis dahin kneif die Arschbacken zusammen, Alter!”

🗣️ "We'll come and visit you tomorrow, **okay**? Until then, pinch your arse cheeks together, mate!" (i.e.: "Chin up, mate!")

🗣️ „Haha! Mach ich!”

🗣️ „Haha! Sure, will do!”

„Nein” – Merely the Tip of the Negation-Iceberg

Yes, „**nein**” means “no” in German. And that's where the word's usefulness already ends, since to express a negation or the absence of something in German, you need a little bit more than just „**nein**”, I'm afraid.



Because, you see, while in English you can and will say: “There is no horse-meat in my sausages!”, the “no” in this sentence translates in

German not to „*nein*“ but instead to „*kein*“, like in: „*Nein, da ist kein Pferdefleisch in meiner Wurst! Kein Wort mehr!*“

The Negative Article „*kein*-“

„*Kein*“ is a negative article, or more precisely, a negation article that functions in the same way as the indefinite article „*ein*“ („a“/”an”) and is inflected in the same way.

Table: Inflection of the Negation Article „*kein*-“

Grammatical Case	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	Plural
Nominative	Kein Mann	Keine Frau	Kein Kind	Keine Leute
Accusative	Keinen Mann	Keine Frau	Kein Kind	Keine Leute
Dative	Keinem Mann	Keiner Frau	Keinem Kind	Keinen Leuten
Genitive	Keines Mannes	Keiner Frau	Keines Kindes	Keiner Leute

You choose the correct ending according to the gender of the object, person, or idea that is not there or does not exist as well as according to the grammatical case the object, person or idea finds itself in the sentence. For example:

- **„Das ist kein Kindergarten hier!“**
„Der Kindergarten“ is masculine. The grammatical case is Nominative, as this is merely a statement of fact. English: “This is not a kindergarten!”
- **„Ich habe keine Fahrkarte.“**
„Die Fahrkarte“ is feminine. The grammatical case of the „Fahrkarte“ in this sentence is Accusative, since the verb „haben“ (to have) represents an ‘action’ that is directed towards the „Fahrkarte“ as the direct object or recipient of this ‘action’. English: “I do not have a ticket.”
- **„Ich glaube keinem Gerücht.“**
„Das Gerücht“ is neuter. The grammatical case is Dative, as the verb „glauben“ always demands a Dative object. (Generally, many verbs in German determine the case of the object.) English: “I do not believe any rumours.”
- **„Im Flugzeug sind keine Leute.“**
Plural („Die Leute“), Nominative. „There are no people on the plane.”
- **„Ich treffe in meinem Job keine Leute.“**
Plural, Accusative. „I don’t meet any people in my job.”
- **„Wir haben mit keinen Leuten gesprochen.“**
Plural, Dative. „We have spoken with no people (nobody).”
- **„Die Villen keiner Leute.“**
Plural, Genitive. “The villas of no people”, (which sounds equally weird in German and no German-speaker would say this – but it’s grammatically correct).

And here’s the handy tip to bear in mind: „*kein*-“ always refers to (the absence of) a person, thing, or idea, (feeling, etc). In other words, you can use „*kein*-“ only if you also name the grammatical subject or object it refers to.

The Negative Particle „nicht“

Next to the negation article „kein-“, the most common general negation in German comes in the shape of the negation particle „**nicht**“ [~neecht]. This is the equivalent to the English “not” and is used in the same manner. For example:

- 1) **„Nicht viele Menschen haben die dunkle Seite des Mondes gesehen.“**
„Not many people have seen the dark side of the moon.“
- 2) **„Ausreden funktionieren nicht bei mir.“**
“Excuses do not work on me.“
- 3) **„Ich habe den Schulbus wirklich nicht gestohlen!“**
„I really did not steal the school bus!“

Keep in mind: „nicht“ doesn’t relate to objects, subjects or verbs per se, but to sentence parts. Hence, „nicht“ usually comes immediately before the part of the sentence that is being negated ¹⁾. However, if the entire action is being negated, „nicht“ comes after the verb ²⁾ – or in case of past perfect tense, before the final verb ³⁾, not after the auxiliary verb. Rule of thumb: „nicht“ should come as late as possible in the sentence, but before the part that is being negated.

Negative Pronouns for Persons – „niemand“; „kein-“

Pronouns, for example „er, sie, es“ (“he, she, it”), replace nouns. To indicate that literally nobody is there, you use in German the two negative pronouns „**niemand**“ and „**kein-**“, (see above).

Both words have similar meanings and are often interchangeable ¹⁾. However, as a rule of thumb you can say that „**niemand**“ is only used for people and means “no one”, “nobody” or “not one person” ²⁾, whereas „**kein-**“, (if used for people) refers more often to a specific group ³⁾.

- 1) **„Niemand da.“** – “Nobody there.”
„Keiner da.“ – „No one there.“
- 2) **„Niemand ist jemals zurückgekehrt.“**
“Nobody has ever returned.”
- 3) **„Keiner der Astronauten hat je darüber gesprochen.“**
“None of the astronauts has ever spoken about it.”

Negative Pronoun for Things – „nichts“

„**Nichts**“ is the German word for “nothing”, (“not one thing”) and is used in exactly the same way ¹⁾, except when it shows up in a uniquely German colloquialism ²⁾.

- 1) **„Nichts ist schöner auf der Welt!“**
„Nothing is more beautiful in the world!“
- 2) **„Das macht nichts!“**
“That doesn’t matter.”

However, the true challenge with this little word comes with its correct pronunciation. Since there's also the German negation of „*nicht*“, i.e. “not”, it is quite important to enunciate the final letter „-s“ at the end of „*nichts*“ as clearly as possible. But admittedly, the combination of the soft [ch]-sound immediately followed by a hissing [ts]-sound is not everybody's cup of tea. That's why it is still far better to circumnavigate this tongue twister by saying instead „*nix*“, [just like “six” but with an “n”], than to omit the „s“ and say „*nicht*“. After all, it makes all the difference between „*Ich weiß nicht.*“ = “I'm not sure.” and „*Ich weiß nichts.*“ = “I don't know anything.”

Negative Adverbs

Table: German Negative Adverbs

	German	English	Opposite	English
1)	nie	never	immer	always
2)	niemals	never	jederzeit	any time
3)	nirgends	anywhere	überall	everywhere
4)	nirgendwo	nowhere	irgendwo	somewhere
5)	nirgendwohin	to nowhere	irgendwohin	to somewhere
6)	nirgendwoher	from nowhere	irgendwoher	from somewhere

1) „Wie oft gehst du in die Sauna?“ – „Äh, **nie**.“

„How often do you go to the sauna?“ – “Uhm, never.”

2) „Du hast mich belogen.“ – „**Niemals!**“

„You've lied to me.“ – “Never!”

3) „Ich finde mein Zielfernrohr **nirgends**.“

“I can't find my rifle scope anywhere.”

4) „Wo warst du gestern?“ – „**Nirgendwo, warum?**“

„Where were you yesterday?“ – “Nowhere, why?”

5) „Ich bin am Ende und kann **nirgendwohin**.“

“I'm at the end of my tether and have nowhere to go.”

6) „Woher kommt der Knutschfleck?“ – „**Nirgendwoher!**“

“Where did that hickey come from?“ – “(From) nowhere!”

Fixed Negation Combinations

These fixed word-combinations show up all the time in German.

Table: German Negative Word-Combinations

	German	English
1)	noch nie	never until now
2)	gar nichts	nothing at all
3)	überhaupt nichts	absolutely nothing
4)	kein(e) einzig-es/-er/-e	not a single ...
5)	kein bisschen	not even a little bit

1) „So eine Schmach habe ich **noch nie** erlebt.“

“I've never before experienced such humiliation.”

2) „*Vincent, was hast du da in der Hand?*“ – „*Gar nichts.*“
 “Vincent, what’s that in your hand?” – “Nothing at all.”

3) „*Das ist mein Ohr! Und du hast mir überhaupt nichts zu sagen!*“
 “That’s my ear! And you’ve got absolutely no right to tell me anything!”

4) „*Kein einziger Mann, keine einzige Frau und kein einziges Kind will meine Bilder sehen.*“
 “Not a single man, not a single woman, and not a single child wants to see my paintings.”

5) „*Das stimmt doch kein bisschen!*“
 “But that’s not true, not even a little bit!”

„Gerne“ – The Unlikely Word of Pleasure

First of all, we need to clear up one of the most common mistakes associated with this word. It is a misconception often found among German-students that „*gerne*“ is equivalent to the verb “to like (something)”. Sure, it is frequently used in sentences that express affection or the desire for something you would like to have or particularly enjoy. The misunderstanding may therefore stem from the fact that „*gerne*“ has a penchant for appearing in close proximity to such positive statements.

Nevertheless, the German verb equivalent to the English verb “to like” (i.e. ‘to have a preference for something’) is actually „*mögen*“, which is conjugated as follows:

Table: Conjugation of the Verb „mögen“

Person	Gegenwart (Present Tense)	Präteritum (Written past)	Perfekt (Spoken past)
ich	mag	mochte	habe gemocht
du	magst	mochtest	hast gemocht
er/sie/es	mag	mochte	hat gemocht
wir	mögen	mochten	haben gemocht
ihr	mögt	mochtet	habt gemocht
sie/Sie	mögen	mochten	haben gemocht

Secondly, and to clear up also this common confusion, there is another verb in German that has something to do with “liking something”: the word „*möchten*“. Grammatically, „*möchten*“ is just the subjunctive II form (*der Konjunktiv II*) of „*mögen*“ – but in modern German it is nowadays used as a verb in its own right for a different purpose than its “parent” modal verb of „*mögen*“. See, the “true” modal verb of „*mögen*“ is usually used in the meaning of “to have a preference for something or someone”, for instance:

„*Ich mag Sauerkraut.*“ = “I like sauerkraut.” (And who doesn’t, right?)

„*Wir mögen deine pfiffige Art.*“ = „We like your clever nature.”

„*Sie mag Frank nicht.*“ = „She doesn’t like Frank.”

As mentioned above, the true nature of „*möchten*“ lies in its role as the subjunctive II form of „*mögen*“, which is the grammatical form used to expresses something unreal, something you wish for, something that could be

possible – or simply to sound polite. You use the subjunctive II form predominantly with the 6 so-called „*Modalverben*“ (modal verbs) in German, which are:

Table: The six German Modal Verbs

Modalverb	Function	English
dürfen	expresses / asks for permission	<i>may / be allowed to</i>
können	indicates ability or possibility	<i>can</i>
müssen	expresses obligation or urgent necessity	<i>must / have to / need to</i>
sollen	indicates recommendation or obligation	<i>shall / be supposed to</i>
wollen	expresses intention, desire, need	<i>want</i>
mögen	indicates preference / enjoyment / liking	<i>like</i>

The subjunctive II (*Konjunktiv II*) form of these verbs for first-person singular („*ich*“/“*I*“) in present tense („*Gegenwart*“) are:

Table: The Subjunctive II Form of the Modal Verbs (1st person sing.)

Konjunktiv II	Usage	English
Ich dürfte ¹	Mainly used in Yes/No-question form or as indication that something/someone might happen/do something.	<i>I should be able to / May I be allowed to</i>
Ich könnte ²	Mainly used to indicate the possibility/option to be able to do something.	<i>I could</i>
Ich müsste ³	Mainly used to express that you actually should do something (but don't).	<i>I ought to</i>
Ich sollte ⁴	Mainly used just like „ <i>müsste</i> “ but in a slightly more urgent/forceful manner.	<i>I should</i>
Ich wollte ⁵	Mainly used as <i>Präteritum</i> form (“written” – but also “spoken” – past) to indicate that you wanted to do sth.	<i>I wanted / (I would)</i>
Ich möchte ⁶	Mainly used to express a wish, desire or want in a perfectly polite form.	<i>I would like to</i>

Side note: Modal verbs have mostly regular endings in *Konjunktiv II*, but several of them show stem vowel changes (→ *Umlaut*), so they are not fully regular, while many of them are irregular in the present tense. Unfortunately, there’s no way around having to spend a fair bit of time looking through the list of these irregular verbs to become familiar with their conjugation. Luckily, however, around 80-90% of all German verbs are regular verbs (also: “weak verbs”), while only 10-20% are so-called “strong verbs”. To conjugate the myriad of regular verbs correctly, all you need to do is to cut off the „-en“-ending of the infinitive verb-form (99% of verbs end in „-en“) and replace it with the following endings depending on the grammatical person:

Table: Regular Verb-Endings

Person	Regular Verb Endings in Simple Present Tense („to learn“)	Regular Verb Endings in Subjunctive II (“would like to“)
Ich	lern- e	möch- te
Du	lern- st	möch- test
Er/Sie/Es	lern- t	möch- te
Wir	lern- en	möch- ten
Ihr	lern- t	möch- tet
Sie/Sie	lern- en	möch- ten

You might want to memorize a handy little mnemonic to remember the endings of all regular verbs in present tense. If you string the endings up, you get a quasi-sentence in the grammatical imperative: **E-st En-t-en**. The imperative verb „*esst*“, (with double-s), is conjugated for the grammatical second person plural „*ihr*“ (informal plural “you”) and gives the command: “Eat”. Fortuitously, the term „*Enten*“ is the German word for “ducks” (plural). So, remember to “Eat ducks!” whenever you need to conjugate a regular verb in present tense.

When it comes to the six modal verbs – the most important German verbs aside from „*sein*“ (to be), „*haben*“ (to have) and „*werden*“ (will/to become) – in their subjunctive II form, they each have their own peculiarities. The most important ones are:

1. **Ich dürfte** – In question form: „*Dürfte ich Sie nachhause begleiten?*“= „May I [be allowed to] escort you home?“. / But as an expression of possibility: „*Es dürfte morgen wieder regnen.*“ = “It will probably – / It looks like it’s going to – rain again tomorrow.” Or: „*Ich dürfte eigentlich nichts mehr trinken*“ = “I actually ought not to [shouldn’t allow myself to] drink any more”.
2. **Ich könnte** – Expresses the possibility that you *could* do something: „*Ich könnte Sie nachhause begleiten, aber ich mag nicht.*“ = „I could escort you home, but I don’t like to.“ / As a politely formed question or request: „*Könnten Sie mich nachhause begleiten?*“ – „*Nö.*“ = “Could you please escort me home?” – “Nope.”
3. **Ich müsste** – The present tense subjunctive II-form of the verb „*müssen*“ only enters the playing field when you want to express that you should or ought to do something: „*Ich müsste eigentlich Clara abholen, aber ich bin zu betrunken.*“ = “I actually ought to pick up Clara, but I’m too drunk.” (The word „*eigentlich*“, i.e. “actually”, is often used in combination with the subjunctive II of „*müssen*“).

