

Recognizing the German you already know

Spotting words that aren't what they seem

Using German idioms

Chapter 1

You Already Know a Little German

The best way to learn a new language is to jump right in — no pussyfooting around. In this chapter, you get a head start in German by seeing some of the language you're already familiar with. You also find out some popular German expressions, and you get the hang of why you need to be careful with what are called »false friends,« that is, words that seem to be the same in both languages but actually have different meanings.

The German You Know

Because both German and English belong to the group of Germanic languages, quite a few words are either identical or similar in both languages. Words that share a common source are called *cognates*. Another group of words common to German and English stem from Latin-based words that English speakers are familiar with. Many of these have direct equivalents in German, for example, nouns that end in »-tion.«

Friendly allies (perfect cognates)

The following words are spelled the same way and have the same meaning in German and in English. The only differences are the pronunciation, as shown in parentheses, as well as the fact that in German, nouns are always capitalized. In addition, German nouns have one of three genders, as seen on this list by the words **der** (masculine), **die** (feminine), and **das** (neuter) in front of each noun. See Chapter 2 for details on what gender is all about and go to Chapter 3 for information on the pronunciation key for each word presented in this book. In a few instances, the German and English pronunciation for the word is the same, so you'll see the English word in the pronunciation (followed by the notation »as in English.«)

- ✓ **der Arm** (dêr ârm)
- ✓ **der Bandit** (dêr bân-deet)
- ✓ **die Bank** (dee bânk)
- ✓ **die Basis** (dee bah-zis)
- ✓ **blind** (blint)
- ✓ **die Butter** (dee boot-er)
- ✓ **digital** (di-gi-tâl)
- ✓ **elegant** (êl-ê-gânt)
- ✓ **die Emotion** (dee ê-moh-tsee-ohn)
- ✓ **emotional** (ê-moh-tsee-oh-nahl)
- ✓ **der Finger** (dêr fing-er)
- ✓ **die Hand** (dee hânt)
- ✓ **das Hotel** (dâs hotel [as in English])
- ✓ **die Inspiration** (dee in-spi-râ-tsee-ohn)
- ✓ **international** (in-ter-nâ-tsee-oh-nahl)
- ✓ **irrational** (ir-râ-tsee-oh-nahl)
- ✓ **legal** (ley-gahl)
- ✓ **liberal** (lee-bêr-ahl)
- ✓ **der Mast** (dêr mast)
- ✓ **die Mine** (dee meen-e)
- ✓ **modern** (moh-dêrn)
- ✓ **der Moment** (dêr moh-mênt)
- ✓ **die Motivation** (dee moh-ti-vâ-tsee-ohn)
- ✓ **das Museum** (dâs mooh-zey-oohm)
- ✓ **der Name** (dêr nah-me)
- ✓ **die Nation** (dee nâ-tsee-ohn)
- ✓ **normal** (nor-mahl)
- ✓ **die Olive** (dee oh-lee-ve)
- ✓ **parallel** (pâr-â-leyl)
- ✓ **das Problem** (dâs proh-bleym)
- ✓ **der Professor** (dêr professor [as in English])
- ✓ **das Radio** (dâs rah-dee-oh)
- ✓ **die Religion** (dee rey-li-gee-ohn)
- ✓ **das Restaurant** (dâs rês-tuh-ron)
- ✓ **die Rose** (dee roh-ze)
- ✓ **der Service** (dêr ser-vis)
- ✓ **das Signal** (dâs zig-nahl)
- ✓ **der Sport** (dêr shport)
- ✓ **die Statue** (dee shtah-tooh-e)
- ✓ **der Stress** (dêr shtrès)
- ✓ **das System** (dâs zers-teym)
- ✓ **das Taxi** (dâs tâx-ee)
- ✓ **der Tiger** (dêr tee-ger)
- ✓ **tolerant** (to-lêr-ânt)
- ✓ **die Tradition** (dee trâ-di-tsee-ohn)
- ✓ **der Tunnel** (dêr toohn-el)
- ✓ **wild** (vilt)
- ✓ **der Wind** (dêr vint)

Kissing cousins (near cognates)

Many words, like the ones shown in Table 1.1, are spelled almost the same in German as in English and have the same meaning. Table 1.1 also shows you something about German spelling conventions, which include:

- ✓ The English *c* is a **k** in most German words.
- ✓ The *ou* in English words like *house* or *mouse* is often equivalent to **au** in German words.
- ✓ Many English adjectives ending in *-ic* or *-ical* have an **-isch** ending in German.
- ✓ Some English adjectives ending in *-y* are spelled with **-ig** in German.
- ✓ Some English nouns ending in *-y* have an **-ie** ending in German.

