

MINH QUANG TRAN, PHD

Partizip

Da-words

Word roots

Prefixes

Cases

Gender

Irresistible German

Why I Find German One of the Most Beautiful
Languages in the World

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MINH QUANG TRAN IS A PASSIONATE AND LIFELONG German learner. Originally from Vietnam, he began studying the language after being encouraged by a German friend to pursue undergraduate studies in Computer Science in Germany. Now, more than two decades later, he has never regretted his decision, as Germany has provided him with countless opportunities to learn, experience, and grow.

Thanks to his German language skills, Quang has been able to achieve numerous accomplishments, including graduating with distinction from his studies at Furtwangen University, completing his Ph.D. thesis at the Technical University of Berlin, and working for several German companies, notably Mercedes Benz.

In his free time, he enjoys practicing martial arts, playing piano, and reflecting on life philosophy.

He is currently living with his wife and daughter in Berlin.

PREFACE

THE GERMAN LANGUAGE IS WIDELY REGARDED AS complex and difficult to learn; some even consider it an ugly language. Mastering and understanding German has been a challenge for generations, as for the Irish writer Oscar Wilde, who famously claimed that “life is too short to learn German,” or the British comedian John Oliver, who humorously dubbed it as “the language of angry, angry poetry.”

When I started learning German, I was quickly overwhelmed by its complex grammar and seemingly never-ending words and sentences. I never quite understood why the language had to be designed so overly complicated. Through the years, I have seen many others, including classmates, friends, and colleagues, face similar problems. They ask themselves: Why are German words often so long and difficult to remember? Why does the language have a seemingly unnecessarily complicated case system with nominative, genitive, dative, and accu-

sative? What is the purpose of the grammatical gender system, *der*, *die*, *das*? And so on.

Two decades of using and pondering the language have led me to find convincing answers to all those questions and more. For me, it has been a joyful journey to delve into the essence of the German language and discover its beauty along the way. This journey took me from the moment I excitedly boarded a plane to Germany for my undergraduate studies to the moment when I was able to confidently use German to write a 200-page Ph.D. thesis in Computer Science. Looking back, it is refreshing to see how much my view of the German language has changed. Now, I would say without hesitation that German is an irresistibly beautiful language that is surprisingly easy to learn if you know the proper way to approach it.

This book is a collection of my personal stories and key insights about the language I've gained over the years. I've carefully picked six central aspects of German, including word roots, prefixes, case system, grammatical gender, participle, and *da*-words. My aim is to demonstrate that these complex features are not designed to confuse us but to make the language more precise, compact, and elegant. I will show you how the German language is a well-crafted sum of its parts, each working

together to create a cohesive whole. You will also see that its beauty and logic lie not only in the big features but also in its smallest details.

I want to dedicate this book to all learners, teachers, or even native speakers interested in the German language. Regardless of your German level, this book will help you understand it beyond the surface level and even inspire you to discover many more new insights on your own.

A hundred years have passed since Oscar Wilde expressed his frustrations with the German language. Yet I stand here today to say, with utmost conviction, that “life is too short NOT to learn German.” I’m fully aware that this is a big statement, so I’ll offer everything for your own judgment in this book. Let the evidence speak, and I sincerely hope you will enjoy the book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Berlin, 07 March 2023

CHAPTER 1:

WORD ROOTS—THEREIN LIES THE WISDOM

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

— Marcel Proust

“**G**ERMANY, HERE I COME!” AFTER ALMOST A YEAR OF taking German classes, the day finally arrived. I was on a plane bound for Frankfurt am Main, feeling nervous and excited at the same time. For a 21-year-old, embarking on this trip was a significant step into the unknown. Will Germany be as I imagined it? Will my German be sufficient to navigate daily life there? These thoughts ran through my mind as the plane took off.

As the flight attendants demonstrated the security procedures and explained, “*Die zwei Notausgänge befinden sich über den Tragflächen.*” (The two emergency exits are located above the wings.), I gazed out the window at the wing, thinking to myself, “I’ve just learned a new word. *Tragflächen* must mean ‘wings.’”

“But why are wings called *Tragflächen* in German?” I wondered. I knew that *die Fläche* means ‘surface,’ but I was unsure of the meaning of *trag* in the word and how it is related to the wing of a plane.

