

# The German Language

## Linguistic Features

### Introduction

When one gets in touch with a new language, the first thing that catches his attention is probably the alphabet. The German alphabet consists of all the 26 letters from the English alphabet, together with 4 additional letters, namely *die Umlaute* ä, ö, ü and *das scharfes s* ß, which only exists in lowercase. Here is the complete alphabet,

a ä b c d e f g h i j k l m n o ö p q r s t u ü v w x y z ß  
A Ä B C D E F G H I J K L M N O Ö P Q R S T U Ü V X Y Z

Pronunciation of the German language is rather consistent, meaning that every word is pronounced more or less as its spelling suggests. For instance, ‘a’ is always pronounced as ‘ah’ in *bar* when it is long and as ‘a’ in *man* when it is short.

There are several sounds in German which English speakers may find interesting. For example, the German ‘r’ sound is more guttural and produced at the back of the throat, which is quite different from the English one. In addition, the German ‘ch’ often causes English speakers severe problems as it does not occur naturally in the English language, and varies in sound depending on its position in the word and the sound which precedes it.

### German Grammar

Grammatically speaking, German is a strongly inflected language. Like Latin, German word order is variable and relations between nouns are demonstrated by changing the cases of the nouns. German has 4 cases, namely nominative, accusative, genitive and dative cases,

In contrast, English is a very weakly inflected language. It has only limited inflections such as adding the suffix ‘s’ to a noun to indicate plurality and adding the suffix ‘ed’ to a verb to indicate past tense. English has lost most of its cases, remaining only the subjective, objective and possessive cases, and relations between nouns are not shown by inflection of nouns but word order. Therefore, the word order in English is more or less restricted.

To illustrate this by an example, in English, the following sentences have different meanings,

*‘The dog bites the man.’*

*‘The man bites the dog.’*

However, in German the followings are equivalent, both meaning ‘the dog bites the man’,

*‘Der Hund beißt den Mann.’*

*‘Den Mann beißt der Hund.’*

In the above sentences, the articles ‘*der*’ and ‘*den*’ serve as case indicators. The article ‘*der*’ denotes a nominative case, whereas ‘*den*’ denotes an accusative one. Therefore, in order to express the meaning ‘*the man bites the dog*,’ one has to say ‘*der Mann beißt der Hund*.’

### **Sie and du**

Another interesting feature of the German language is its second person addresses. Just like all other Indo-European languages (with the exception of English, whose ‘*thou*’ has died out), German distinguishes between the formal second person address and the familiar one. As a comparison, here lists both addresses in some languages.

	German	English	Italian	Russian	Chinese
Formal	Sie	thou	Lei	??	您
Familiar	Du	you	tu	??	你

According to the German linguist Gottsched in his ‘*Vollständigere und Neuerläuterte Deutsche Sprachkunst*’, Germans probably started to use this formal address ‘*Sie*’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

*“In the last century Germany and Italy sought a higher level of politeness, in that they began using the third personal singular, namely Er and Sie, instead of the second person singular Du. Thus, people said for Du hast mirs gesagt, Er hat mir gesagt, or Sie hat mir gesagt. And polite people talked like that in those days.”*

The reason why Germans and Italians both used the third person, feminine, singular address as the formal ‘you’ may probably be because third person address indicates indirectness, which was regarded as respectful.

In general practice, Italians use the formal address to strangers or people not in close contact. If *Lei* is used when *tu* is suitable, they may feel not being respected. In northern China (e.g. Beijing), the situation is more or less the same. However in southern China, the formal form of ‘you’ is rarely used. For Germans, they use the addresses similarly, but are even more restricted in the use of the familiar ‘*du*’. They do not easily start a ‘*du*’ relationship, hence they may still use ‘*Sie*’ when speaking to a many-years colleagues. Moreover, one can be fined if familiar address is used in official situations. For instance, the most expensive average fine - over \$1,200 - was

for cases where a person had been found guilty of addressing a police officer as 'du' !  
These all may well give us a hint to Germans' culture and personality.

## **History of the German Language**

Officially speaking, the history of the German language begins with the appearance of the first written documents in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. But it should be noted that the development of a written version of any language almost always follows a lengthy period of spoken usage, and it is known that people had been speaking German or closely related dialects for many years before the language was ever recorded in writing. Thus, the real origins of German are to be found considerably earlier, maybe as far back as 4000 BC.

The German language does not exist in isolation; it has close connections with other languages. In particular it shares with most European languages & some Asiatic ones a common origin in a language usually known as Indo-European.

Indo-European is unlikely to have shown complete uniformity over an extensive geographical area; even if its speakers were settled in a comparatively restricted area, it is more likely to have consisted of a group of dialects that share some common features of sounds, grammar, & vocabulary. Speakers of Indo-European languages were established over wide areas of Europe and Asia. 10 major groups of languages Indo-European languages can be distinguished, they are Indian, Iranian, Armenian, Albanian, Baltic, Slavonic, Greek, Italic, Celtic and Germanic.