German	English
die Adresse (dee ah- <i>drês</i> -e)	<i>address</i>
der Aspekt (dêr âs- <i>pêkt</i>)	<i>aspect</i>
der Bär (dêr bear [as in English])	<i>bear</i>
blond (blont)	<i>blond(e)</i>
die Bluse (dee <i>blooh</i> -ze)	<i>blouse</i>
braun (brown [as in English])	<i>brown</i>
die Demokratie (dee dê-moh-krâ- <i>tee</i>)	<i>democracy</i>
direkt (di- <i>rêkt</i>)	<i>direct</i>
der Doktor (dêr <i>dok</i> -tohr)	<i>doctor</i>
exzellent (êx-tsel- <i>ênt</i>)	<i>excellent</i>
fantastisch (fân- <i>tâs</i> -tish)	<i>fantastic</i>
das Glas (dâs glahs)	<i>glass</i>
das Haus (dâs hous)	<i>house</i>
hungrig (<i>hoong</i> -riH)	<i>hungry</i>
die Industrie (dee in-dooH- <i>stree</i>)	<i>industry</i>
der Kaffee (dêr <i>kâf</i> -ey)	<i>coffee</i>
die Komödie (dee koh- <i>mer</i> -dee-e)	<i>comedy</i>
die Kondition (dee kon-di-tsee- <i>ohn</i>)	<i>condition</i>
das Konzert (dâs kon- <i>tsêrt</i>)	<i>concert</i>
die Kultur (dee kool- <i>toohr</i>)	<i>culture</i>
logisch (<i>loh</i> -gish)	<i>logical</i>

Table 1.1: Words Similar in Meaning, Slightly Different in Spelling

German	English
das Mandat (dàs mân-daht)	<i>mandate</i>
der Mann (dêr mân)	<i>man</i>
die Maschine (dee mâ-sheen-e)	<i>machine</i>
die Maus (dee mouse [as in English])	<i>mouse</i>
die Methode (dee mê-toh-de)	<i>method</i>
die Mobilität (dee moh-bi-li-tait)	<i>mobility</i>
die Musik (dee mooh-zeek)	<i>music</i>
die Nationalität (dee nât-see-oh-nahl-i-tait)	<i>nationality</i>
die Natur (dee nâ-tooehr)	<i>nature</i>
offiziell (oh-fits-ee-êl)	<i>official</i> (adjective)
der Ozean (dêr oh-tsê-ân)	<i>ocean</i>
das Papier (dàs pâ-peer)	<i>paper</i>
das Parlament (dàs pâ-r-lâ-mênt)	<i>parliament</i>
perfekt (pêr-fêkt)	<i>perfect</i>
politisch (poh-li-tish)	<i>political</i>
potenziell (po-tên-tsee-êl)	<i>potential</i> (adjective)
praktisch (prâk-tish)	<i>practical</i>
das Programm (dàs proh-grâm)	<i>program</i>
das Salz (dàs zâlts)	<i>salt</i>
der Scheck (dêr shêk)	<i>check</i>
sonnig (zon-iH)	<i>sunny</i>
der Supermarkt (dêr zooh-pêr-mâkt)	<i>supermarket</i>
das Telefon (dàs tê-le-fohn)	<i>telephone</i>
die Theorie (dee tey-ohr-ee)	<i>theory</i>
die Tragödie (dee trâ-ger-dee-e)	<i>tragedy</i>
die Walnuss (dee vahl-noohs)	<i>walnut</i>

Table 1.1: (Continued)

False friends

As does every language, German contains some false friends — those words that look very similar to English but have a completely different meaning. As you read the following list,

you can see why you should treat any new German word with kid gloves, especially if it looks like an English word, until, that is, you find out for sure what it means in English.