To express the same situation but in the past tense, i.e. if the event has already happened, you will need instead to construct a past subjunctive II sentence with modal verb, e.g.: „*Ich hätte sie abholen müssen, aber es lief gerade das Finale von ‘Game of Thrones’.*“ = “I should have picked her up, but the finale of ‘Game of Thrones’ was just on.”. Here, „*hätte*“ is the auxiliary verb, derived from „*haben*“ (to have), in subjunctive II that forms together with „*müssen*“ a substitute infinitive construction. If you’ve been paying attention to the chapter: Perfekt vs Präteritum – Two Ways to talk about Yesterdays, you might now wonder why Germans don’t use the correct present perfect construct here, which would be: „*Ich hätte sie abholen gemusst.*“

However, to German ears this phrase sounds extremely clumsy and quite “uneducated”, even though it is grammatically correct. And the same would also be true for the other modal verbs in such a sentence construction. This is because with modal verbs, the infinitive is almost always used instead of the past participle in the present perfect tense (*Perfekt*) or past perfect tense (*Plusquamperfekt*) whenever another verb (here: „*hätte*“ as the indicator for probability or possibility) is present.

Finally, when it comes to question-sentences, the use of „*müss-te/-test/ etc.*“ usually carries a heavy dose of reproach and admonition, as in:

„Müsstest du nicht eigentlich deine Frau abholen!?“ = “Wouldn't you actually have to pick up your wife?”

4. **Ich sollte** – This *Konjunktiv II* verb is used almost interchangeably with „müsste“. The only difference lies in the severity of the expression, although the ranking will probably surprise you. While „ich müsste“ (“I ought to”) appears at first glance the stronger phrased expression, it is in fact “ich sollte” that indicates a more severe urgency. This becomes apparent when you realise that the modal adverb „eigentlich“ (“actually”) is used more often with „müsste“, while „sollte“ is frequently accompanied by the intensifying adverb „wirklich“ (“really”). So, you would say e.g.: „Ich sollte wirklich nicht mehr so viel trinken.“ = “I really shouldn’t drink that much anymore.”

However, you can replace „wirklich“ also with „eigentlich“ here – but this changes the meaning quite considerably, since it heavily implies a follow-up starting with “however” or “but”, as in: “Ich sollte eigentlich nicht mehr so viel trinken ... aber gut, schenk noch mal einen Whisky nach.” = “I actually shouldn’t drink that much anymore ... but alright, pour me another whisky.”

5. **Ich wollte** – The problem with the subjunctive II form of the verb „wollen“ (to want) derives from the fact that both the subjunctive II and the simple past (*Präteritum*, i.e. “written past”) are conjugated in exactly the same way. This is why „woll-te/woll-test/etc.“ is almost exclusively used to express the simple past, like in: “Ich wollte Clara wirklich abholen, glaub’ mir!” = “I really wanted to pick up Clara, believe me!”.

If you really need to express the possibility of wanting to want something, (which is quite rare), you will therefore rather say: „Ich würde ja mit dem Trinken aufhören wollen – aber es schmeckt einfach zu gut.“ = “See, I would like to want to stop drinking – but it just tastes too good.”. Here, you form a subjunctive II paraphrase with „würde“, i.e. the subjunctive II form of the verb „werden“ (will/to become), which is used in such cases to explicitly express something hypothetical, polite, or reserved.

6. **Ich möchte** – And finally, we come back to the crux of the matter. As stated above, the verb „möchten“ represents actually the subjunctive II form of the verb „mögen“, which means “to like”, as in “having a preference for”, like in: „Ich mag den Nachbarsjungen“ = “I like the boy next door”. „Möchten“ on the other hand is nowadays almost exclusively used as a “normal” verb to express a wish, want or a polite request, for example:

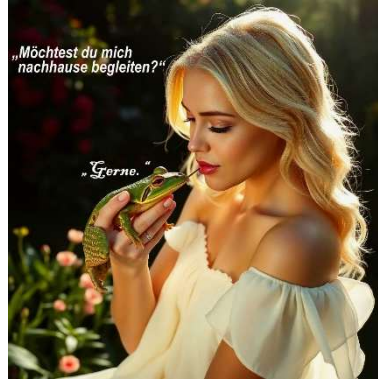
„Ich möchte ein Fass Sauerkraut“ = „I’d like a barrel of sauerkraut.“

„Sie möchte Urlaub machen.“ = “She would like to take a holiday.”

„Möchtet ihr noch ein Bier?“ = “Would you guys like another beer?”

Keen-eyed observers will have realised that from a purely grammatical point of view you could easily replace „möchten“ with „wollen“ (to want) in such sentences. However, this is strongly advised against, since using „Ich will“ (I want) in cases where you can easily replace it with „Ich möchte“ (I’d like) only shows that you have been brought up poorly. The only ones who can get away with such rudeness are children – and even they are regularly reminded by their parents that they should say „Ich möchte“ rather than „Ich will“.

So, where does all this leave us with the little word „**gerne**“, after we have now abundantly clarified that it does not mean “to like”? Well, the best approximation to English would probably be the idea of the expression “with pleasure”. Why? Because „**gerne**“ is used as an amplifier as well as a stand-alone answer, and “with pleasure” best covers both of these situations. In practice, the use of „**gerne**“ or “„**gern**“ will therefore look like this:



„Möchtest du noch eine Bratwurst?“ – „Danke, (sehr) gerne.“

„Would you like another bratwurst?“ – Thank you, with (lots of) pleasure.”

„Ich mag Peter wirklich gerne.“

„I am really fond of Peter.”

„Von 1 bis 10, wie gerne würdest du mit mir ausgehen?“

„On a scale of 1 to 10, how much would you like to go out with me?“

„Ich denke gerne an unsere gemeinsame Zeit zurück.“

„I fondly remember our time together.”

„Möchtest du mich nachhause begleiten?“ – „Gerne.“

„Would you like to escort me home?“ – „With pleasure.”



„Mach hinne!“ – German Quick-Talk

“The greatest art is to make everything simple.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, (1749 – 1832), German Poet, politician and natural scientist

Sometimes, less is certainly more. Which is why German, like most other languages, provides its speakers with a range of quick and short expressions to communicate essential messages or information in the blink of an eye. It may be hard to believe when you consider the complex sentences and inserted clauses that German likes to construct, but you will hear the following two- or three-word sentences in German conversations everywhere and every day. And while these "stenography"-sentences are rarely taught in language schools or textbooks, only by understanding and using them will you truly transcend the line between a theoretical and a practical German-speaker, ready to join the ranks of those who appreciate the art of simplifying German.



38 of the Most Common Short Sentences in German

„Kein Bock.“ / „Null Bock.“

[~Kain Bokk. / Nool Bokk.]

Literal translation: No buck. / Zero buck. [i.e., male goat]

English equivalent: “Can’t be bothered.”; “Not interested.”

Situation: When you are asked to do something and totally don’t feel like it.

Example: 🧑 : “Want to Netflix and Chill tonight?” – 🧑 : „**Nope, kein Bock.**”

„Was macht ...?“

[~Vaz mahcht ...?]

Literal translation: What makes ...?

English equivalent: “What is ... doing?”; “How is ... doing?”

Situation: When you meet an old friend and ask him or her how a mutual acquaintance is doing nowadays.

Example: 🧑 : „Hey Mel, long time no see. **Was macht Don, dein Ex-Mann?**”

* „dein Ex-Mann” = “your ex-husband”

„Weg da!“

[~Vek da!]

Literal translation: Away there!

English equivalent: “Out of my way!”

Situation: a). When you are carrying two hot plates with Lasagne and your little son is stumbling between your legs. b). When you need to catch that train and other people don’t notice that you’re running like the small sibling of Usain Bolt and still don’t make way for you.

Example: 🚲 : „**Weg da!**” – 🚶 : „**Selber ‘weg da!’ Das ist eine Fußgängerzone! Runter vom Fahrrad!**”

* „Selber, weg da!’ Das ist eine Fußgängerzone! Runter vom Fahrrad!” =
“Weg da’ yourself! This is a pedestrian zone! Get off your bike!”

„Wie geil!“

[~Vee guile.]

Literal translation: *How horny!*

English equivalent: “Wow, how amazing!”; “That’s great!”

Situation: **a).** When you enter this new restaurant and see that all dishes are delivered to the tables by a miniature steam locomotive. **b).** When your little sister tells you that she passed her exam and that she’s now a certified forklift-operator.

Example: 🧑 : “I’ve seen a guy yesterday who looked just like Tony Hawk. So, I went and told him that he looks just like Tony Hawk, and he looked at me and said: ‘I am Tony Hawk!’” – 🧑 : „**Nein, wie geil!**”

„Lohnt sich nicht.“

[~Loaned seech neecht.]

Literal translation: *Doesn’t make itself worthwhile.; Doesn’t pay off.*

English equivalent: “It’s not worth it.”

Situation: **a).** When you’re asked if the new exhibition of South Tyrolean traditional garments is worth a visit and you were rather underwhelmed. **b).** When you are still fifty metres away from the train-door and silently deliberate whether you should run for it or wait for the next train and conclude that being punctual at the office isn’t worth all the running, panting and sweating.



Example: 🧑 : “Hey Anakin, did you go and see the Pyramids when you were in Egypt?” – 🧑 : „**Yeah, lohnt sich nicht. Zu viel Sand.**”

* „Zu viel Sand.” = “Too much sand.”

„Du mich auch.“

[~Doo meech aouch.]

Literal translation: *You me too!*

English equivalent: “You can lick my backside too!”

Situation: **a).** When you are about to go to the kitchen to get a beer and your partner asks you to bring a bottle for them too, and some snacks, and a tissue box, and two glasses, and a bowl of popcorn, and **b).** When your colleague tells you that he suggested you for the job of chief-organiser for the next department Halloween-party because you’re “such a party-animal”.

Example: 🧑 : “Damn, you look absolutely amazing today! Look at you, so dapper and fresh. Your mama must be so proud of you! I’m surprised that no fashion magazine has featured you on their cover yet!” – 🧑 : „**Jaja, du mich auch.**”

* „Jaja.” = “Sure”. (Side note: Germans also tend to say: “Jaja” is the little sister of ‘fuck off’.)

„Keine Ahnung.“

[~Kai’ne Ahnoong.]

Literal translation: *No premonition.; No clue.; No hunch.*

English equivalent: “No clue.”; “No idea.”

Situation: **a).** When you are asked why Europeans use a 24-hour time indication or why they prefer to live under “socialist rule” instead of enjoying the “freedom” of private health insurance and out-of-pocket payments, zero maternity leave, one week of holidays per year and huge tuition fees. **b).** When your female friend asks you who is more beautiful: Sidney Sweeney™ or her.

Example: 🧑 : “Hey, what do you think is healthier: The Sardinian ‘Casu Marzu’ cheese that is infested with the eggs of the cheese fly ‘*Piophilidae casei*’ so it contains living maggots when eaten – or American Easy Cheese™ with milk, whey protein concentrate, canola oil, milk protein concentrate, sodium citrate, sodium phosphate, calcium phosphate, lactic acid, sorbic acid, sodium alginate, , annatto, cheese culture, and enzymes.– 🧑 : „Keine Ahnung ...”

„Nicht schlecht.”

[~Neecht schlecht.]

Literal translation: Not bad.

English equivalent: “Not bad.”

Situation: Whenever you want to express the highest possible praise for someone else’s work or achievements.

Example: 🧑 : “Look, I’ve built the first functional spaceship with faster-than-light propulsion and a miniature cold-fusion reactor. It can travel to Jupiter in less than an hour.” – 🧑 : „Hm, ja. **Nicht schlecht.**”

„Geht’s gut?”

[~Geht’z goot?]

Literal translation: Does it go good?

English equivalent: “Are you well?”; “How are you?”

Situation: When you meet an old acquaintance or friend.

Example: 🧑 : „Hi Donald, **geht’s gut?**” – 🧑 : „**Geht so.**”

„Geht so.”

[~Geht so.]

Literal translation: Goes such.; Goes like this.

English equivalent: “So-and-so.”; “Could be better.”

Situation: a). When you’re asked how you are and you feel pretty shitty but don’t want to admit it outright. b). When you’re asked how the last Star Wars™ movie was and you don’t want to ruin your friend’s enthusiasm.

Example: 🧑 : “Hey, how was your wife’s ‘50 Shades of Grey’ TV-marathon with her book club friends at your house last night?” – 🧑 : „Hm, **geht so ...**”

„Lass stecken.”

[~Laz shtekken.]

Literal translation: Leave it sticking; (Leave the sword sticking in the scabbard)

English equivalent: “Don’t even start.”; “Last warning!”

Situation: a). When the enemy knight wants to draw his sword, but you are the Black Knight. b). When you sit in a meeting with your boss and colleagues, and this one brownnoser repeatedly tries to bring up some mistake you made months ago. c). When a young hothead thinks he needs to show off in front of his friends by stepping in your way and doesn’t let you pass.

Example: 🧑 : “Hey, Mr. Eastwood! I bet that you can’t catch my hand before it hits your face!” – 🧑 : „**Söhnchen, ich sag das nur einmal: Lass stecken.**”



* „Söhnchen, ich sag das nur einmal” = “Son, I only say this once”

„Das geht ab!“

[~Dahs gait up!]

Literal translation: *That goes off!*

English equivalent: “That’s so wild!”; “That’s so much fun!”

Situation: **a).** When your German friend takes you in her Porsche™ 911 on the German Autobahn and accelerates to 240 km/h (143 miles/h). **b).** After the bartender in a trendy night club has mixed gin, Green Chartreuse, lime, and Maraschino liqueur and you’ve taken your first sip of a ‘Last Word’ cocktail.

Example: 🧑 : “So, how was your first day as a driver in the Paris-Dakar Rally?”

– 🧑 : „Alter! Ich sag dir, **das geht ab!**“

* „Alter! Ich sag dir“ = “Dude! I tell you”

„Der Hammer!“

[~Dare Hahmmer]

Literal translation: *The hammer!*

English equivalent: “Extraordinary!”; “Great!”; “Amazing!”

Situation: **a).** When you are invited for a weekend in the 4-star Castle Hotel *Schönburg* and see the authentic “royal” castle room you’ll be staying in with a view across the Rhine. **b).** when you take your first bite of a traditional Döner.

Example: 🧑 : „Die Stimme von Annie Lennox ist **echt der Hammer.**“

* „Die Stimme von“ = “The voice of” / * „echt“ = “really”

„Muss ja.“

[~Mooz ya.]

Literal translation: *Has to, anyway.*

English equivalent: “Needs must.”; “There is/was no other choice anyway.”

Situation: **a).** When you’re in the Marines and your platoon is about to begin its nighttime operation of infiltrating enemy-lines and your commander wishes you “*Viel Spaß*”. **b).** When you sit at your desk in the office in the evening and your last remaining colleague is leaving and tells you that he’s sure that you’ll manage to finish that presentation before tomorrow morning.

Example: 🧑 : “Hey, I’ve heard your ex-wife married again. Did you really set up the home reception for the newlyweds?” – 🧑 : „Naja, **muss ja. Sie wohnt ja noch in meinem Haus.**“

* „Sie wohnt ja noch in meinem Haus.“ = “After all, she’s still living in my house.”

„Verarsch’ mich nicht.“

[~Fer’ahrsh meech neecht.]

Literal translation: *Don’t arse me.*

English equivalent: “Don’t pull my leg.”; “I don’t believe it/you.”

Situation: **a).** When you can’t join your mates on their annual holiday for the first time and they come back and tell you that they met Mike Tyson and he invited them to his mansion where they partied for two weeks straight. **b).**



When you just bought a new crate of beer yesterday and your partner tells you that the beer is already empty again.