Up to 2000 BC, many Indo-European tribes had made their way to the areas round the western end of the Baltic comprising South Sweden, Denmark, and Schleswig-Holstein. They then developed a Bronze Age culture there. Because of this migration, the Indo-European dialect underwent a number of far-reaching changes that made of it a new language known as Primitive Germanic. This language can be divided into three main branches, they are North Germanic, East Germanic & West Germanic.

For practical purposes it has been customary to divide the 12 hundred years of the history of the German language into 4 periods: Old High German (770-1050); Middle High German (1050-1350); Early New High German (1350-1650); New High German (1650-present).

During the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the German-speaking regions can be divided into three areas, they are Low German (northern Germany), Central German and Upper German (southern Germany). Central and Upper German can be grouped together as High German dialects. The origins of standard German actually lie in central and southern Germany.

During the Middle High German period, there was the emergence of a group of nobles that did not read Latin. This led to the demand for texts in German and this made German become a literary language. In 1440, the invention of printing from movable type by Johannes Gutenberg accelerated the rise of a written German standard language.

At the same time, Martin Luther, who was regarded as the 'Father of the German Language' made his strong impact on the standardization of the language through his translation of the Bible. Though Luther did not invent a new language, he was very successful in developing a version of German that was understood by speakers of different High German dialects. As a result, many scholars described the standard German language as the 'Protestant dialect'.

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, many great writers such as Goethe and Schiller were all using German in their writings, this increased the popularity of the language. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, German was well established as a literary language. Thus, it was slowly gaining recognition among the elite circles as a language that can also be spoken in daily lives.

Nowadays, German is the native language of more than 100 million people. This means that, in terms of the various languages spoken worldwide, German ranks about tenth. Chinese, by comparison, has about 770 million speakers while English has approximately 415 million speakers. Though English is a much more important language in an international context, German is still a significant language in a European context. It is the native tongue in Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, and 70% of the population in Switzerland. German is also spoken in some small areas in northern Italy, southern Denmark, Belgium, France and Luxembourg. Moreover, German is used in diplomatic and political negotiations, and it is one of the main languages of the European Union. Nowadays, about one in 10 books published throughout the world in originally written in German.

## **Linguistic Development**

German is a member of the Germanic group in the Indo-European family. All members of the Indo-European family are believed to be the descendents of the Proto-Indo-European language (PIE). Through thousands of years of evolution, the Germanic languages have developed 3 main differences between the PIE.

The first difference concerns the stress placed on individual words. The PIE had more or less free stress patterns. Romance languages such as French and Spanish have retained this free stress pattern, thus giving them a musical intonation. On the

other hand, Germanic languages have developed an initial stress, meaning that the stress is usually placed near the beginning of a word.

The second difference concerns the way the Germanic languages change their words in order to mark certain grammatical functions. In the PIE, a method known as ablaut, which changes the vowel of a word, is used to indicate tense forms. This method is adopted by the Primitive Germanic for verbs of basic human activity and passed on to English and German. Here shows some examples,

English	German
<i>eat/ate/eaten</i> (e/a/e)	<i>essen/aß /gegessen</i> (e/a/e)
<i>drink/drank/drunk</i> (i/a/u)	<i>trinken/trank/getrunken</i> (i/a/u)

However, verbs that entered the Primitive Germanic afterwards followed a different route. The Primitive Germanic used ‘d’ or ‘t’ at the end of a verb to mark past tense. Such as English ‘*laughed*’, ‘*cooked*’ and German ‘*lachte*’ and ‘*kochte*’.

The third and last difference is the sound shifts of the Germanic languages. During the development of the Germanic languages, there have been two important sound shifts which changed certain consonants of the words. These changes were first noticed and described by the German philologist Jacob Grimm in 1822. Hence the descriptions of these two sound shifts are collectively known as the Grimm’s Law.

The first sound shift is also known as the Germanic sound shift. It occurred before 500BCE when the Germanic tribes first made contact with the Romans. In this sound shift there were several consonant shifts in Germanic words, some examples are given below, together with the corresponding words in Latin, Italian and French, which were not affected by the sound shift.

PIE	‘b’	‘p’	‘d’	‘t’	‘g’	‘k’
Latin	<i>Labium</i>	<i>pater</i>	<i>duo</i>	<i>tres</i>	<i>genu</i>	<i>canis</i>
Italian	<i>Labbro</i>	<i>padre</i>	<i>due</i>	<i>tre</i>	<i>ginocchio</i>	<i>cane</i>
French	<i>Lèvre</i>	<i>père</i>	<i>deux</i>	<i>trois</i>	<i>genou</i>	<i>chien</i>
GERMANIC	‘p’	‘f’	‘t’	‘th’	‘k’	‘h’
German	<i>Lippe</i>	<i>Vater</i>	<i>zwei</i>	<i>drei</i>	<i>Knie</i>	<i>Hund</i>
English	<i>Lip</i>	<i>father</i>	<i>two</i>	<i>three</i>	<i>knee</i>	<i>hound</i>
Dutch	<i>Lip</i>	<i>vader</i>	<i>twee</i>	<i>drie</i>	<i>knie</i>	<i>hond</i>
Swedish	<i>Läpp</i>	<i>fader</i>	<i>två</i>	<i>tre</i>	<i>knä</i>	<i>hund</i>
Icelandic	<i>Vör</i>	<i>faðir</i>	<i>tveir</i>	<i>þristur</i>	<i>kné</i>	<i>hundur</i>

The second sound shift, occurred during 500-750CE when the Germanic tribes migrated southwards, is also known as the High German sound shift. As its name suggests, the High German sound shift occurred only in High German languages, including German, therefore Low German languages such as English are not affected. Some examples of the second sound shift are given below.