- ✓ **After** (ahf-ter): If you want to avoid embarrassment, remember the meaning of this word. Its German meaning is *anus* and not *after*. The German word for *after* is **nach** (nahH) or **nachdem** (nahH-deym).
- ✓ **aktuell** (âk-tooh-êl): This word means *up-to-date* and *current*, not *actual*. The German translation for *actual* is **tatsächlich** (tât-sêH-liH).
- ✓ **also** (âl-zoh): This one means *so*, *therefore*, or *thus*; not *also*. The German word for *also* is **auch** (ouH).
- ✓ **bald** (bâlt): This word means *soon* and is not a description for someone with little or no hair. The German word for *bald* is **kahl** (kahl) or **glatzköpfig** (glâts-kerpf-iH).
- ✓ **bekommen** (be-kom-en): This verb is an important one to remember. It means *to get* and not *to become*. The German word for *to become* is **werden** (vêr-den).
- ✓ **Boot** (boht): This is a *boat* and not a *boot*, which is **Stiefel** (shteef-el) in German. A *sailboat* is called a **Segelboot** (zey-gêl-boht).
- ✓ **brav** (brahf): This word means *well-behaved* and not *brave*. The German word for *brave* is **tapfer** (tâp-fer).
- ✓ **Brief** (breef): This is a noun and means *letter*, not *brief*. The German translation for the English adjective *brief* is **kurz** (koorts), and, for the English noun, **Auftrag** (ouf-trahk) or **Unterlagen** (oon-ter-lah-gen).
- ✓ **Chef** (shêf): This is the German word for a person you take orders from, your *boss* or *supervisor*, not someone who's in charge of the cooking. The German word for *chef* is **Küchenchef** (kueH-ên-shêf) or **Chefkoch** (shêf-koH). Otherwise, a plain *cook* is called a **Koch** (koH) in German.
- ✓ **eventuell** (ey-vên-tooh-êl): This one means *possible* or *possibly*, not *eventual* or *eventually*, both of which would be **schließlich** (shlees-liH) in German.
- ✓ **fast** (fâst): This is an adjective that means *almost* — not the speeds at which Formula One drivers race. The German word for *fast* is **schnell** (shnêl) or **rasch** (râsh).
- ✓ **genial** (gê-nee-ahl): This adjective describes an idea or person *of genius* and has nothing to do with *genial*. The German word for *genial* is **heiter** (hay-ter).
- ✓ **Gift** (gift [as in English]): The German meaning is *poison*, so when you're giving your German-speaking host a *present*, you should say you have a **Geschenk** (gê-shênk), that is, unless you really are giving something like weed killer or a green mamba.
- ✓ **Kind** (kint): This is the German word for *child*. It has nothing to do with the English *kind*, which is **nett** (nêt) or **liebenswürdig** (lee-bens-vuerd-iH) in German.
- ✓ **Komfort** (kom-fohr): This word means *amenity*, for example, the amenities you expect in a five-star hotel, not *comfort*. The German verb meaning *to comfort* [someone] is **trösten** (trêrs-ten).

- ✓ **kurios** (koohr-ee-ohs): This word means *strange*, not *curious*. The German word for *curious* is **neugierig** (noy-geer-iH).
- ✓ **Mist** (mist [as in English]): Be careful not to misuse this word that actually means *manure* in German! It doesn't describe heavy moisture resembling a fine rain, which is called **Nebel** (ney-bel) or **Dunst** (doonst).
- ✓ **Most** (most): This is the German word for unfermented fruit juice, and in southern German-speaking regions, a young fruit wine. The German word for the English *most* is **das meiste** (dàs mays-te); for example, **die meisten Leute** (die mays-ten loy-te) (*most people*).
- ✓ **ordinär** (or-di-nair): This word means *vulgar* rather than *ordinary*. The German word for *ordinary* is **normal** (nor-mahl) or **gewöhnlich** (ge-vern-liH).
- ✓ **pathetisch** (pâ-tey-tish): This one means *overly emotional*, not *pathetic*, which, in German, is **jämmerlich** (yêm-er-liH) or **armselig** (ârm-zey-liH).
- ✓ **plump** (ploomp): The German meaning is *clumsy* or *tactless*, not *roundish*, which in German is **rundlich** (roont-liH).
- ✓ **Präservativ** (prê-zêr-vah-teeef): Another embarrassing moment can be avoided when you know that this word means *condom* in German. The German equivalent of *preservative* is **Konservierungsmittel** (kon-sêr-yeer-oongs-mit-el).
- ✓ **Provision** (proh-vi-zee-ohn): The meaning of this word is *commission*, not *provision*. The German word for *provision* is **Vorsorge** (fohr-zor-ge) or **Versorgung** (fêr-zohr-goong).
- ✓ **See** (zey): This word means *lake* or *sea*. In German, the verb *to see* is **sehen** (zey-en).
- ✓ **sensibel** (zen-zee-bel): The meaning of this word is *sensitive* rather than *sensible*, which translates as **vernünftig** (fêr-nuenf-tiH).
- ✓ **sympathisch** (zerm-pah-tish): This word means *likeable* or *congenial*, not *sympathetic*. The German word for *sympathetic* is **mitfühlend** (mit-fuel-ent).