Example: 🧑 : “Daddy, it’s me! You need to come home! I just drove your Maserati into our swimming pool ...” – 🧑 : „**Claire, verarsch’ mich nicht!**“

„Pass auf!“

[~Paz aouf!]

Literal translation: *Pay attention!*

English equivalent: “Pay attention!” / “Watch out!” / “Watch it!”

Situation: a). When your friend looks at her/his smartphone while crossing the road. b). When that one “prankster” who is always up to some BS starts playing with a lighter and holds the flame ever closer to your hair.

Example: 🧑 : “Wow, Hilda! You look so ... strong. I bet you could even wrestle Klaus to the ground.” – 🧑 : “Wer ist Klaus?” – 🧑 : “What, you don’t know Klaus, the biggest hippopotamus in our zoo?” – 🧑 : „**Freundchen, pass auf!**”

* „Wer ist?” = “Who is?” / * „Freundchen” = “Buddy”; “Pal”; “Dude”

„Übertreib’s nicht.“

[~Über'tribe'z neecht.]

Literal translation: *Don’t exaggerate it.*

English equivalent: “Don’t exaggerate.” / “Don’t take it too far.”

Situation: a). When you take a walk with your friend and they see an old swing on an abandoned playground and he immediately must sit on it and start swinging higher and higher, while the old ropes are already precariously squeaking. b). When you take a walk with your friend and you meet your secret crush and your friend starts telling stories about that one time when you peed in your pants or that one time you had a booger in your nose and didn’t notice it for hours or that other time when ...

Example: 🧑 : “Darling, what do you think if I go for a girly-weekend to Berlin with Lisa and Tina?” – 🧑 : “Hmm, yeah, why not.” – 🧑 : “Oh, and Tina will bring her new boyfriend and his brother. But only for the first two days.” – 🧑 : “Uh, well ...” – 🧑 : “And maybe, just maybe, Lisa will invite her neighbour Tom for an evening.” – 🧑 : “Well, you know ...” – 🧑 : “Oh, and you know what!? Tom works in the adult film-industry. So, maybe he will bring some colleagues –” – 🧑 : „**Übertreib’s nicht!**”

„Guten!“

[~Goo'ten!]

Literal translation: *Good one!*

English equivalent: “Bon appetite!”

Situation: When you’ve been to the pub with your buddies and later get the post-beer munchies and you all rush into the next Döner kebab shop and everyone orders a kebab with everything and extra spicy („mit alles und scharf!”) and then you sit on the wooden bench in front of the shop and grin at each other and then tuck in. (Note: Do not use when you are invited to dinner for the first time by the parents of your new girlfriend.)

Example: 🧑 : “God, I’m starving!” – 🧑 : “Yeah, me too!” – 🧑 : „**Na dann: Guten!**” – 🧑 : „**Gleichfalls!**”

* „Na dann” = “Alright then”; “Well, then” / „Gleichfalls!” = “Same to you!”



„Hau rein.“

[~How rhine.]

Literal translation: *Hit into it!*

English equivalent: “Tuck in.” / “Go for it.” / “Enjoy!” / “Good luck.”

Situation: **a).** When your best friend comes over and you surprise him/her with a homemade sandwich and put the plate with a grin in front of him/her. **b).** When you’re at a club and your friend sees someone she/he likes and shouts over the loud music that she/he is going to speak with that person now. **c).** When you give your friend a nicely wrapped present and he/she doesn’t know yet that it is the PlayStation™ 5 / a backstage pass for the next Taylor Swift™ Concert. **d).** When your little nephew tells you that he is going to hide behind the door and wait until his mum is coming in and that he will then light that firecracker from last New Year’s Eve to “surprise” her.

Example: 🙄 : “No, I’ve never seen her until now. But she wrote to me that if I send her twenty thousand for the ticket, she’ll come to see me! Oh, I’ve gotta go. Got to send her the money! Excuse me.” – 🙄 : „Ja klar. **Hau rein.**“

* „Ja klar“ = “Sure”

„Wer’s mag.“

[~Vair’s mahg.]

Literal translation: *Who likes it.*

English equivalent: “Fine if you/others like it. (I certainly don’t.)”

Situation: **a).** When your female friend goes shopping with you and wants to show you a blouse that she had seen online and you go with her to the shop and she tries it on and it’s a Balenciaga™ fitted top with long sleeves in washed navy blue – for 750 €. **b).** When your male friend tells you that this summer he’s going on holiday with his Bowling club-buddies to Mallorca to drink as many buckets of Sangria with long straws as possible before passing out in the Spanish sun.

Example: 🙄 : “Did you hear? Mareike and Sebastian are expecting their seventh child!” – 🙄 : „Oh. **Naja, wer’s mag.**“

* „Naja, ...“ = “Well, ...”

„Mach hinne!“

[~Mach hynn’e.]

Literal translation: *Make there.; Make fast.*

English equivalent: “Hurry up!”

Situation: **a).** When you’re driving the escape car after the bank heist and your buddy Pete suddenly needs to pee super urgently, so you stop and he gets out while you can see the police approaching in the rear mirror. **b).** When you pick up your daughter from school and she keeps on giggling and chatting with her friends while you park in an “absolutely no stopping” zone.

Example: 🙄 : „It’s Christmas Eve now! Hey, Father Christmas, **mach hinne!**“



„Vergiss es.“

[~Ferr'giss es.]

Literal translation: *Forget it.*

English equivalent: “Forget it.”

Situation: a). When your friend owes you money and finally hands you the 100 Euro while at the same time he is telling you how he saved this money by not eating for two weeks and that he will now have to give away his dog – but that it's okay, since it is much more important that “rich people like you” get their money back in time. b). When you've asked your husband ten times to take out the rubbish while he's playing on his Xbox™, and you finally do it yourself, and hours later he comes into the kitchen and announces that he's going to take out the rubbish now.



Example: 🧑 : “Hey, I know you wanted to watch the Football World Cup Finals yesterday and I'm sorry that I simply had to watch the re-run of ‘Sex in the City’ instead. But I recorded the game secretly here on this USB-drive! I just watched the end. It's actually quite exciting when Brazil scores the decisive 1-0 in extra time. Here, take the drive! Enjoy!” – 🧑 : „Ach, vergiss es.“

„Eben.“

[~Eh'ben.]

Literal translation: *Just now.*

English equivalent: “Exactly.”; “That's just what I said/mean.”; “Yes, right, ...”

Situation: a). When you've told your friend that she shouldn't trust that guy and later she comes back and tells you that she shouldn't have trusted that guy. b). When your friend wants to try this new Jägermeister™-Tequila-Vodka shot and you warn her not to do it and she remarks that it was you after all who told her that your recently deceased neighbour was a big fan of this drink.

Example: 🧑 : “Come on, let's try it! Everyone says that this new pill makes you feel like you can jump from the highest buildings!” – 🧑 : „Eben, du Idiot.“

„Mach das.“ / „Tu das.“

[~Mach dahs. / Too dahs.]

Literal translation: *Make that. / Do that.*

English equivalent: “Sure, go ahead.”; “Yeah, do that.”

Situation: a). When your roommate tells you that he or she is now finally going to get up from the couch, stop binge-watching ‘Game of Thrones’ and start working on the essay that's due tomorrow morning. b). When your



colleague lets you know that enough is enough and that he/she will now go the boss's office and tell the old guy that 70 work hours per week is not “a rookie number”. c). When during a school trip to the zoo your classmate Toby is whispering to you that he is going to climb over the fence to pet this cute lion.

Example: 🧑 : "I'm quitting my office-job and start my own business, a pottery school specialising in clay toothbrushes with organic reed bristles." – 🧑 : „**Klar, mach das.**“

* „Klar“ = „Sure“

„Was weiß ich.“

[~Vass why'z eech]

Literal translation: *What do I know.*

English equivalent: "How am I supposed to know?" / "Who cares? I don't."

Situation: **a).** When your partner asks you where they've put their car keys this time. **b).** When your boyfriend asks you who you will support in the upcoming Champions League™ Finals, Bayern München or Red Bull™ Leipzig. **c).** When your girlfriend asks you if you would still love her if she were an armadillo.

Example: 🧑 : "Hey, wasn't that your ex-partner just now? What's he/she doing nowadays?" – 🧑 : „**Was weiß ich.**“



„Hör auf!“ / „Ach, hör auf!“

[~Hoir aoo! / Ach, hoir aoo!]

Literal translation: *Stop it! / Oh, come on, stop it.*

English equivalent: "Stop it!" / "Come on, stop it."; "No way!"

Situation: **a).** When your brother puts you in a headlock and won't stop rubbing his knuckles over your head. **b).** When your girlfriend/boyfriend has been listing all his/her former bed partners for over an hour now. **c).** When your boyfriend tells you at length about his latest "success" on the toilet. **d).** When your colleague tells you about your mutual ex-colleague Bob, who was fired for gross negligence and general incompetence, and who was apparently hired recently for the position of senior manager at Boeing™. **e).** When your 72-year-old neighbour tells you that she is now selling all her possessions and embark on an expedition into the almost unexplored regions of the Tibetan Himalayas.

Example: 🧑 : "Hey, catch! And catch! And catch! And catch! And ..." – 🧑 : „**Hör auf!** Und überhaupt, was ist das denn?" – 🧑 : "That? Oh, that's just some of the jewels we "liberated" from the Louvre museum in Paris a while ago." – 🧑 : „**Ach, hör auf!**“

* „Und überhaupt, was ist das denn?“ = "And anyway, what is this?"

„Frag nicht.“

[~Frahk neecht.]

Literal translation: *Don't ask.*

English equivalent: "Best don't ask."; "Let's not talk about it."

Situation: **a).** When your friend asks you how your dinner date at the steak house with that vegan girl went. **b).** When you come home from your heist at the bank and your girlfriend asks you where your buddy Pete is. **c).** When your classmate asks you on the way out of the zoo where Toby is.

Example: 🧑 : "Hi Bob! I've heard you've got a new job as a senior manager at Boeing! Congratulations. So, with whom did you have to sleep to get that job, ha-ha?" – 🧑 : „**Ähm ... Frag nicht.**“

* „Ähm“ = "Uh"

„Gleichfalls.“ / „Ebenso.“

[~Glaich'fahls / Eben'soh]

Literal translation: *Same (back).*

English equivalent: “Thanks, the same to you.”; “You too.”

Situation: **a).** When someone wishes you „Guten Appetit!“ (“bon appetite”) or „Guten!“ **b).** When your colleague wishes you a nice weekend. **c).** When the drunk guy on the bus starts to get loud and calls you a “loser”.

Example: 🧑 : “I hope you’ll be happy in your new life with your new supermodel-partner in that big villa and with all that money!” – 🧑 : „Danke, gleichfalls! Oh nein, warte, Du hast ja gar kein Geld ...“.

* „Danke“ = „Thanks“ / „Oh nein, warte, Du hast ja gar kein Geld ...“ = “Oh no, hang on, I forgot, you don’t have any money ...”

„Das gibt’s doch gar nicht!“

[~Dahs geebts doch gar neecht!]

Literal translation: *That surely doesn’t exist!*

English equivalent: “Wow, that can’t be true!”; “Amazing!”; “Unbelievable!”

Situation: **a).** When you switch on the news and the newsreader announces that the Berlin Wall has just been opened. **b).** When you are trekking along a narrow hiking trail at an altitude of 4,000 metres in the Tibetan Himalayas and suddenly your elderly former neighbour appears on the trail in front of you and smiles. **c).** When your little daughter comes home from school and shows you her homemade pottery coaster, and you ask if she made it herself, and she says yes, she made it all by herself.



Example: 🧑 : “Did you know that a well-known aircraft manufacturer sold a supplier company a few years ago for 900 million dollars – only to buy it back some years later for several billion?” – 🧑 : „Das gibt’s doch gar nicht. Wie blöd kann man sein.“

* „Wie blöd kann man sein“ = „How stupid can someone be.“

„Alles in Ordnung?“

[~Allez in Ohrd'noong?]

Literal translation: *All in order?*

English equivalent: “Everything alright?”; “Are you okay?”

Situation: **a).** When you see your friend crying and sobbing after she wished her ex-boyfriend “all the best” for his new life with the supermodel. **b).** When you hear a loud clattering of crockery coming from the kitchen, followed by your little daughter crying. **c).** When you meet your elderly neighbour in the middle of the Tibetan Himalayas and don’t know what else to say. **d).** When you see a little boy climbing out of the zoo’s lion enclosure with some bloody scratches on his face and arms.

Example: 🧑 : „Hey, I just saw you getting sand in your eyes. Alles in Ordnung?“ – 🧑 : „Nein, nichts ist in Ordnung! Ich hasse Sand!“

* „Nein, nichts ist in Ordnung! Ich hasse Sand!“ = “No, nothing is okay! I hate sand!”

„Geschafft!“

[~Geh'shafft!]

Literal translation: *Managed!*; *“Done!”*

English equivalent: *“Finished!”*; *“Done and dusted!”*; *“Made it!”*

Situation: **a).** When you had to leave your buddy behind after the bank heist and narrowly escaped the pursuing police cars and finally pull into your garage at home, switch off the car's engine and lean back with a sigh. **b).**



When you finish writing your essay after an all-nighter and have thirty minutes left before the submission deadline. **c).** When your teacher returns your German final exam and you have passed, and you meet your friends and family outside the door. **d).** When you finally managed to assemble that bloody SMÅGÖRA® from IKEA™.

Example: 🧑 : „**Endlich geschafft!**“ *“Now, I swear I'll never touch another German textbook ever again!”*

* „**Endlich**“ = „Finally“ / „*Mein neues Bett*“ = “My new bed.”

„Gerne.“

[~Gerr'ne.]

Literal translation: *With pleasure.*

English equivalent: *“with pleasure.”*; *“very much so.”*; *“gladly”*

Situation: **a).** As part of your confirmation whenever you want to express that you would like something “a lot” or “very much”, („*Ja, gerne.*“; „*Danke, gerne.*“). **b).** As a stand-alone polite answer when you are asked if you would like something, (e.g. a coffee, a kiss, another beer or your Maserati™ pulled out of your pool). **c).** When your friend asks you if you would like to drive her Porsche™ on the *Autobahn* and you think that's a stupid question, but you want to drive that car, so you answer politely.

Example: 🧑 : “Would you like me to get you a glass of wine and to massage your feet after I've cooked your favourite dinner?” – 🧑 : „**Sehr gerne.**“

* „**sehr**“ = „very (much)“

„Aber immer.“ / „Jederzeit.“

[~A'bear eemmer. / Yeder'zait.]

Literal translation: *But always. / Anytime.*

English equivalent: *“Sure, anytime.”*; *“Always.”*; *“Don't mention it.”*

Situation: **a).** When your friend thanks you for picking her up from the club and driving her home in the middle of the night and you didn't yet realise that you are deep in the friendzone. **b).** When your BFF picks you up in the evening and asks you if you're ready to paint the town red. **c).** When the barman asks you if you would like another Macallan™ 'Night on Earth' Single Malt Whisky. **d).** When your boyfriend asks you if you would still hook up with him if he would lose his job and gain 20 kg, (44 lbs).