‘p’	’pf’	Apple	<i>Apfel</i>	pound	<i>Pfund</i>	pepper	<i>Pfeffer</i>
‘t’	’z’	tide	<i>Zeit</i>	ten	<i>zehn</i>	two	<i>zwei</i>
‘p’	’f/ff’	Sharp	<i>scharf</i>	ship	<i>Schiff</i>	open	<i>offen</i>
‘t’	’ss’/’ß’	that	<i>dass</i>	eat	<i>essen</i>	foot	<i>Fuß</i>
‘k’	’ch’	book	<i>Buch</i>	seek	<i>suchen</i>	make	<i>machen</i>
‘d’	’t’	bed	<i>Bett</i>	deep	<i>tief</i>	daughter	<i>Tochter</i>
‘th’	’d’	thing	<i>Ding</i>	three	<i>drei</i>	brother	<i>Bruder</i>

By knowing these rules, it is often easy to guess the corresponding cognate of a German word in English or Romance languages.

### **Sociolinguistics of the German Language**

The main concern of this section is to examine the interaction between a language and its culture and society. The influences of National Socialism and feminism will be discussed.

#### **The Impact of National Socialism on the German Language**

It is a common practice for totalitarian governments to influence every aspect of national life. The totalitarian government of the Nazi era is of no exception. During the Third Reich, attempts were made by the Nazi government to impose changes of meaning on to the German language. The *Sprachbrockhaus*, a pictorial dictionary, went through four editions between 1935 and 1940. For example, in 1935, the word *Schule* means the institution that serves the purpose of educating and teaching. In 1940, the entry was headed ‘the German school’ and the definition is ‘the German school is a part of the National Socialist educational order. Take the word *Fuhrer* as another example, in 1935, it meant ‘personality in leading position, especially the leader of the German people’. However, in 1940, the meaning of the word had been changed to ‘Adolf Hitler in his position at the head of the NSADP and as leader of the German Reich.’

The attempt to manipulate language was not limited to dictionary definitions. The Nazi government also controlled the language to hide their criminal behavior. For example, words such as *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment, i.e. murder) and *Endlosung der Judenfrage* (final solution to the Jewish problem, i.e. the extermination of the Jews) were used to mask the cruelty behind their acts. Moreover, many events were given names that were not able to reflect the truth. For example, the term

*Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) was applied to describe Hitler's accession to power in 1933 as if a revolution was taken place. This helped him to create a heroic image as the saviour of the nation who overthrew the inefficient Weimar Republic. Though in reality, Hitler's accession to power was only a political deal.

The third influence of Nazism on the German language was the introduction of a large number of abbreviations and acronyms that were necessary to deal with the many party and political organizations. Some of the examples are NSADP (*Nationsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* - 'National Socialist German Workers Party'); SA (*Sturmabteilungen* - storm detachments); HJ (*Hitlerjugend* - Hitler Youth) and DAF (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront* - German Labor Front).

The German language did not simply reflect National Socialist ideology through its vocabulary, it was also the main weapon for the dissemination of Nazi propaganda. There was significant manipulation of the written language in newspapers and magazines, and the role of the spoken language was even more influential as Hitler was such an excellent orator who can appeal to the mass through his emotional speeches.

As we can see, the Nazis did try to inculcate their political ideologies into the minds of the German people by manipulating the German language. And their impact did not cease with Germany's defeat in the Second World War. After 1945, the linguistic legacy of National Socialism remained an important issue for many people. Even today, many words still carry connotations of National Socialism to such a degree that they tend to be avoided in general use, such as the term *Fuhrer*.

### **The Impact of feminism on the German Language**

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been struggles against linguistic sexism. In German, the names for many professions have a basic masculine form from which the feminine equivalent has to be derived. This phenomenon agitated many feminists as they see it as a form of sex discrimination. Their most successful victory came when there was the introduction of the capitalized suffix *-Innen* into the plurals of words denoting professions. For example, the word *Lehrer* (teacher) had been changed to *LehrerInnen* to express the idea that both genders are covered by the word. For job advertisements, it is now illegal for the female version of the noun not to appear in the job specification.

### **The Spelling Reform**

This reform aims to remove the anomalies and to make German orthography easier to learn. It came into force on 1 August 1998, and there is a transition period that

lasts till 31 July 2005. During this period, the previous spellings will not be regarded as wrong, but as obsolescent.

Nevertheless, this reform does not receive popular support and many of the new rules are proved to be controversial. In 1995, an opinion poll showed that 70% of the German population considered a spelling reform to be unnecessary.