



GUTE REISE!

*What every manager should know
about German translation*



COMMUNICATION. IN ANY LANGUAGE.

German is the most commonly translated written language in the world, surpassing English, Chinese, and Spanish.





“I would like a glass of beer, please.”

When Mark Twain was visiting Heidelberg, he once overheard a student from California say he would rather decline a couple of drinks than a single German adjective. We couldn't agree more.

German grammar is a linguistic minefield that every English speaker has trouble navigating. Even someone with Twain's literary gifts couldn't avoid the pitfalls. In his essay, “The Awful German Language,” Twain wrote:

“I went often to look at the collection of curiosities in Heidelberg Castle, and one day I surprised the keeper of it with my German. I spoke entirely in that language. He was greatly interested; and after I had talked a while he said my German was very rare, possibly ‘unique,’ and wanted to add it to his museum.”

Maybe Twain's translations belong in a museum, but you certainly don't want yours there. If you're a business manager



responsible for producing quality translations between English and German, your goal is simply to be as accurate and seamless as possible.

And by following the few tips in this guidebook, you can do just that. So relax. The only phrase you *really* need to know in German is, “*Ich möchte ein Glas Bier, bitte.*” I would like a glass of beer, please.

The Not-So-Awful German Language

German is one of the world’s most important languages. In fact, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*, German is the most commonly translated written language in the world, surpassing English, Chinese, Spanish and other languages that actually have more speakers. German is also the third-most studied foreign language in the world, and it’s one of the official languages of the European Union (EU), where it is the second-most commonly spoken language after English.

Approximately 130 million people speak German worldwide. Of the total, about 110 million speak it as their native tongue, while the remaining 20 million learn it as a second language. It is the primary language of Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, and an official language of Switzerland, Luxembourg and Belgium.



German is also recognized as an official language in designated regions of Denmark, Italy and Romania. In the former German colony of Namibia, it was an official language until 1990, and although it no longer holds official status there, it’s still spoken by thousands of Europeans in Namibian communities.



Das Alphabet

Like English, the German alphabet has 26 letters, no different from the standard ABCs every English-speaking student learns in primary



school. But the German writing system is more complicated than its Anglo-Saxon neighbors' because a few German letters use diacritical marks that aren't present in English.

These marks pertain to the vowels a, o and u. When they're written with an umlaut – as in *ä*, *ö* and *ü* – they represent sounds that are pronounced differently than the same vowels without the diacritics. In some instances (such as when email programs don't offer diacritical marks as an option on the keyboard), German umlauted vowels can be written as *ae*, *oe* and *ue*, rather than the preferred *ä*, *ö* and *ü*, respectively.

Diacritics aren't the only stumbling block translation managers must overcome. German has a special letter known as the *sharp s*, which the Germans call the “*ess-zett*.” Written as *ß*, the *ess-zett* is used today to replace a *double-s* (*ss*) when the two letters follow a long vowel or a diphthong. Instead of writing *die Strasse* (street), the standard German spelling requires the *sharp s*, as in *die StraÙe*. If you're still unclear, think how it might look on the following postcard: “*I'm having a terrific time in MiÙsiÙippi, but I still miÙ you.*”

Since the *sharp s* is never used at the beginning of a word, it's also never written as a capital letter. In Switzerland it isn't used at all – a street in Zurich is a *Strasse*, not a *StraÙe*. And to make matters even more confusing, German reformed its spelling rules in 1996, and the proper use of the *ess-zett* officially changed.



But don't get too hung up on the details. All you need is a great translator, not a Ph.D. in Germanic studies. Just be aware that the *ess-zett* is unique to the German language and that it's essential for your translated materials to reflect its usage accurately.

The Long and the Never, Ever Short of It

The German language *loves* long words. Especially as far as nouns are concerned. In German, you can stick two, three, four or even more nouns together, and *voilà* – a brand new star is born!

The process is similar to what happens with the English word, *grasshopper*. The word *grasshopper* is actually a noun composed of two separate nouns, *grass* and *hopper*. But when these two words are joined together, they create an entirely new noun that stands, (or in this case, hops) on its own.