Example: 🧑 : “Would you like a steak with baked potatoes?” – 🧑 : „**Aber immer!**“ – 🧑 : “And thanks again that you helped me getting rid of the escape car!” – 🧑 : „**Jederzeit.**“

„Egal.“

[~E'gahl.]

Literal translation: *equal; same; unimportant; irrelevant*

English equivalent: “Doesn’t matter.”; “It’s the same to me.”; “Never mind.”

Situation: **a).** When your husband tells you that he had to leave his buddy Pete behind but you’re just happy that he made it back alive. **b).** When your wife asks you who you’d prefer if she would give you an “eternal celebrity hall pass” – Bo Derek, Emma Stone, Lauren Cohen, Brigitte Bardot or Charlize Theron? **c).** When your friend holds out a bottle of Jever™ beer in his left and a bottle of Flensburger™ (“Flens”) in his right hand, looking at you questioningly. **d).** When



you sit in Hamburg on a harbour-wall and just want to bite into your smoked-eel bun when suddenly a seagull swoops down, snatches the bread roll and flies away, while you watch on with acceptance and shrug your shoulders.

Example: “Did you hear that your former BFF Mel married Bob, that guy who was just hired as the new quality manager at Boeing?” – „**Das ist mir echt scheißegal.**“

* „Das ist mir echt scheißegal.“ = „I really don't give a shit.“

„Na und?“ / „Na und ...“

[~Nah oond?]

Literal translation: *Well, and?*

English equivalent: “So what?”; “And?”; “Who cares.”

Situation: **a).** When someone tells you that a yacht with the six most powerful men in the world has just sunk dramatically in a freak storm and that there are probably no survivors. **b).** When you hear that Anakin doesn’t like sand. **c).** When your buddy tells you that Henninger™ Beer has ceased production. **d).** When your girlfriend lets you know that she really, really likes this cute little diamond ring or your boyfriend mentions that it’s his birthday



soon and that the PlayStation™ 5 is on offer right now. **e).** When you're watching television alone in the evening and the film is interrupted by an emergency news bulletin and you hear that the world is going to end in five minutes.

Example: 😊 : ‘Well, nice story that, you meeting your elderly neighbour in the Tibetan Himalayas. But you know, I’ve met Taylor Swift™ backstage recently and she offered me champagne and we talked for an hour, and she said that I gave her some ideas for new songs and that she will probably use my name in one of them!’ – 🙄 : „**Hmm. Na und ...**“

„Was solls.“

[~Vaz sollz.]

Literal translation: *What should it.*

English equivalent: “Who cares.”; “Doesn’t matter.”; “It is what it is.”; “Why not.”

Situation: **a).** When you ran out of “Egal” and “Na und”. **b).** When you go for a nice romantic picknick with your partner but when you arrive at the secluded meadow you find a group of new-age travellers already camping there and they invite you to sit with them at the campfire and share their lavish barbeque and a bong with them and you look at each other, shrug your shoulders and decide to just go with the flow. **c).** When you made yourself a nice big sandwich and just want to take your first bite when the ham and cheese slip out and fall onto the kitchen floor, but you remember the “5-seconds rule”, quickly pick the slices up and just put them back on the sandwich.



Example: „Damn! We missed the ferry! Now we must stay on this tropical island for another week!“ – „Ach, was solls.“

* „Ach“ = „Well“

„Ausgerechnet.“

[~Aous'ge'rech-ned.]

Literal translation: *Calculated.*

English equivalent: “Of all things.”; “Just when you need/expect it the least.”

Situation: **a).** When you want to make clear that *just* in that moment when Pete got out of the car the police showed up in your rear mirror. **b).** As an expression of frustration when the bakery-assistant tells you that the customer right before you bought the last freshly baked „Brötchen“. **c).** As an insincere expression of sympathy when your friend tells you that he saw this amazing job-offer today and called them right away, only to hear that he was ten minutes too late and that they had already hired someone else – but he doesn’t know that this someone is you. **d).** When you got stuck on a tropical island for another week because just on this of all days you “forgot” to charge your smartphone with the alarm clock.

Example: „I travelled to the other end of the world and climbed one of the remotest mountains on Earth – and who do I have to meet? **Ausgerechnet dich!**“

Ausgerechnet dich! = “You of all people!”

„Ich dich auch.“

[~Eech deech aouch.]

Literal translation: *I you too.*

English equivalent: “Me you too.”; “Same.”

Situation: **a).** When your best friend tells you after a long night of pubs, beer, Döner and laughter that she/he really likes you, (“Ich hab’ dich echt gern.”). **b).** If your partner tells you, that he/she loves you. **c).** When your teenage daughter yells at you that she hates you – since „Ich dich auch“ is so ingrained as the default reply to “I love you” that „Ich dich auch“ in this context is in fact a way to say, “I know that you don’t mean it and that you actually love me – and I love you too, no matter what, you little brat.”

Example: „Ich liebe dich.“ – „Ich dich auch.“

* „Ich liebe dich.“ = „I love you.“



Sorry, Come Again? – What Germans Really Mean When They Say ...

"That's the nice thing about the Germans: No one is so crazy that they won't find someone even crazier who will understand them."

Heinrich Heine, (1797 – 1856), German poet, writer, and journalist

German:	Mahlzeit!
Literally:	Mealtime!
English:	Enjoy your meal! / It's (soon) time to eat! / Hello!



Are you working in a German company? Then you'll have probably already heard some of your colleagues ritually exclaiming the word „Mahlzeit!“ as soon as the daily lunch break approaches. Weirdly enough, people will start greeting you with the word „Mahlzeit!“ in passing in the office corridor as soon as they suspect you being on your way to the canteen, or when they themselves are off to grab some grub and happen to see you still working at your desk,

as if to say, “Come on, don't be such an overachiever and make us look bad. Let's go, they're serving *Currywurst mit Pommes* today!”

Once you've joined your co-workers at the table in the cafeteria, some will then wish everyone „Guten Appetit!“ (“bon appetite”), while others will simply double down and wish the others „Mahlzeit!“ again, this time meaning “Enjoy your meal!”.

Although many find the habit of using this word as a greeting in work-environments rather weird – since it literally just means “meal time” while also being the simple term for “a meal” – it remains so ubiquitous that your best bet is to simply run with it, unless you want to join the resistance and answer each time with, “Yes, I know it's time for a meal. *Danke für die Information.*”

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Mahlzeit!“ [answered with: “Mahlzeit!”]	“Hello!”	Around lunch hour
„Mahlzeit!“ [answered with: “Ebenso.”]	“Bon appetite!” (answer: “Likewise.”)	Right before eating
„Mahlzeit!“ [answered with: “Danke!”]	“Have a good lunch!” [answer: “Thanks!”]	In passing at work



German:

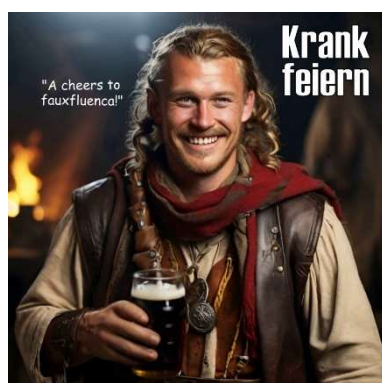
Krankfeiern

Literally:

To celebrate illness

English:

To skive off work



If you are already working as an employee in Germany, you will know that under the Continued Remuneration Act your employer is obliged to continue to pay you the agreed salary during an illness for up to 42 calendar days. And if you're still sick after these six weeks, you can then claim (reduced) sick pay from the health insurance fund.

However, if you deliberately breach your contractual obligations to the company, the consequences can range from a staff appraisal to a warning to even a dismissal after repeat offences – in other words, should you „krankfeiern“, (literally either, “celebrate your illness” or “party despite being ill”),

If you skive off work in this way and your boss gets suspicious that you're only faking your sickness, in extreme cases you can expect the company to even send a private eye after you and to sue you should they have evidence for your “deceit”. On the other hand and in all likelihood, there's really only a vanishingly small number of German employees who've never „krankgefeiert“ for some days. So, don't get your knickers in a twist only because you're overcome by the insurmountable urge once or twice a year to spend a couple of relaxed sunny days in a cosy beer garden or to take a mini-holiday on the banks of some crystal-clear lake in the countryside to celebrate your aliveness.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Na, Du hast wohl krankgefeiert.“	“Well, it looks like you skived off work.”	Colleague to colleague
„Krankfeiern gibt's nicht!“	“No playing sick!”	Boss to employees
„Ich hab' noch nie krankgefeiert.“	“I've never taken sick leave when I wasn't sick.”	In conversation



German:

Raus ins Grüne fahren

Literally:

To drive out into the Green

English:

To drive into the countryside, to make a day trip



Speaking of a refreshing bath in a cool lake somewhere in the lush countryside, when the weekend has finally arrived there's almost nothing Germans like more than to drive „raus ins Grüne“.

Depending on your location in Germany, this can mean having a day out at one of the many sandy-white beaches on the North Sea or the Baltic Sea, for instance if you live in Hamburg, Bremen, or the North

in general, or going hiking in the Alps, if you are in Munich or in a city similarly close to the mountains, or visiting the quaint little villages and impressive castles along the river Rhine, including a wine-tasting along the way, if you're situated in Cologne, Düsseldorf, or the *Ruhrgebiet*, or having fun at any of the countless large and small lakes studding the impressive landscapes of the eastern five federal states, or simply taking your picnic-blanket, a portable grill, some beer and some sausages and setting up camp on a sun-drenched meadow somewhere „im Grünen“.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Wir fahren am Wochenende raus ins Grüne!“	“We're going out to the countryside at the weekend.”	In conversation
„Wir müssen mal wieder raus ins Grüne fahren.“	“We really ought to get out into the countryside again.”	In conversation
„Fahrt doch mal raus ins Grüne!“	“Why don't you take a trip out into the countryside?”	As suggestion



German:

Blau machen

Literally:

To make blue

English:

To skip work, to skip school



The birds are joyfully chirping, the sky presents itself in its most vibrant blue and the warm sunshine simply beckons to be absorbed by every cell of your body, but instead you're sitting in the rattling, dusty underground or in your car in traffic, silently fuming on your daily commute to your dimly-lit office or your gloomy classroom?

Then perhaps it's time to finally give in to the temptation and to „blau machen“ for just one day. Other than „krankfeiern“, where

you would usually take more than one day off and need to concoct some elaborate illness-story, „blau machen“ means to decide at the spur of the moment to skip the office or school for this day, because right now life is just too beautiful to be spent indoors.

It isn't ultimately clear where the term “to make blue” originated as the German idiom for playing truant. But one theory suggests that the expression goes back to the dyers in the Middle Ages, who used to dye their work trousers blue with indigo leaves and needed to lazily idle around while waiting for the process to complete. An alternative explanation points out that in the olden days soldiers who left the barracks without permission were forced to wear a blue badge after being caught. In any case, if you feel like „blau machen“, just make sure that you're up to date with your workload or studies and won't fall behind because of this much deserved or needed time-out.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Frederick hat gestern bestimmt einfach blau gemacht.“	“I’m sure (Fred) just skipped work yesterday.”	Colleague to colleague
„Hier machen mir zu viele blau.“	“Too many people are playing truant here.”	Boss to employees
„ich mach’ manchmal einfach blau.“	“Sometimes I just take the day off without leave.”	In conversation



German:

Über den Berg sein

Literally:

To be over/across the mountain

English:

To be out of the woods, to be over the worst



Germans compare that special sentiment of “having climbed a steep mountain with the greatest effort to finally reach the top and thus having overcome the worst” with the equally relieving feeling of finally being on the mend after having wrestled with a severe illness. That’s why the idiom „Über den Berg sein” is usually not used for mere trivial illnesses like a common cold or a broken toe – unless employed in a sarcastic manner, to indicate that the

recuperating person has made a huge fuss over a minor inconvenience.

Incidentally, around 11,700 people break a toe each year in Germany, men slightly more often than women and mainly during work or while doing sports. While the injury is „kein Beinbruch”, i.e., “no broken leg”, meaning that it isn’t dead serious, the pain can be intense – and if you broke your toe, you should certainly see a doctor. Oh, and as an important reminder for all U.S.-Americans: The costs for healthcare, doctors, hospitals, and ambulances are almost completely covered by your German health insurance. So, don’t wait it out and hope that you’ll soon be „über den Berg” without proper medical care.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Pauline ist endlich über den Berg.“	“[Pauline] is finally over the hump.”	In conversation
„Es hat lange gedauert, bis Michael über den Berg war.“	„It took a long time for [Michael] to get over the hump.”	In conversation
„Wann denken Sie wird mein Mann über den Berg sein?“	“When do you think, my husband will start to recover / be out of the worst?”	To the doctor
„Ja, danke, Ich bin über den Berg.“	„Yes, thank you, I’m much better now.”	Reply to inquiry



German:

Die Daumen drücken

Literally:

To press the thumbs

English:

Fingers crossed, wishing someone good luck



You've got an important exam ahead of you? You're off to the hospital for a dicey operation? You're going to pop the ultimate question to your long-time partner? Or perhaps you're seriously attempting to piece together your Christmas present, the 3,449-piece Lego® Death Star™?

On these and many other occasions involving a difficult endeavour, Germans will smile at you encouragingly and tell you: „*Ich drück' Dir die Daumen!*“ = “I’m pressing the

thumbs for you!”, in this way wishing you “good luck”, („*Viel Glück!*”), “all the best”, („*Alles Gute!*”), or “much success”, („*Viel Erfolg!*”).

Often, you will hear people say also, „*Toi, toi, toi!*”, [ˌtɔɪ. tɔɪ. tɔɪ], while pressing their thumbs and wishing someone good luck. And in certain circumstances, the luck-wisher will even proceed with pretend-spitting three times on the ground. While this custom seems absurd at first, it has a very down-to-earth historic background.

See, folks in the Middle Ages fervently believed in witches and the devil. Back then, it was therefore common practice to spit out “against the evil eye” – and today’s triple „*Toi*” is supposed to imitate the sound of spitting (“Ptui, ptui, ptui”) exactly three times, since according to old superstition, this was the number of spits you needed to ward off bad luck or evil spirits.

Thus, „*Toi, toi, toi!*” became the “refined” or onomatopoeic form of this ritualistic spitting which remains popular to this day – particularly among one specific group. Actors, musicians, and dancers, (known for being a rather superstitious lot), have adopted „*Toi, toi, toi!*”, (and the triple “dry” spitting over the left shoulder of the wish-recipient), as their go-to phrase, since they don’t want to say, „*Viel Glück!*” (“Good luck!”) before a performance, so as not to tempt fate.

However, the rest of us have other alternatives, such as saying, „*Ich drück' die Daumen!*”, (“I’m pressing the thumbs!”) and „*Ich drück' alle Daumen!*”, (“I’m pressing all thumbs!”), accompanied by the gesture of making a fist with the thumb enclosed. Sometimes, the silent gesture alone is also enough to show your encouragement and empathy to the addressee, who will usually answer with a nod and a simple but heartfelt „*Danke!*”.

“Thanks!” is also the answer given in English to the well-known Anglo-Saxon expression of “Fingers crossed!” and its accompanying gesture of crossing forefinger and middle finger. Incidentally, this common habit first originating from a pagan symbol for protection and was later adopted by early Christians, who associated it with the Holy Cross as their own version for warding off evil, which later changed its meaning to a gesture for good luck.