Then it suddenly dawned on me that *trag* must come from the verb *tragen*, meaning ‘to carry,’ and that the word *die Tragfläche* is a combination of ‘carrying’ and ‘surface.’ In my mind, I imagined a conversation among German aerospace engineers leading up to this term.

“What is a wing?”

“It’s a huge surface.”

“That’s what a wing is. Why don’t we just call it *die Fläche*?”

“That sounds great. But we need a more specific type of surface. How does a wing work?”

“It carries the plane.”

“Carrying can be expressed by the root *trag*.”

“*Die Tragfläche*, carrying surface. That’s it. That’s the word we’ve been looking for!”

Years later, the image of a ‘carrying surface’ in the word *die Tragfläche* remains a vivid memory for me, symbolizing not only the start of my trip to Germany but also the beginning of my exploration of the beauty of the German language. It opened my eyes to a new way of looking at it, one that is filled with delight and wonder.

The part *trag* in *die Tragfläche* exemplifies what linguists call a word root, which is defined as “a part of a word with lexical meaning that cannot be broken down further,” according to Glottopedia, a wiki devoted to linguistics. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to think of a root as the part of a word that remains when removing any prefixes, suffixes, or endings that do not contribute to its core meaning. It is worth mentioning that a root can change its appearance in nouns, adjectives/adverbs, and plural forms. For instance, the root *trag* becomes *träg* in adjectives and adverbs, such as *erträglich* (bearable), in some nouns, like *der Träger* (carrier), and in plurals, like *die Vorträge*. Sometimes, the change in appearance can be more significant, as in the case of the verb *schneiden* (to cut), which transforms into *Schnitt* in the noun form. When we refer to a root,

we consider all its possible appearances in all grammatical forms, with a focus on the root's meaning.

The German language extensively uses the idea of 'carrying' provided by the root *trag* in forming many words. For example, the verb *ertragen*, which means 'to bear,' is rooted in 'carrying a burden.' The word *der Vortrag* for 'presentation' is based on the image of 'carrying your words in front of an audience.' Or, in the word *der Eintrag* for 'entry,' as in 'an entry in a diary,' we can visualize a person carrying emotions and thoughts into their diary in the form of written words.

But this is by no means an isolated occurrence. Besides *trag*, there are many other roots used as building blocks in thousands of German words. For example, *Fall* from *fallen* (to fall), *Fang* from *fangen* (to catch), *Lauf* from *laufen* (to run), *Gang* from *gehen* (to go), *Halt* from *halten* (to hold), *Schnitt* from *schneiden* (to cut), *Sprung* from *springen* (to jump), *Stand* from *stehen* (to stand), *Tritt* from *treten* (to step) and *Trieb* from *treiben* (to drive, to urge), and the list goes on and on.

In the remainder of this chapter, I'll delve into a few more examples to further illustrate the versatility and power of roots in constructing German words. Here, I faced a dilemma of what the Germans would call *die Qual der Wahl* (the agony of choice). So many roots

are just as powerful and exciting as *trag*, if not more so. Which ones should I choose to introduce to you? Ultimately, I opted for the root *zieh/zug*, which caught my attention when I was trying to understand Mark Twain's confusion about the many meanings of the word *Zug* in his book "The Awful German Language." Twain wrote:

Zug means Pull, Tug, Draught, Procession, March, Progress, Flight, Direction, Expedition, Train, Caravan, Passage, Stroke, Touch, Line, Flourish, Trait of Character, Feature, Lineament, Chess-move, Organ-stop, Team, Whiff, Bias, Drawer, Propensity, Inhalation, Disposition: but that thing which it does not mean—when all its legitimate pennants have been hung on, has not been discovered yet.

When reading that paragraph, my first reaction was one of confusion: "How can I hope to memorize all these meanings, let alone those of thousands of other German words?" As I was about to throw my hands up in frustration along with Twain, the analytical part of my brain interjected with a question, "perhaps all the meanings have something in common?"

Indeed they do. I discovered that most of the meanings of *Zug* can be literally or metaphorically explained by the idea of 'pulling' or 'dragging.' This is because *Zug* is