Lenders and borrowers

A few German words have been adopted by the English language and have retained their meaning, such as **Kindergarten** (kin-der-gâr-ten), **Angst** (ânkst), **kaputt** (kâ-poot), **Ersatz** (êr-zats), **Sauerkraut** (zou-er-kROUT), **Zeitgeist** (tsayt-gayst), and **Wanderlust** (vân-der-loost).

However, the number of these German words is minimal compared to the English words that have made their way into the German language. At times, the combination of English and German makes for somewhat curious linguistic oddities. For example, you may hear **das ist total in/out** (dàs ist toh-tahl in/out [as in English]) (*that's totally in/out*) or **Sie können den File downloaden** (zee kern-en deyn file [as in English] *doun-lohd-en*) (*You can download the file*).

The following is a list of German words that have been borrowed from the English language. Note that they all retain their English pronunciations, with a slight exception: The borrowed verbs are »germanified,« which simply means they combine the English verb, such as *kill* or *jog*, with **-en**, the German suffix that creates the infinitive form (*to kill* and *to jog*). Go to Chapter 2 for more on German infinitives:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ der Boss | ✓ killen (<i>to kill</i>) |
| ✓ das Business | ✓ managen (<i>to manage</i>) |
| ✓ das Catering | ✓ der Manager |
| ✓ die City (German meaning: <i>downtown</i>) | ✓ das Marketing |
| ✓ der Computer | ✓ das Meeting |
| ✓ cool | ✓ Okay |
| ✓ das Design | ✓ online |
| ✓ das Event | ✓ outsourcen (<i>to outsource</i>) |
| ✓ Fashion (used without article) | ✓ die Party |
| ✓ das Fast Food | ✓ pink |
| ✓ das Feeling | ✓ das Shopping |
| ✓ flirten (<i>to flirt</i>) | ✓ die Shorts |
| ✓ der Headhunter | ✓ die Show/Talkshow |
| ✓ Hi | ✓ das Steak |
| ✓ hip | ✓ surfen (<i>to surf waves or the Internet</i>) |
| ✓ der Hit | ✓ das Team |
| ✓ das Hotel | ✓ der Thriller |
| ✓ das Internet | ✓ der Tourist |
| ✓ das Interview | ✓ das T-Shirt |
| ✓ der Jetlag | ✓ der Workshop |
| ✓ der Job | ✓ Wow |
| ✓ joggen (<i>to jog</i>) | |

Finally, a few English terms have different meanings in the German language. For example, the word **Evergreen** refers to a *golden oldie*, **Handy** means a *cellphone*, **Mobbing** means *bullying* or *harassing*, **Oldtimer** refers to a *vintage car*, and **Wellness-Center** means *spa*.

Talkin' the Talk

Read the following conversation with a grain of salt — and a smile. It gives you an idea of how many words have slid into German. However, you're not likely to overhear this many examples of mixed language in a single conversation. In this scenario, two friends, Claudia and Jana, meet on the street. Notice how some terms have a slightly different meaning in German.

Claudia: Hi Jana, wie geht's? Wie ist der neue Job?

Hi [as in English] *yâ-nâ*, vee geyts? vee ist dêr *noy-e* job [as in English]?

Hi Jana, how are you? How's the new job?

Jana: **Super! Heute war meine erste Presentation vor meinem big Boss, und er war total cool.**

super [as in English]! *hoy-te* vahr *mayn-e êrs-te* pre-zen-tât-see-ohn fohr *mayn-êm* big boss [as in English], oont êr vahr toh-*tahl* cool [as in English].

Super! Today was my first presentation in front of my big boss, and he was totally cool.

Claudia: **Wow! In meinem Office gibt es nur Stress. Mein Boss kann nichts managen. Mein Kollege checkt nichts, und denkt, er ist ein Sonnyboy, und alle anderen spinnen.**

wow [as in English]! in *mayn-êm* office [as in English] gipt ês noohr shtrês. *mayn* boss kân niHts *mân-â-gen* [g as in English]. *mayn* kol-ey-ge checkt niHts oont dênkt êr ist ayn sonny boy [as in English], oont âl-e ân-der-en *spin-en*.