The origins of the symbol of the pressed thumb adopted in Germany on the other hand, (no pun intended), have a rather more bellicose background. Historians believe that the gesture of the pressed thumb goes

way back to the spectators at gladiatorial games in ancient Rome. Gladiators often asked the audience for mercy for a fallen fighter by holding up a hand and pressing their thumb with their fingers. The hope was that the current big-wig on the Colosseum's royal balcony would then lead the crowd into pardoning the unlucky sod kneeling in the sand by raising his own thumb.

Furthermore, already the ancient Romans seemed to have used the pressed thumb (Latin: "*pollex*", related to "*pollere*" = "to be strong"), also as a general gesture for wishing someone good luck and to show their support. Assumedly, this tradition originated from the old superstition that the thumb had some protective and magical properties and that by pressing it in your fist you'd be warding off misfortune and evil spirits. (Although, all the thumb pressing didn't ward off the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, making the efficacy of the gesture rather doubtful.)

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Ich drück' Dir die Daumen!“	"I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you!"	Before a challenge
„Jetzt hilft nur noch Daumen drücken.“	"All we can do now is to keep our fingers crossed."	Start of a challenge
„Hey, alle Daumen gedrückt, Alter!“	"Hey, fingers crossed, mate!"	Friend to friend
„Drück' mir die Daumen!“	"Keep your fingers crossed for me!"	Before a challenge



German:	Schwein haben
Literally:	To have (a) pig
English:	To luck out, to have a stroke of (unexpected) luck



While pressing your thumbs is used to wish good luck to someone who is about to perform a difficult or challenging task, the expression „*Schwein haben*“ refers to that unpredictable and sudden stroke of luck that can sometimes save your bacon.

Imagine yourself, for example, on a fine summer day merrily riding on your bike on one of the modern bike lanes in one of the larger German cities. At the same time, Kevin and Karen in their 2.2 tonne BMW™ X5 SUV are rapidly approaching from behind, overtake you on the right and then suddenly swerve to the left across your bike lane, to catch a turn-off road at the last second. They miss your bike's front wheel by the breadth of a prayer – and this only because you squeezed both your brake handles in the last second to, well, breaking point. And while you're still standing there, deadly pale and gasping for breath, just waiting for your soul to re-enter your body, the elderly lady on her cargo bicycle whom you had overtaken a kilometre ago now stops next to you and succinctly remarks: „*Wow, Schwein gehabt!*“, ("Wow, that was close. Lucky you!").

Later in the evening, in hopes to distract yourself from your near-death experience and from having apparently been saved by the grace of some incorporeal pig, you decide to visit the city's prestigious casino. Scanning the

hustling and bustling on the casino floor, your choice falls on one of the roulette tables.

Alas, after the tenth roll of the little ball you're already down by two monthly salaries, while your blood pressure is up by several magnitudes. With trembling hands and a cold sweat on your brow you put your last 1,500 Euro on your unimaginative lucky number 7.

The dealer turns the wheel and releases the ball. The little orb rolls, jumps, clickers, rolls some more, and finally comes to rest – on the number 7. Sliding over your chips to the value of 54,000 Euro, the dealer grins lopsidedly and comments drily: „*Na, Schwein gehabt, was?*“, (“Well, lucky you, eh?”).

The next day, and with your faith in this ominous unseen pig greatly increased, you see a kiosk in town that sells lottery tickets. With freshly bolstered confidence you stride in, fill out a lottery slip (“6 out of 49”) and hand it in to the guy behind the counter. In the evening you sit down to watch the weekly drawing of the lottery numbers in the *ARD*, (Germany’s main public broadcaster). You follow the drawing of the numbers, compare them with your lottery slip one by one – and when the final number is revealed, it becomes clear that you picked not even one number correctly. (Well, what did you expect? Did you really think you’d win the lottery? Come on. Nobody has that much *Schwein*.)

Although the pig („*Schwein*”) is known in many cultures as a symbol of luck, there’s a bit more than just that to the origins of this German expression, used whenever someone escapes a dire situation through the timely intervention of goddess Fortuna. In fact, there are no less than four theories competing for the true origins of “having a pig”.

Making a rather convincing case is the first hypothesis, stating that the phrase originates from 16th century medieval card games, where the Ace was also known as “the Sow”, („*die Sau*”), and whoever drew this “female pig” card was naturally lucky. In southern Germany, the Ace is even today still known by this name in card games like „*Schafkopf*”, „*Binokel*”, or „*Gaigel*”.

Another interesting explanation involves a specific old mural in the town hall of Münden, a German town that frequently suffered from floods in the olden days. The mural depicts a scene where citizens try to save their goods and chattels during such a flooding, with a pig prominently displayed on a raft. From this, it can be inferred that anyone lucky enough to save a valuable pig from nature’s wrath would be considered quite fortunate, despite the harrowing circumstances.

The next theory also refers to the high value of a pig in medieval times. The Thirty Years’ War and other calamities that almost regularly befell the German-speaking peoples between the 14th and 19th century – including the bubonic plague, famines, and peasant revolts – made folks yearn for “the good old times”, when their ancestors were still lucky enough to revel in an abundance of smoked ham, grilled sausages, pork knuckles, bacon, pig ears, pork cheeks, rump steaks, pig snouts, cutlets, pork belly and fresh lard. However, that is probably exactly what their ancestors thought as well about their own forebears, who surely must have had an abundance of „*Schwein*”, and these forebears assumed that the same was true of their ancestors and so on down the generations, all the way back to the owner of the first domesticated pig.

The final and most unlikely theory dates once more all the way back to the Middle Ages. It assumes that in medieval archery competitions even the

loser who came in last was still rewarded with a pig. However, this is rather unlikely, considering the value of a pig in these days. Yet, who knows, perhaps even an “Anti-Robin Hood” was allowed to have „Schwein” for once in his life.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Mann, da haste aber Schwein gehabt!”	“Man, you were really lucky there!”	Friend to friend
„So viel Schwein würde ich auch gern mal haben.”	“Heck, I'd like to be that lucky sometimes”	In 'jealous' admiration
„Der Kerl hat immer Schwein.”	“That guy is always lucky.”	As statement
„Ha, Schwein gehabt!”	“Ha, lucky you!”	Exclamation



German:

Nicht das Wasser reichen können

Literally:

To be unable to hand someone the water

English:

Can't hold a candle to someone



Are you seriously worried that the newly hired programmer from Japan will outperform you? Nah, don't fret, „*der kann Dir nicht das Wasser reichen!*”, (“he can't hand you the water!”), since you're far more experienced than him. However, once you get home, your partner will definitely beat you at Mario Kart™, since when it comes to gaming there's no question that „*du kannst ihm/ihr nicht das Wasser reichen*”, (“you cannot hand him/her the water”).

And now take a wild guess in which period this phrase was coined. But don't expect a trophy for assuming, “in the Middle Ages”. (Admittedly, it gets a bit monotonous with the Germans and their Middle Ages. But then again, what can you expect from a people and a language with more than a thousand years of history, traditions and culture, eh?)

Anyway, as you might know, back in those days even the rich and noble had not yet taken to that modern trend of using cutlery to cut and pick up food from their plates, a fad that really only took off in the 17th century. Instead, even royalty mostly employed a knife and their fingers when stuffing themselves with the delicacies of those days, like bread, cheese, apples, pears, grapes, cabbage, onions, turnips, roasted and boiled pork, chicken, goose, deer, hare, pheasant, and, of course, entire roasted swans stuffed with chestnuts, bacon, and onions.

Obviously, once you had stained and smeared your hands with all kinds of grease, lard, oil, fat, and juice, you would then be in urgent need of cleaning your fingers before inappropriately touching the upper thigh of your good-looking, (i.e. fully toothed), table companion. At which point your squire would step in to unobtrusively present you with a wooden bowl with water.

Now, you might think that the task of holding out a bowl of water for your lord or lady would not have amounted to much, considering that you were “just a squire”. Well, in that case you'd be in for a surprise, since the

overall appearance, including clothes and demeanour, of a personal table servant was of utmost importance to the respective nobleman or noble lady of the day, whose wealth and standing was judged accordingly by their fellow peasant exploiters. Consequentially, if a squire's overall appearance didn't pass muster when holding out a bowl of water for his lord or lady, he was naturally regarded as "not even good enough to hand the water" to his betters.

Of course, such representative duty did by no means indicate that the chosen squire would be in any shape, size or form "equal" to the grease-dripping, rich lard-arse or the haughty hag in whose employ he was. In those days, you could just as well dream of being on equal terms with your masters or mistresses as of using extra-soft, four-ply toilet paper instead of the usual moss, straw, and leaves.

Instead, you found yourself in a constant competition with your fellow servants, and any co-squire, kitchen-helper and housemaid felt at liberty to snidely remark on your apparent "worthlessness" by pointing out that you were not even good enough to hold out a bowl of water.

Over the centuries, the phrase became synonymous with being labelled too incapable or incompetent to successfully compete with someone else. So, next time you're washing your greasy hands in a modern sink after devouring your weekly stuffed swan, kindly spare a thought for those poor squires whose greatest wish it must have been to cut a fine figure while silently holding out a bowl of water.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Dem kannst du das Wasser reichen.“	"You can't hold a candle to [him]."	Statement
„Wenn Du Lucille jemals das Wasser reichen willst, dann musst Du“	"If you ever want to hold a candle to [Lucy], then you have to ..."	Statement
„Dem Sieger konnte keiner das Wasser reichen.“	"No one could hold a candle to the winner."	Statement
„Was Mathematik betrifft, kann Monique niemand das Wasser reichen.“	"When it comes to maths, no one can hold a candle to [Monique]."	Statement



German:	Die Hosen anhaben
Literally:	To have the trousers on, to wear the pants
English:	<i>To wear the breeches in the family</i>



Now, here comes a question that seems to have lost none of its spark over the last 50 years: Who really has „die Hosen an“ in German households?

With such an emotional topic, perhaps it's best to start the search for an answer by looking at some interesting facts. According to the *Statista Consumer and Media Analysis* of 2021, the German population was almost equally divided into 49.4 per cent men and 50.6 per cent women,

meaning that in 2021 out of 83.2 million Germans, 42.09 million women and 41.1 million men lived in Germany.

Counting all singles in Germany resulted in around 42.5 per cent of female singles between the age of 18 and 49 years, while around 57.5 per cent of singles in the same age group were male. Furthermore, provisional figures show that in 2023 Germany had around 7.9 million married men and women with at least one child, and 9.4 million married people without children. Thus, of all 42.09 million women in Germany, 8.65 million were married while 33.37 million female Germans were either single, widowed, or lived in other types of partnerships. Of the 41.1 million male Germans, 8.65 million were married, while 32.42 million German men were either single, widowed or lived in other types of partnerships.

Table: German Male and Female Singles (in %)

Germany 2021	Percentage	Total Numbers
Total Population	100.0%	83.20 million
Male Germans	49.4%	41.10 million
Female Germans	50.6%	42.09 million
Male Singles (of all 18-49 y.o.)	57.5%	23.58 million
Female Singles (of all 18-49 y.o.)	42.5%	17.88 million
Germany 2023	Percentage	Total Numbers
Married people w/ 1+ child	9.5%	7.9 million
Married people w/o child	11.3%	9.4 million

[Note: a). These figures have changed slightly between 2021 and 2026 (German population in 2024: 83.6 million) but have remained largely unchanged in relation to each other. b). The population in the age groups under 40 keeps continuously declining since 2021, with some slight fluctuations, and gets lower the younger the age group. c). The higher life expectancy of women means that the surplus of women increases continuously from around the age of 60 upwards.]

In 2024, women in Germany married on average at the age of 32.6 years, while men were averagely 35.1 years old when they tied the knot. Despite this slight age-gap, in most modern marriages and partnerships it is nowadays a matter of course that both partners equally „die Hosen anhaben“, i.e. that both are on equal footing in all aspects of shared life.

However, as you may be aware, this hasn't always been the case. Although the German „Grundgesetz“, (“Basic Law”; “Constitution”), states since 1949 that „Männer und Frauen sind gleichberechtigt“, (“Men and women have equal rights”), it still took some hard-won battles fought by tenacious women to transform this noble goal into practical reality.

As late as in 1958, the German Equal Rights Act finally did away with the legal status of the husband as the “sole decision-maker in the family”, who until then had unilaterally decided important matters, e.g. whether his wife was allowed to work, how the household money was managed, which purchases were made and where and how the family lived. A legal status that cemented the idea of the man as the “master of the household”, the one who „die Hosen an hat“. The Equal Rights Act of 1958 was therefore the first large crack in this seemingly eternal status quo.

It then took another twenty years until the reform of the Marriage and Family Law passed parliament in 1977, which finally put both partners also legally fully on par, by determining that „die Ehegatten die Führung des Haushalts einvernehmlich organisieren sollen“, (“the spouses shall organise the running of the household by mutual agreement”).

A further twenty years down the line, in May 1997, German women won the next decisive battle when the „Bundestag“, (“German Parliament”), decided by a large majority that marital rape was to be criminalised. Co-initiator and former MP *Ulla Schmidt* (SPD) said at the time: “*It is a signal that the state is setting standards that clearly state that wives are protected by the legislator without exception. Husbands have no special rights.*”

No question about it, women’s rights have already come a long way since the days of the German „*Kaiserreich*“ (“empire ruled by the emperor”), when women had to hide their ankles under elaborate floor-length dresses and often were reduced to selecting the flower-arrangement of the day while frequently fainting from ridiculously tight corsets.

However, as you know, certain disparities between the sexes still exist even today. Yet, when nowadays a German man half-jokingly remarks that his wife or partner „*hat die Hosen an*“ at home, (or worse, when he unironically boasts that he is the one wearing the breeches), you can safely assume that he is quickly labelled as a member of the dying breed of men who haven’t yet come to grips with the fact that there shouldn’t be such a thing as one partner who „*die Hosen an hat*“ – and that it is called a “partnership” for reasons.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it’s used:
„Bei uns zuhause hat meine Frau die Hosen an.“	“At our house, my wife wears the breeches.”	Party; Reception
„Du musst ihr endlich mal zeigen, wer die Hosen an hat!“	“You need to show her who wears the breeches!”	Drunk man to drunk friend at the pub
„Na, sieht so aus, als hätte bei euch Sonja die Hosen an.“	“Well, it looks like [Sonja] wears the breeches in your relationship.”	During weekend outing with other couples
„Bei uns hat niemand ‚die Hosen an‘. Wir entscheiden alles gemeinsam.“	“No one ‘wears the breeches’ at our house. We decide everything together.”	At meeting with modern families



German:

Dir ist eine Laus über die Leber gelaufen

Literally:

You had a louse running across your liver

English:

You’re sulky; You’re ratty; You’re butt-sore



Probably the weirdest idiom in the German language, „*Dir ist wohl ‘ne Laus über die Leber gelaufen*“, (“It seems like a louse ran over your liver”), is nonetheless a frequently used sentence to remark on the grumpiness, unfriendliness or obstinacy of a friend, family member or colleague who got irritated by a triviality.