In German, this same noun-combining process operates on steroids. For example, if you want a German company to help you build the next Atlantis, you might require the services of an underwater construction firm, or what German speakers call an *Unterwasserbauunternehmen*. An insurance agent, a *Versicherungsvertreter*, could help you protect your investment, and a *Werbeagentur*, an advertising agency, might handle the publicity.



Whether you're headed for Atlantis, Hamburg or the Oktoberfest, your German translations will always involve longer words than the original English versions. In short: by understanding – and managing – the difference in word length, you'll save yourself time, headaches... and most



importantly as far as your job is concerned...money.



Design/Layout Guidelines

If your English to German translations involve printed materials, you should always keep German's longer word length in mind when you design the original English versions. By creating designs and layouts that leave enough room to comfortably accommodate the space requirements of both languages, you will eliminate the need to create two completely separate designs.

Below is an example of an English paragraph, followed by its translation into German:

German has been one of the most important languages in the world for many centuries. With the collapse of communism and the expansion of the European Union, however, German is perhaps even more relevant today than it was in the latter half of the 20th Century. Since many Eastern Europeans speak German as a second language, German plays a vital role in promoting communication and commerce between Eastern and Western Europe.

Seit vielen Jahrhunderten ist die deutsche Sprache eine der wichtigsten Sprachen der Welt. Jedoch seit dem Zusammenbruch des Kommunismus und der Erweiterung der Europäischen Union nimmt die deutsche Sprache heute wohl eine noch wichtigere Stellung ein als im späten zwanzigsten Jahrhundert. Da Deutsch in vielen Ländern Osteuropas die erste Fremdsprache ist, spielt es eine erhebliche Rolle bei der Förderung von Kommunikation und Handel zwischen West-und Osteuropa.





As you can see, the German translation takes one more line in its printed format than the English version does. Just be thankful you're not translating *Gone With the Wind* because your German drafts will always demand more space.

As a rule of thumb, plan for a German translation to require about 10% more space than your original English version. Always leave enough white space in your initial design to account for the extra room you'll need in German.

Pay particular attention to layouts that involve rows, columns, tables and other sequential lists. A single line item in English often becomes two rows in the German edition – a fact that many a financial or technical manager has discovered the hard way.

So don't make it hard on yourself. Take extra time early on to plan for the extra space you'll need later on.

Here's to a Happy Ending!

In the end, the most important point to understand about German translation is that its most important point is at the end.

In German, you never really know what a sentence intends to convey until you actually reach the end of it. Unlike English, German often puts the most important verb of the sentence in the very last position. As a result, it's the ending of the sentence that often reveals its true meaning. Or, as German speakers would put it: it's the ending of the sentence that often its true meaning reveals.

German also relies on countless verbs with prefixes that separate and, like conjugated verbs in relative clauses, only appear in the



sentence's final position. For example, *schließen* means "to close" a door. But when you put the prefix *ab* in front of it, the word *abschließen* now means "to lock." With the prefix *auf*, the word *aufschließen* means "to unlock" that same door.

So, if you happen to be a German with little patience, you might demand:

"Schließ die Tür!" ... "Close the door!"

"Schließ die Tür ab!" ... "Lock the door!"

Or... "Schließ die Tür auf!" ... "Unlock the door!"

Regardless of your manners, whoever you're speaking to (or yelling at) won't always know what you mean until the very end of your sentence. The same rule applies to translations you are responsible for managing.

For Better or for Wurst

Achtung! Here are a few more tips to ensure a successful German translation every time.

- Pay special attention to the German numbering system. Unlike English, German uses periods instead of commas to designate thousands. As a result, 1,000 in English is written as 1.000 in German. A one million sum is written as 1.000.000.
- On the other hand, where a decimal point is required in English, German uses a comma. For example, 1.5 in English translates to 1,5 in German. Always remember that decimals are different between English and German. Period.



- Most importantly, you should always have your translations proofed by an objective third party who not only speaks German, but understands your business as well. When discrepancies and differences of opinion arise – and they usually do! – these differences must be resolved before producing your final draft.



For more information on how to produce perfect German translations for any project, contact your Conversis representative. Until then, *Auf Wiedersehen! And Gute Reise!*