Wow! In my office there's nothing but stress. My boss can't manage anything. My colleague isn't »with it,« and thinks he's a hot shot, and all the others are crazy.

Jana: **Ich gehe shoppen. Kommst du mit?**

iH *gey-e shop-en*. Komst dooh mit?

I'm going shopping. Do you want to come along?

Claudia: **Nein, danke. Gestern war ich in einem Outlet und habe ein T-Shirt in pink und eine Jeans im Boyfriend-Look gekauft. Ich gehe jetzt joggen. Bye-bye!**

nayn, *dân-ke. gês-têrn* vahr iH in *ayn-em* outlet [as in English] oont *hah-be* ayn T-shirt [as in English] in pink [as in English] oont *ayn-e* jeans [as in English] im boyfriend-look [as in English] ge-*kouft*. iH *gey-e yêtst jog-en* [*jog* as in English]. bye-bye [as in English]!

No, thanks. Yesterday I went to an outlet and bought a pink T-shirt and a pair of jeans in boyfriend look. I'm going jogging now. Bye!

Jana: **Schade. Bye-bye!**

shah-de. bye-bye!

Too bad. Bye!

Using Popular Expressions

Just like the English language, German has many *idioms*, which are expressions typical of a language and culture. If you translate these idioms word for word, they may sound obscure, silly, or just plain meaningless, so you definitely need to find out what they really mean in order to use them appropriately.

Some expressions may have an English equivalent that's recognizable, so it's easier to get the hang of using them. For example, the German idiom **ein Fisch auf dem Trockenen** (ayn fish ouf deym trok-ên-en) literally translates into *a fish on the dry*, which somewhat resembles the English *a fish out of water*. On the other hand, if you were to take apart the German expression **Da liegt der Hund begraben** (da leekt dêr hoont be-grah-ben) word for word, you'd probably feel sorry for the poor dog, because in essence, it means something like *That's where the dog is buried*. However, the English equivalent is *That's the heart of the matter*.

A few other typical German idioms are

Die Daumen drücken. (dee doum-en druek-en.) (*Press the thumbs*). The English meaning is *Keep your fingers crossed*.

Wo sich Fuchs und Hase gute Nacht sagen (voh ziH fooks oont hah-ze gooh-te nâHt zah-gen) (*where fox and hare say good night to one another*), which means *in the middle of nowhere*, or *in the sticks*.

Ich bin fix und fertig. (iH bin fix oont fêr-tiH.) (*I'm quick and ready*.) This means *I'm wiped out*, or *I'm exhausted*.

Du nimmst mich auf den Arm! (dooH nimst miH ouf deyn ârm!) (*You're taking me on your arm!*), meaning *You're pulling my leg!*

Das ist ein Katzensprung. (dâs ist ayn kâts-en-shproong.) (*That's a cat's jump*.) The English meaning is *It's a stone's throw away*.

Schlafen wie ein Murmeltier (shlâf-en vee ayn moor-mel-teer) (*sleep like a wood-chuck [marmot]*). In English, you say *sleep like a log*.

Apart from such idioms, many handy and frequently used German expressions are easy to learn. Here are some of them:

Prima!/Klasse!/Toll! (pree-mah!/klâs-e!/tôl!) (*Great!*)

Fertig. (fêrt-iH.) (*Ready./Finished.*) This can be either a question or a statement.

Quatsch! (qvâch!) (*Nonsense!/How silly of me!*)

Einverstanden. (ayn-fêr-shtând-en.) (*Agreed./Okay.*)

Vielleicht. (fee-layHt.) (*Maybe./Perhaps.*)

Mach's gut. (virt ge-mâHt.) (*Take it easy.*) This is a casual way of saying *good-bye*.

Wie, bitte? (vee bi-te?) (*[I beg your] pardon?/What did you say?*)

Macht nichts. (mâHt niHts.) (*Never mind./That's okay.*)

Nicht der Rede wert. (niHt dêr rey-de vêrt.) (*Don't mention it.*)

Schade! (*shah-de!*) (*Too bad!/What a pity!*)

So ein Pech! (zoh ayn pêH!) (*Bad luck!*)

Viel Glück! (feel gluek!) (*Good luck!*)

Oder? (*oh-der?*) (*Isn't that true?/Don't you think so?*)

Bis dann! (bis dân!) (*See you then!*)

Bis bald! (bis bâlt!) (*See you soon!*)