Like the almost equally weird British English phrase “Looks like you’re ratty” or the U.S.-English “You’re butt-sore”, the German phrase describes a situation in which a small, often insignificant thing has upset a person, and they are now reacting huffy.

And who would have thought it? The expression dates back to the Middle Ages, of course, when people believed that the liver was the seat of your emotions. This belief was often reflected in the literature and poetry of the time; for example, lovers would say that their “liver burns with passion”. Conversely, being “white-livered” implied cowardice or a lack of courage, referencing the liver’s symbolic role in courage.

In fact, the idea that the liver is the centre of emotions goes all the way back to ancient Greece and the great philosopher and polymath *Aristotle* (Greek: Ἀριστοτέλης; Latin/German: *Aristoteles*), who taught that the brain cooled the blood and governed rational thought, while the heart was responsible for reason, higher mental functions and imagination, and the liver controlled emotions and desires. This theory was widely accepted in Aristotle’s time and was later adopted by medieval scholasticism through the translation of his works into Latin and Arabic.

In a first stage of the phrase’s introduction, the public in the Germanic Holy Roman Empire of the 14th and 15th century adopted Aristotle’s “medical explanation” for a person’s “exaggeratedly angry reaction to an insignificant event” by coining the idiom „*Dir ist wohl etwas über die Leber gelaufen*“, (“It seems like something ran over your liver”). Only in the 16th century, the term „*Laus*” replaced the word „*etwas*”. The earliest documented use of the now common saying can be found in the works of *Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg* (1445–1510), a Swiss preacher in Strasbourg who is considered to have been the most influential German-speaking preacher of the late Middle Ages. One of *von Kaysersberg*’s texts contains the line: “... and if a louse has crawled over your liver...”, thus giving us the earliest written reference of the idiom.

But regardless of who came up first with the idea of inserting a “*Laus*” into the idiom — be they a medieval merchant, farmer, laundress, count, knight, squire or street urchin — they would certainly enjoy a successful career as a copywriter in an advertising agency today.

After all, the “louse” is the perfect metaphor for a tiny, insignificant but irksome creature, symbolising the idea that something small can be greatly annoying. Additionally worth noting is also the memorable and melodious alliteration of “*Laus*” and “*Leber*”. Honestly, it takes a small stroke of genius to come up with a “slogan” that conveys the core message in such a concise and vivid manner and uses alliteration as a memorable stylistic device. So, hats off to the unknown wordsmith from centuries past and let’s hope they never had reason to feel as if a louse had run over their liver.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it’s used:
„Dir ist wohl ‘ne Laus über die Leber gelaufen, was?”	“Ey, what’s up with that attitude! Do you have a complaint, or what?”	Friend to friend Boss to employee
„Also, Hans-Friedrich benimmt sich heute, als wäre ihm eine Laus über die Leber gelaufen.“	“Really, [Hans-Friedrich] is acting today as if something got at him and now he’s taking his bad mood out on others.”	Office gossip Friend circle
„Sag mal, ist Elenora eine Laus über die Leber gelaufen, oder was?”	“Say, is something the matter with [Elenora], or what?”	Friend to friend Colleague to colleague
„Wenn Dir eine Laus über die Leber gelaufen ist, kannst Du gerne gehen.“	„If you continue with that grumpy attitude, you are more than welcome to bugger off.”	Friend to friend Parent to child



German:

Die Ohren spitzen

Literally:

To sharpen your ears to a point

English:

To prick up your ears



Approximately 35 million dogs, 15 million cats and 3 million small pets like rabbits, hamsters, rats, and Guinea pigs, live in German households today. And you can safely assume that the old stereotype that “Germans love their pets more than children” is still true in certain parts of the German population.

What led to the creation of the idiom „die Ohren spitzen” was not least this close bond between dogs and their „Frauchen” or „Herrchen”, (the German terms for female and male pet-owners), that likely started as early as 40,000 years ago, combined with the ongoing love-hate affair between domesticated cats and their human servants in the last 10,000 years. After all, pricking up the ears is exactly what these animals do as soon as they hear a predator approaching or dry-food rattling in the feeding bowl.

Today, a teacher might use the imperative sentence-form to admonish students with a sharp: „Spitzt die Ohren!” to get their attention, or a castle tour guide might tell a group of pleasantly creeped-out tourists: „Wenn Sie die Ohren spitzen, können Sie das Burggespenst heulen hören”, (“If you prick up your ears, you can hear the castle ghost howling.”)

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„So, jetzt spitz' mal die Ohren!”	“Right, now prick up your ears!”	Mainly parents
„Jetzt alle mal die Ohren spitzen!”	“Now everyone prick up your ears!”	Mainly teachers
„Achtung, Ohren gespitzt!”	“Attention, prick up your ears!”	Mainly teachers



German:

Alles in Butter

Literally:

Everything in butter

English:

Everything is fine; All done and dusted



Picture yourself at the end of a seven hours drive and 500 kilometres across the Alps from Munich to Venice. It is evening, you have finally arrived and now want nothing more than a hot shower and a soft bed. But of course, as if by telepathy, your mother or your partner back home somehow “knows” that you are just about to relax and inevitably calls at this moment to ask: “Did you arrive safely?” Now you could talk about the crazy truck-driver who suddenly swerved into you lane while you were doing 190 km/h on the *Autobahn*, or about the lost pair of skies on the road which you were only able to avoid at the last

second, or about the sudden black ice on the *Brenner* mountain pass. But your hot shower is waiting. So, to avoid any lengthy explanations, you choose the best answer you can give in German to reassure someone that everything went as smooth as a baby's backside and simply answer: „Ja, Schatz, / Ja, Mama, alles in Butter!“ = “Yes, darling, / Yes, mum, everything peachy!”

The next day you sit with your Austrian friend Xaver in a Venetian café and enjoy the incomparably smooth espresso they serve there, when Xaver's boss suddenly calls him. The loud voice of the old man on the other end of the line even reaches your ear and you hear him ask Xaver: „Na, Herr Mittermayer? Hat der Job so geklappt wie wir's uns vorgestellt hatten?“ = “So, Mr. Mittermayer? Did the job work out as well as we've hoped?” Xaver rolls his eyes, then puts on a fake smile and says with utter conviction: „Ja, Chef. Alles in Butter!“. After hanging up, Xaver turns to you, grins and says: “I bet this will have the old tyrant send his secretary straight for the Champagne.”

Which reminds you of your own last bottle of *Dom Pérignon™ Oenothèque Rosé* that you opened in the evening a month ago after a visit to your doctor. On that day, she had your anxiously awaited lab-results in front of her on her desk. You looked at her nervously – but then she smiled and said: „Keine Angst, alles in Butter!“ = “Don't worry, everything's fine!” And you felt a truckload of worries disappear, together with any fear of a possible STD.

Well, you get the gist. “All in butter” is perhaps the most reassuring confirmation you can give in German, even more so than „Alles in Ordnung“, (“All in good order”). Rather predictably at this point, the phrase is assumed to have originated in the Middle Ages, when goods and wares were transported predominantly in carriages with wooden wheels, rattling along on poorly maintained and thus bumpy roads. Naturally, such a rough transport was a problem for high-value goods like for example exquisite glass wares from Venice or other distant locations.

Traders in these days must have tried all sorts of shock-absorbing materials before finally getting the brilliant idea to use butter as the perfect cushioning. After heating the butter over a flame, merchants simply dropped their Venetian glass wares into the melted butter and allowed it to cool down, sealing the precious cargo shock-proof in the then-solidified yellow delicacy.

Once his caravan arrived in Cologne, Mainz, Frankfurt, or Aachen, the first question the trader would have been asked by local shopkeepers would've naturally been whether their expensive wares were still in one piece. And to their great relief, the trader would have smiled and replied: “Alles in Butter!”, thus reassuring the buyers that their precious Murano glasses had been transported more safely than in any modern UPS™ or DHL™ van.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Na, alles in Butter?“	“Oi, all good with you/the project/life?”	General greeting
„Ja, bei mir/uns ist alles in Butter.“	“Yes, everything is all right with me/us.”	Positive answer
„Nee, in Margarine.“	“Nah, in margarine.”	Silly answer
„Wenn wir das schaffen ist alles in Butter.“	“If we can manage that, everything will be done perfectly.”	Group-leader to group-members
„Mit Ihrem Ferrari ist wieder alles in Butter, Herr Dr. Degenhart.“	“Your Ferrari is back in tip-top condition, [Dr. Degenhart].”	Service provider to owner



German:

Etwas durch die Blume sagen

Literally:

To say something through the flower

English:

To beat around the bush; to sugarcoat sth.; to put sth. delicately



One fine evening you are comfortably sitting at the bar of your favourite „Kneipe“ (“pub”), when your friend Jonas comes in and proceeds to put his backside on the bar stool next to you. After ordering a beer from the bearded, bald and taciturn barman, he stares wordlessly at the cardboard beer-mat on the counter, then grabs it and angrily tears it into tiny pieces while mumbling under his breath.

„Hey, was ist los?“, (“Hey, what’s up?”), you ask. Jonas stops mutilating the beer-mat, turns to you and exclaims:

„Ach, verdammt! Ich hatte heute mein erstes Date mit Susanne. Du weißt schon, die toll aussehende Verkäuferin in dem Blumenladen am Marktplatz in die ich schon seit Monaten verknallt bin.“

(“Oh, damn! I had my first date with Susanne today. You know, the gorgeous sales assistant in the flower shop on the market square who I’ve had a crush on for months.”)

„Ja, ich weiß, die große Blonde mit den großen ...ähm., Augen“, sagst du.

„Und, was ist passiert?“

(“Yes, I know, the tall blonde with the big... um, eyes”, you say. “So, what happened?”)

„Naja, nichts! Wir haben gegessen und geredet und ich hab’ ihr von meinem neuen 3er BMW erzählt und von meinem letzten Urlaub in Thailand mit Trixi, meiner Ex, und sogar erwähnt, dass Trixi immer meinte, ich hätte den größten Dödel, den sie je gesehen hat! Und was sagt diese Frau dann am Ende zu mir? Ich sei, ‘sicherlich ganz amüsant’ und dass wir uns ‘gerne wieder am 30. Februar treffen könnten’! Mit anderen Worten, sie hat mir mehr oder weniger durch die Blume gesagt, dass ich ein Trottel sei und sie mich nicht wiedersehen will. Und das, obwohl ich ihr sogar ein Foto von meinem Dödel gezeigt hab’!“

(“Well, nothing! We ate and talked, and I told her about my new BMW 3 Series and my last holiday in Thailand with Trixi, my ex, and even mentioned that Trixi always said I had the biggest willy she’d ever seen! And what does this woman say to me at the end? That I’m ‘certainly quite amusing’ and that we ‘could meet again on 30 February’! In other words, she more or less told me in a roundabout way that I’m an idiot and that she doesn’t want to see me again. And that’s even though I showed her a photo of my willy!”)

You nod while trying to look convincingly sympathetic, but by now Jonas has his nose deep in his beer mug and finishes its content, then slams the large glass on the counter and loudly orders another one. In the meantime, you have made up your mind and decided to be an honest friend instead of feigning sympathy. So, next you say: „Naja, durch die Blume gesagt bist Du daran ja auch ein bisschen selbst schuld.“

(“Well, to put it mildly, you’re partly to blame for that yourself.”)

„Ach ja!?“ Jonas turns to you aggressively. „Und wieso? Na komm, raus damit, sei ehrlich. Du musst mir nichts durch die Blume sagen!“

(„Oh, really!? And why is that? Come on, out with it, be honest. You don't have to sugarcoat anything with me!“).

Right then, the massive form of the bartender appears out of the shadows behind the counter. His bald head with its thick beard leans over and he pierces Jonas with his dark eyes. Wordlessly, he places a small vase with a single velvety, blood-red rose in full bloom in front of Jonas and says in a soft, husky voice: „*Pass mal auf, Jonas, mein Junge. Ich erzähl' Dir mal was. Es ist nicht lange her, in der Barockzeit, da wurde es schon als unschicklich angesehen, die Dame seines Herzens offen anzusprechen. Allein für diesen Zweck haben sie damals ein Sofa mit zwei Sitzen erfunden, auf dem Du und die Dame deines Verlangens dann Rücken an Rücken saßen. Natürlich ohne sich zu berühren.*

Wenn Du Dich dann ungestört unterhalten wolltest, dann hieltst Du einen Fächer vor den Mund und flüsterst der Dame süße Nettigkeiten zu, ohne den Kopf zu drehen. So konnte die leider immer anwesende Anstandsdame nichts aussetzen. Und auf der Rückenlehne zwischen den beiden Turteltauben standen dann auch oft die in der Zeit so beliebten, aufwändigen Blumengestecke. Darum sprachen die Tuschelnden 'durch die Blume'. Verstehst Du? Sie flüsternten sich ein-zwei Worte zu, die mehr bedeuteten als ganze Bücher oder Dick-Pics es je könnten. Durch die Blume gesagt, Junge, weniger ist oft mehr. Kapiert?“

(“Look here, Jonas, my boy. Let me tell you something. Not so long ago, in the Baroque period, it was considered improper to openly address the lady of your heart. For this purpose alone, they invented a two-seater sofa on which you and the lady of your desire would sit back-to-back. Without touching each other, of course.

If you wanted to talk undisturbed, you held a fan in front of your mouth and whispered sweet nothings to the lady without turning your head. That way, the chaperone, who was unfortunately always present, couldn't find fault. And on the backrest between the two lovebirds, there were often elaborate flower arrangements, which were popular at the time. That's why the whisperers spoke 'through the flower'. Do you understand? They whispered a word or two to each other that meant more than entire books or dick-pics could ever convey. To put it nicely, lad, less is often more. Got it?“)

He strokes a petal of the perfect rose surprisingly gentle with a large finger and grumbles: „*Hier, geh und probier's aus.*“, (“Here, go and try it.”), before his head disappears into the dim light behind the bar-counter and he is gone.

After a longer silence, you finally remark with a chuckle: „*Wow! Otto hat Dir buchstäblich durch die Blume gesagt, dass Du öfter mal die Schnauze halten solltest. Also, so elegant hätte ich das nicht hingekriegt.*“

(“Wow! Otto told you literally 'through the flower', [i.e. in a roundabout way] that you should shut up more often. Now, I certainly couldn't have said it more elegantly.”).

But Jonas is already fumbling his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans, pulls a 20 Euro bill out and puts it on the counter, then jumps off his bar stool and tells you with a grin: „*Ich geh jetzt zu Susanne und sag' ihr einfach, dass ich sie liebe! Aber nicht durch die Blume sondern mit einer Blume!*“

(“I’m going to Susanne and just tell her that I love her! But not through the flower, but *with* a flower!”)

Jonas picks the rose, which seems to radiate its own burgundy light, out of its vase, pats you on the shoulder and disappears through the pub’s age-old wooden door into a promising night.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Mareike hat mir durch die Blume gesagt, dass ...“	“[Mareike] hinted to me that ...”	In conversation
Also, ich sag's mal durch die Blume, ...“	“So, let me put this delicately. ...”	Gossip
„Ich möchte das mal durch die Blume formulieren ...“	“I'd like to phrase this in a rather diplomatic way ...”	Interview answer; 'Official' statement



German:

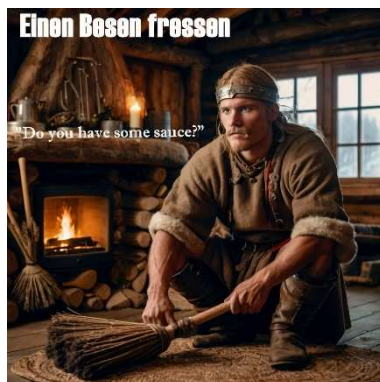
Einen Besen fressen

Literally:

To eat a broom

English:

To eat one's hat



Another day, another encounter with a weird German idiom. At a convivial gathering at your local bustling coffee shop, you tell your friends that you plan to go skydiving next weekend for the first time in your life. Wolfgang, Birgit, Ilias, Karsten, Iris, Jonas and Susanne all look at you in a mixture of shock and surprise. Finally, Karsten is the first to overcome his paralysis and exclaims: „*Du!? Fallschirmspringen!? Mit deiner Höhenangst? Also, wenn du das*

wirklich machst, dann fresse ich einen Besen!“, (“You? Skydiving? With your fear of heights? Okay, if you really do that, I’ll eat a broom!”)

A couple of weeks later, you all meet up again in your favourite café. You confidently walk in and wordlessly hand Karsten a pristine broom.

The idiom „*Dann fresse ich einen Besen*“ (“Then I’ll eat a broom”) is a colloquial, widely used German expression that signifies surprise, disbelief or scepticism, roughly equivalent to “I don’t believe it!” or “That’s completely impossible!”

Now, for anyone who noticed that the word for “eat” here is not the usual German verb „*essen*” but instead the verb „*fressen*”, well spotted. German-speakers use the word „*essen*” solely for humans consuming food in a civilised manner, while the term „*fressen*” is usually used for animals wolfing down their chow.

Since dogs, wolves, cats, lions, foxes or tigers do this generally in a rather messy way, without closing their snouts while chewing and without using any cutlery, the term „fressen“ has also been adopted to describe the eating-habits of humans who wolf down their chow like an animal, e.g. by tearing large chunks with their teeth from their grilled wild boar knuckle or by slobbering mushroom cream sauce all over their shirt-front or by gobbling down their *Spaghetti all'arrabiata* like a starving *Luciano Pavarotti*. And since a broom would vehemently resist any attempt to being consumed in any civilised manner, (e.g. with cutlery), the only way to get the unruly bristles into your digestive tract is to „fressen“ (“wolf down”) it.

While the exact origins of the idiom are not clearly documented, there is evidence for it appearing in written form in the 19th century in comedic texts and plays. Then, just as now, it was an exaggerated bet claiming to do something impossible if something else would actually happen, like: “If you learn German, I’ll start learning Mongolian Throat Singing!”

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it’s used:
„Wenn das stimmt, fress’ ich einen Besen.“	“If that’s true, I’ll eat my hat.”	Statement
„Wenn Du das schaffst, fress’ ich ‘nen Besen.“	“If you can do that, I’ll eat my hat”	Statement
„Ich fress’ ‘nen Besen!“	“I’ll eat my hat!; ‘Unbelievable!”	Exclamation



German:	Ins Fettnäpfchen treten
Literally:	To step into a small bowl with lard or grease
English:	To put one’s foot in it



foot in it!”

Should you pose the question to contemporary Germans regarding the provenance of their proverbial expressions, it is likely that you will be met with a scarcity of responses, accompanied by a multitude of equivocal gestures. But no idiom is shrouded in more mystery than the saying: „*Da bist Du aber ins Fettnäpfchen getreten!*“, which literally means, “You really stepped into the small grease pot there”, i.e., the German equivalent of, “Well, you’ve really put your

The greatest source of confusion with this idiom is naturally the word „*Fettnäpfchen*“. A „*Näpfchen*“ is a small bowl, due to the diminutive form with the „-chen“-ending. The word for a larger bowl is „*Napf*“, which is still in use today, mainly to denote a bowl for animal food, e.g. for a cat or dog. The second confusing aspect, which often befuddles Germans too, is the bowl’s contents, which is „*Fett*“ [~fat], i.e. “lard”, “fat”, or “grease”. But why would anyone have a small bowl of lard or grease lying around when not even cats and dogs would eat that? Weird. And the final conundrum only adds to the

confusion, because if you can step into this bowl of lard, that must mean that it sits on the floor. „Und was zur Hölle macht ein Napf mit Fett auf dem Boden?“, (“And what on earth is a bowl of lard doing on the floor?”)

Regrettably, the solution to this mystery is actually rather anticlimactic. See, in old farmhouses, the farmer’s wife would put a grease bowl between the door and the stove. When the farmhands came home in the evening after a day’s hard work in the fields, they would use the contents of the bowl to re-grease their boots to stop them drying out, keeping the leather soft and pliable. Often, a tired or clumsy farmhand, or even the farmer himself, would stumble around and accidentally step into the bowl of grease, making a mess and prompting the lady of the house to berate him for his clumsiness, much to the amusement of the others.

Over the centuries, this common scene evolved into a general warning against behaving stupidly or clumsily — in other words, not to say or do things that make you look foolish.

To give a modern-day example, imagine that you and your business partner have entered the impressive conference room of an international corporation to meet its CEO, Dr Degenhart. You are hoping to win him and his conglomerate as your newest and biggest customer. The atmosphere is friendly; you shake hands, take your seats, and engage in the usual small talk. At one point, you innocently ask the burly CEO: „Und wie geht es Ihrer Frau?“, (“And how is your wife doing?”). In an instant, the smile disappears from Dr Degenhart’s face. He looks at you with cold eyes and replies coolly:

„Danke, ihr geht es ausgezeichnet. Schließlich hat ihr das Scheidungsgericht vor einer Woche mein Haus, meinen Ferrari, mein halbes Vermögen und unsere beiden Kinder zugesprochen. Oder wie die Presse es formulierte, ‘Scheidungskrieg: Sybille Degenhart lässt Ex-Mann und IT-Gigant CEO arm aussehen’“.

(‘Thank you, she’s doing just great. After all, a week ago the divorce court awarded her my house, my Ferrari, half my fortune and our two children. Or as the press put it, ‘Divorce battle: Sybille Degenhart leaves ex-husband and IT-giant CEO looking poor’.”) [Double meaning: In German, “to look poor” also means, “to be defeated”.]

The rest of the conversation drags on rather awkwardly after that, and Dr. Degenhart soon gets up and ends the meeting. The two of you wordlessly make your way out of the impressive company HQ. But as soon as you are outside, your partner gives you the coldest look imaginable and snarls: „Guter Gott! ‘Wie geht es Ihrer Frau?! Na, da bist Du diesmal ja voll ins Fettnäpfchen getreten!’“, (“Good heavens! ‘How is your wife?! Well, you’ve really put your foot in this time!’”)

Nowadays, it is still easy to “step into the bowl of lard” in Germany, for example by asking a German about their salary, weight, age, sexual preferences, family matters or whether their grandparents were members of Hitler’s Nazi party. In comparison, it would still be better to casually bring up the ‘Wembley goal’ that was wrongfully awarded to England in the 1966 Football World Championship finals between England and Germany (4:2). Or just start singing the ‘Bomber Harris’ song. That will do nicely.

What Germans typically say:

What it means in English:

When it’s used:

„Karl tritt in jedes Fettnäpfchen, das er findet.“	“(Karl) puts his foot in it every chance he gets.”	In conversations
„Da bist Du aber schön ins Fettnäpfchen getreten, was?“	“You really put your foot in it there, didn't you?”	As statement
„Samantha lässt auch wirklich kein Fettnäpfchen aus.“	“(Samantha) never misses an opportunity to put her foot in it.”	Gossip
„Oh Mann, voll ins Fettnäpfchen getreten!“	“Oh dear, you've really put your foot in it!”	Exclamation



German:

Einen Zahn zulegen

Literally:

To put another tooth on it

English:

To speed something. up; To drive faster



Finally, your dream comes true! You are in Germany, your German friend owns a Porsche™ 911™ Turbo™ S Cabriolet, (i.e., a bloody fast Porsche™ convertible) – and she agrees to take the powerful machine on the road with you. And best of all: She allows you to drive.

The next thing you know, you are cruising along on the famous *Autobahn* and a glance at the speedometer shows you that you're currently doing 160 km/h, (99 mph).

Your friend in the passenger seat looks bored out of the side window and says: „Hör mal, wir sind doch hier nicht auf'm Kindergeburtstag. Leg mal einen Zahn zu!“, (“Listen, this isn't a children's birthday party. Get a move on, will you!”)

Thus prompted, you offer a silent prayer, firmly press the pedal to the metal and begin to fly along the lanes at 229 km/h (142 mph). Suddenly, you see a white-and-blue Audi™ A6 Avant Quattro with flashing blue roof lights in your rear-view mirror, actually gaining ground on you.

A wave of panic washes over you. But a few seconds later, the car from the „*Autobahnpolizei*“ (“Autobahn Police”) passes you at a speed of at least 240 km/h (149 mph) and soon becomes a rapidly shrinking spot on the horizon. Shakily, you take your foot off the pedal, wipe the sweat from your forehead and say with a lopsided grin: „Na, da hab' ich aber nicht nur einen Zahn zugelegt, sondern eher ein ganzes Gebiss, was?“, (“Well, I haven't just put a tooth on it there, but rather a whole set of teeth, haven't I?”) In response, your friend just grins broadly.

Well, obviously, the "tooth" mentioned in this idiom has nothing to do with the tooth fairy or the human teeth she likes to collect. Instead, some people think that the "tooth" in question comes from the gear wheel of the mechanical transmission in early automobiles. Others think, probably rightfully so, that it is related to another medieval household custom, whereby large cooking pots were hung on a rack over open fires. If the cook wanted to increase the temperature, they would hang the pot a notch lower, or “put a tooth in”.

In any case, the idiom has become particularly popular with young German mothers, who like to urge their slow-moving young children on in the morning before school with an exasperated: „Jetzt legt mal einen Zahn zu, ihr Trödellesen! Sonst seid ihr schon wieder zu spät in der Schule und könnt euch später keinen Porsche 911 Turbo S Cabriolet leisten, wenn ihr groß seid!“, („Now get a move on, you slowpokes! Otherwise, you'll be late for school again and later won't be able to afford your own Porsche 911 Turbo S Cabriolet when you grow up!“)

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Jetzt leg' mal 'nen Zahn zu!“	“Come on now, step on it! ‘Hurry up!’”	Impatient demand
„Auf der A3 kannst du öfter mal einen Zahn zulegen.“	“The A3 [Autobahn 3] allows you to step on it quite often.”	Show-off statement
„... und dann hab' ich halt mal einen Zahn zugelegt.“	“... and then I just stepped on it.”	Tall tale telling
„Der neue 3er BMW legt noch mal einen Zahn zu.“	“The new [BMW 3 Series] raises the performance up another notch.”	Car review



German:

Kreislauf haben

Literally:

To have circulation

English:

To have problems with the (blood) circulation system



Do you know this feeling, when your legs suddenly get all wobbly, a hot wave of exhaustion rushes over you, your hands start to tremble, and beads of sweat break out on your forehead? When you feel light-headed, dizzy and weak and suddenly have only one wish: To get into a dark, cool room, drink some cold water and lie down for a bit?

Well, that's a genuine case of what Germans like to call, „Kreislauf haben“, meaning literally, “to have circulation”, in

other words, having problems with their blood circulation, often associated with a sudden drop in blood pressure.

However, whether such spells of dizziness can always be traced back to low blood pressure is debatable. What's certain is that even if Germans wake up with a massive hangover after the previous night's 8 *Weißbier*, 3 Long Island Iced tea and 15 tequila shots and feel as if their bedroom has turned into a chairplane, some of them will still blame their feeling of impending doom simply on having „Kreislauf“.

Another typical situation where „Kreislauf haben“ serves as the go-to explanation, particularly with elder Germans who were already adults at the time of Charles' and Diana's royal wedding, arises when you jump up too quickly from your seat. For instance, when the king enters the ball room and everyone rises, including you, only for you to suddenly become light-headed and faint straight into the arms of the royal octogenarian.

A further precarious situation also younger Germans are familiar with comes to pass when you eat your two bread rolls with „Mett“ (minced raw

pork with diced raw onions) for breakfast, washing it all down with a Red Bull™ energy drink and a Double Ristretto Chocolate Brownie Iced Vanilla Double Shot Gingerbread Frappuccino on your way to work. Shortly before you arrive, you suddenly start to pant, break out in a cold sweat and feel dizzy. A kind nurse who is passing on her way to work stops and asks you, „*Alles in Ordnung?*“ You nod and reply, „*Ja, nur ein bisschen Kreislauf.*“ ("Yes, just a bit of low blood pressure."). Then you compose yourself and continue on your way to perform your first brain surgery of the day in the operating theatre.

In all sorts of cases, Germans tend to blame their queasiness on their „*Kreislauf*“. One of the most often assumed causes for such spells of weakness is also „*das Wetter*“ ("the weather"). Especially older people have a tendency to slump into their armchairs and lament their „*Kreislaufprobleme*“ as soon as the temperature rapidly rises or drops by more than $\pm 5^{\circ}\text{C}$ (41°F). Exclusively in Bavaria, people often also blame the „*Föhn*“, a warm and dry wind blowing down from the Alps – (and the namesake for a German brand of hairdryers („*Föhn*“) which became synonymous with the device.)

From a medical perspective, Germans claiming problems with their cardiovascular system usually experience dizziness, faintness, wooziness, low blood pressure or a vague feeling of being weak, unstable, or “about to collapse.” In most cases, however, such sensations can be traced back to either *orthostatic hypotension*, (i.e., when blood pressure drops after standing up), or *vasovagal reactions*, (i.e., fainting due to stress, heat, or dehydration). Another common cause is *general circulatory instability*, brought about by external factors such as exhaustion, summer heat, high atmospheric pressure, overindulgence in stimulating beverages or substances, allergies or claustrophobia.

But all this still doesn't answer the question why a whole nation is so insistent on sticking with this most basic and vague of all basic and vague diagnoses for all kinds of symptoms and causes?

To answer this, we need to go back in time to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. You see, by the late 19th century, Germany had become the global centre of medical and biomedical science, with even many physicians from Britain, the U.S., Russia, and Japan training at German universities. For example, in this period alone, *Robert Koch* identified the bacteria causing Tuberculosis (1882) and Cholera (1883), *Emil von Behring* developed the serum therapy for diphtheria (1890s) and from 1880 onwards *Rudolf Virchow's* earlier work ('*Cellular Pathology Based on Physiological and Pathological Tissue Theory*', 1858), was systematically applied and formed the theoretical basis for modern pathology, bacteriology and cellular pathology.

While this explains the trust that the German population placed in their doctors back then, it nevertheless stands in stark contrast to the somewhat outlandish theory that those very doctors had developed regarding the „*Kreislauf*“. See, in German medical circles of the time, the „*Kreislauf*“ became regarded as a “*holistic regulator of health*” and not just as the blood that is rushed through the body in a circle by a pumping muscle.

For the often ingenious (but at times surprisingly misguided) German doctors of the time, a “weak circulation” therefore constituted a diagnosis that could be conveniently applied to many undefinable or non-severe ailments.

With so many patients leaving the hospital or doctor's office with the same diagnosis of „*schwacher Kreislauf*“ (“weak circulation”), it's no wonder that the phrase soon became cultural shorthand, and everyone knew what you meant when you said, „*Oh Mann, ich hab' heute Kreislauf.*“ (“Oh man, I've got circulation today”). A phrase that has then been passed down from generation to generation and today is still used as an idiomatic symptom category, like in English, “*the chills.*”

So, should you've joined the German workforce, sooner or later also you will encounter some secretary, office worker, apprentice or other professional who will timidly mention that they have a „*Kreislaufproblem*“ today. However, it could turn out that the idea behind this was actually just “to launch a test balloon”, to see if the boss or colleagues would react sympathetically. In which case the groundworks would have already been laid for a post-lunch complaint about sudden headaches or nausea – and thus for an afternoon of „*blau machen*“ and the freedom to take a trip „*raus ins Grüne*”.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Ich hab' Kreislauf.“	“I've got circulation problems.”	Statement
„Ich kann heute nicht kommen, ich hab's mit dem Kreislauf.“	“I can't come in today; I've got circulation problems.”	Employee to company
„Das liegt bestimmt am Kreislauf.“	“It's definitely down to circulation.”	Smart aleck comment
„Miriam hat ständig Kreislauf.“	“[Miriam] always has circulation problems.”	Gossip
„Bei der Hitze haben vor allem ältere Menschen oft Kreislaufprobleme.“	“In this hot weather, older people in particular often suffer from circulatory problems.”	Annually returning statement by medical journalists



German:	Jemandem einen Bären aufbinden
Literally:	To tie a bear onto someone
English:	To pull someone's leg; To spin a yarn; to tell a tall tale



The meaning of this idiom is quickly explained. However, the more interesting question here is where this strange “picture” of a bear being tied onto someone originally came from and how it came to describe a situation in which one person spins a yarn for another.

Unfortunately, the mists of history once again only allow us to catch glimpses of the past, and so we must make do with the limited information we have to cobble

together some plausible theories.

For the first theory that has been put forward we need to travel back in time to an era when farmers' markets and travelling fairgrounds were still a rugged and unregulated affair. One of the main attractions at these popular events were so-called “bear trainers”, often simply carnival and fairground jugglers who somehow came into possession of a trained bear, and who performed with the poor creature at fairs and festivals. Some linguistic historians now suggest that “to bind or tie a bear onto someone” therefore

has first come to be a figurative expression for burdening someone with something difficult or annoying to handle, (as if the poor bear didn't suffer enough already, it was apparently also the one who was "difficult" and "annoying"), which later transformed into the modern meaning of "burdening someone with a lie" or to tell a tall tale.

At least the second explanation put forward in connection with bear trainers and real bears doesn't blame the innocent, mistreated animals. Instead, it suggests that the self-proclaimed bear trainers were somehow tricking the audience, perhaps even by having a man wearing a bear costume to deceive the gullible common country folk. Once these audiences suspected deceit or actually found out that the bear was in fact just a malnourished poor fella in a moth-eaten bear costume, they might very well have passed the word around that „*Der große Kunibert – Bärenbezwiner und Meister-Jongleur*“ (= "The Great Kunibert – Bear Vanquisher and Master Juggler"), had figuratively tied a bear-sized lie onto them.

Scholars who are leaving past historic events aside and concentrate purely on the linguistic aspect suggest instead that the bear is an age-old symbol for something big, unpredictable and dangerous. Tying such a beast onto someone's back or leg would almost certainly result in a rather messy outcome and should thus be avoided just as much as liars and their lies in all their manifestations. But honestly, this explanation seems somewhat pulled out of thin air and does leave something to be desired.

In comparison, the alternative linguistic theory has a bit more flesh on its bones. It suggests that the idiom has its origins in older regional dialect forms, where „*Bär*“ was indeed used metaphorically to represent a burden, a difficulty or a deception.

In the end, we will probably never know for certain how this unusual idiom truly came about in its current form, which Germans still use as a matter of course today. And anyone who will tell you otherwise clearly intends „*dir einen Bären aufzubinden*“.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Komm, bind' mir keinen Bären auf.“	"Come on, don't pull my leg."	When possibly lied to
„Der hat Dir doch einen Bären aufgebunden.“	"I'm sure he pulled your leg."	When giving an opinion
„Sie wollen mir wohl einen Bären aufbinden, was?“	"You're trying to pull wool over my eyes, aren't you?"	When possibly being taken advantage of



German:

Die beleidigte Leberwurst spielen

Literally:

To play the insulted liver sausage

English:

To sulk; To be a sore loser; To throw a tantrum



Of course, how could German ever get by without idioms involving one of its homeland's most famous and ubiquitous culinary delights, the „Wurst“, (“sausage”)?

Next to the deeply philosophical saying, „*Alles hat ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei*“, (“Everything has an end, only the sausage has two”), that has even been made into a popular song, the idiom „*Die beleidigte Leberwurst spielen*” is certainly up there with the best German sausage-idioms in existence

and remains common in German culture as a slightly teasing reprimand.

Calling someone who is exaggeratedly pouting an “insulted liver sausage” is thus rarely intended as a harsh insult but often used in a light-hearted manner with friends, children or partners when they are fussing over something trivial.

Historically, the seemingly nonsensical phrase goes back to old German folk humour and has roots in culinary and folk tales imagery alike. A popular folk explanation for the idiom's origins that made the rounds in the 19th century pointed at a particular fairy tale-like story involving different types of sausages as the main characters, (because of course there's a German fairy tale with sausages as the protagonists).

The story in a nutshell: Once upon a time, all the different kinds of sausages decided to go on a pleasant walk in the countryside together – the *Bratwurst*, the *Blutwurst*, the *Bockwurst*, the *Knackwurst*, the *Leberwurst* and all the others. Everything could have been fine and dandy – if only the *Leberwurst* wouldn't have begun to complain after a while, because it felt that the others didn't pay enough attention to it. And as it so often happened, soon the *Leberwurst* had worked itself up into a rage – until it finally burst open and spilled its innards on the road, (as liver sausages tend to do when overcooked or overheated). The End.

Okay, probably you need to be German to regard this “fairy tale” as a completely normal children's story instead of the existential horror of bursting bellies and spilled entrails that it actually is. In any case, this at one time rather popular tale gave birth to the idiom that is still in use centuries later. That is, if you're willing to swallow this explanation, of course.

Alternatively, there is also a more grounded, culinary angle to choose as the idiom's origin story. This goes back to the olden days, when the farmer and his wife still stuffed and boiled their sausages at home on the farm. Once the sausages swam in the large pot, it was of utmost importance to take the softer and more delicate *Leberwurst* out of the boiling water earlier than the other sausage types, since otherwise it would burst.

In turn, this may have given rise to the joke that the *Leberwurst* didn't “want to stay” any longer in the pot with the other sausages because it was “offended” and would burst out of sheer indignation.

As a small side note, contrary to popular belief the German delicacy *Leberwurst* does in fact not consist purely of ground pork liver. Other main ingredients include pork meat, pork fat or bacon, sautéed or boiled onions, salt and curing salt, broth or stock, marjoram, white pepper, allspice, nutmeg, thyme, and sometimes mace or ginger.

Variations of this *Leberwurst*-recipe have been well-known since at least the 17th century – while the “offended version” is a more recent humorous personification, attested in written form since the 19th century.

You eat your *Leberwurst* traditionally spread cold on bread or rye rolls (*Leberwurstbrot*), optionally served with mustard, pickles and onions on the side. In rural areas or traditional German restaurants, you can often also order a warm *Leberwurst*, served differently depending on the region. In the Rhineland they like to eat warm *Leberwurst* with „*Himmel und Ääd*“, (“Heaven and Earth” in dialect, i.e. mashed potatoes and apple sauce), while in the Palatinate they prefer it with sauerkraut and mustard. In Hesse, they serve the sausage with sauerkraut and mashed or boiled potatoes, in Thuringia it comes alongside blood sausage and head cheese (*Schlachtplatte*), and in northern Germany *warme Leberwurst* is often simply served with bread and pickles.

However, unlike the spreadable „*feine Leberwurst*“, a warm *Leberwurst* will always be a „*Hausmacher*“ or „*grobe Leberwurst*“, i.e. the coarse and rustic variation. The best way to enjoy this dish in the most traditional way is simple: Once you’ve got the steaming delicacy in front of you on a plate, first remove the casing. Next, cut it into your mashed or boiled potatoes, then mix this with sauerkraut and apple sauce or mustard for a sweet-sour-savoury balance, put the mix in your mouth and taste how the warmth perfectly brings out the liver aroma and creamy fat texture. And you can bet your hamster’s favourite handbag that after such a treat, very few are able to continue “playing the offended liver sausage”.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Jetzt spiel' hier nicht die beleidigte Leberwurst.“	“Don't play the offended victim here.”	In discussions
„Kerstin spielt immer gleich die beleidigte Leberwurst.“	“[Kerstin] always plays the insulted victim.”	In conversations
„Na, Du beleidigte Leberwurst? Immer noch sauer?“	“Well, you poor sulking thing? Still angry?”	As a tentatively out-stretched hand
„Hmm, lecker, warme Leberwurst! Okay, jetzt bin ich nicht mehr beleidigt.“	“Hmm, yummy, warm liver sausage! Okay, now I'm not offended anymore.”	Time to eat



German:

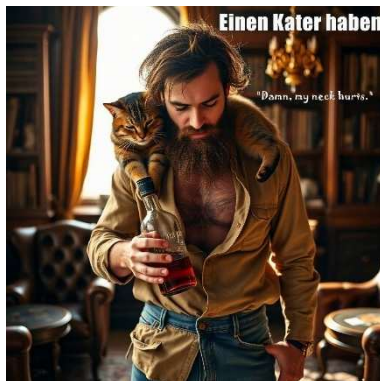
Einen Kater haben

Literally:

To have a tomcat

English:

To have a hangover



Probably only about the same small number of people who can remain grumpy after a warm *Leberwurst* are also aware of the fact that the „Kater“, (“tomcat”), that’s to be had in this common idiom doesn’t refer to a male cat at all but was instead born from the Latin-based term “*Katarrh*”.

As the story goes, in the 18th and 19th century it appears that more than just a few German university students had made it a habit to entertain themselves by conversing

in a crude mix of Latin, Greek and German, as one naturally does as one of those scions of the upper-class bourgeoisie. And it is a fair guess to assume that the original creators who coined this term for their regularly occurring hangovers after a night of binge-drinking must have studied medicine in Heidelberg, Berlin (*Charité*), or Munich (*LMU & TU*). After all, the Latin-derived word „*Katarrh*“, (from Greek “καταρρεῖν” = “*katarrhein*” = “to flow down”), is to this day the official medical term for an “*inflammation of the mucous membrane of the respiratory organs*”. A medical condition that is associated with increased secretion of watery or mucous discharge, or, as English calls it, a “runny head”. Of course, it is no coincidence that a typical hangover often materialises with very similar symptoms, i.e., a heavy head, dull pain and sluggishness. For the aspiring “demigods in white” reason enough to equate the term „*Katarrh*” with their frequent post-drinking illness.

Over time, the local pharmacists, wine merchants, tobacco salesmen and prostitutes, all living off and in close proximity to the exalted academic circles, picked up on this new term but didn’t quite get the right end of the stick with it, mishearing or misunderstanding the word „*Katarrh*”, which sounded foreign and pretentious, and hence replaced it unceremoniously with the familiar-sounding and homophonous word „*Kater*” (“male cat”). Thus, the initial „*Ich habe einen Katarrh*” gradually morphed into the far more playful „*Ich habe einen Kater.*”, (“I’ve got a hangover.”). And by the late 1800s, „*Kater*” had become the common term for a hangover in everyday speech.

Today, the German language also knows the „*Katerfrühstück*”, i.e., “hangover breakfast”, which can consist of all kinds of “miracle cure” foods and drinks to recover from a hangover the next morning – from pickled herring and strong black coffee to raw eggs, a glass of vegetable juice or freshly pressed orange juice, scrambled eggs with ham and cheese, a piece of blueberry cake, or fried egg sandwiches with mayonnaise and broccoli.

Naturally, German has turned the idiom „*einen Kater haben*” also into an adjective, hence the expression „*verkatert sein*”, which literally translates to “to be tomcatted” but of course means, “to be hungover”.

Finally, and so as not to leave all the fun to the cats’ male gender, there’s also the term „*Katzenjammer*”, literally meaning “cat’s wailing”. The word originally describes the sound of a cat in distress but later also became a synonym for hangover or for a tearful emotional regret after a break-up.

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
„Mann, hab' ich einen Kater.“	“Blimey, I've got such a hangover.”	Morning after
„Wenn du so weiter trinkst, hast du morgen garantiert einen Kater.“	“If you keep drinking like that, you're guaranteed to have a hangover tomorrow.”	Good advice
„Wein auf Bier: Das rat' ich dir. Bier auf Wein: Das lass' sein.“	“Wine after beer: Nothing to fear. Beer after wine: Rips out your spine.”	German saying
„Obwohl ich gestern gesoffen hab' wie ein Loch, hab' ich heute keinen Kater.“	“Even though I drank like a fish [„hole“] yesterday, I don't have a hangover today.”	Bragging



German:	Feierabend
Literally:	Celebration evening
English:	<i>Home time, quitting time, time after work, beer o'clock</i>



If there is one German word any newly employed foreigner in Germany will indubitably learn in their first week, then it is the term „Feierabend“, i.e., the “celebration evening”.

Whether it is in the wishful phrase, „*Hoffentlich ist bald Feierabend!*“ = “Hopefully the workday is over soon!”, in the relieved utterance of: „*So, endlich Feierabend!*“ = “So, finally the work is done for today!” or in the ubiquitous question

among workers: „*Was machst Du am Feierabend?*“ = “What are you doing after work?” – the word „Feierabend” embodies everything you’re looking forward to when the job stretches out like a wad of cheap chewing gum that you can’t wait to spit out, in other words, to leave through that door and start your „Feierabend”, i.e., the decidedly better part of your day.

Originally, the word „Feierabend” derives from Middle High German and once referred only to an evening before a public holiday. However, from about the 16th century on, craftsmen began to use the term to indicate the “resting time in the evening”, and today it has become synonymous with the moment when the workday officially ends, i.e., 17:00 or 18:00 o’clock – as well as with the time-period between the end of the workday and the moment you fall into your waiting bed after some bottles of delicious, unwinding „Feierabendbier”. And incidentally, that’s something also you have verily earned now after your extensive dance with **That Damn German Language!**

What Germans typically say:	What it means in English:	When it's used:
“Endlich Feierabend.”	“Finally, time to knock off.”	Colleague to colleague
„Ich hab' heut' früher Feierabend.“	„I finish early today.”	In conversation
“Wann hast Du Feierabend?”	“When do you finish?”	In conversation
“Was machst Du am Feierabend?”	“What are you doing after work?”	In conversation
“So, jetzt ist Feierabend.”	“Right, that's work well done for the day.”	Bringing something to a satisfactory conclusion.



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