

Common inaccuracies in the written English of German-speakers

Or, “Mark is very pedantic”

Mark Rodgers

May 19, 2009

Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Written English	2
2.1	a and an	2
2.2	*allow to	2
2.3	Berücksichtigen	3
2.4	Beziehungsweise	3
2.5	both . . . and	3
2.6	Dafür	4
2.7	However	4
2.8	if clauses	4
2.9	in case	5
2.10	*in the last years	5
2.11	*in the moment	5
2.12	Look like	5
2.13	Nach	5
2.14	Nebenbemerkung	6
2.15	Paint	6
2.16	Past Participles	6
2.17	Seit	6
2.18	Sensibel	7
2.19	Sozusagen	7
2.20	Wobei	7
3	A few points on the spoken language	7
4	Notes on notation	8
5	References	8

1 Introduction

I am a Ph.D. student who spent a year in a German university, namely Siegen, and also I have several German friends here in the U.K., and because of this I have a number of times been given texts to read and correct that have been written in English by Germans. While doing this, I have noticed a few slips that several of my friends make, which I have listed here alphabetically (although some are listed under English titles and some under German ones).

I should note that most of the people reading this will only use a few of these inaccurate words and phrases, but I hope you find it useful. If you notice any mistakes in the below, or if I am unclear anywhere, please do let me know (mark.rodgers@durham.ac.uk). I'm sure this document will evolve and be added to over time.

A general point that deserves to be written in the introduction is that German-speakers often write sentences that are too long for English speakers to follow. I think this is because Germans have to be able to carry more in their heads while they wait for, for example, a past participle at the end of the sentence, and are therefore used to more complicated structure.

2 Written English

2.1 a and an

There is quite a simple rule for when which of these is used. It is purely to do with pronunciation: if the next word starts with a vowel sound, an is used. Note that the spelling is irrelevant:

An unnecessary expense and a house
but a user account and an honourable man

Because *user* starts with a consonant sound (the one represented in German by *j*), even though it starts with a vowel (letter); and the *h* of *honourable* is silent, so the word starts with an *o*-sound.

2.2 *allow to

In German, there is the useful construction:
Diese Methode erlaubt es, den Wirkungsquerschnitt zu berechnen.

In English, similar constructions exist, but this construction
*This method allows to calculate the cross section.
is incorrect.

The easiest equivalent expression is
This method allows us to calculate the cross section.
The problem being that one doesn't usually want to refer to oneself when writing a scientific document.

Allow can be used with nouns:

This method allows the calculation of the cross section.

so transforming everything to a noun is usually the easiest solution. ¹

Great care is needed with allow for, which usually has to do with tolerances
Engineers usually allow for a decrease of 20% in the metal's strength during use.

This all applies to *require to as well.

2.3 Berücksichtigen

The number of entries in the LEO dictionary demonstrate the difficulty of translating this word. Consider and take into account are the usual meanings.

Bitte berücksichtigen Sie den Umstand, dass alle Engländer Tee mit Milch trinken.
is Please consider the fact that all Englishmen drink tea with milk.

Diese neue Methode berücksichtigt den Einfluss der Masse des Elektrons.

This new method takes the effect of the mass of the electron into account. or

This new method accounts for the effect of the mass of the electron.

2.4 Beziehungsweise

This is a very useful word in German, and for this reason needs a few different translations:

Die Massen von Elektron und Myon sind 511keV beziehungsweise 106MeV.

This is, I think, the original usage and is the one to which respectively refers:

The masses of the electron and muon are 511keV and 106MeV respectively.

The problem is that this is not the dominant usage, as in German the meaning has extended. In many formal usages, it is equivalent to or:

Eine Wohnung mit Garage bzw. Carport.

In spoken German, it can also be used to correct oneself or to be more specific (In indicating a table *Das Diagramm beziehungsweise die Tabelle, die wir hier sehen . . .*), in which case the correct translation is or rather, or or if you want to be less emphatic.

2.5 both . . . and

Sowohl X als auch Y has two translations: both X and Y, which is used when X and Y are equally important, and X as well as Y when we know the circumstance applies to Y, and we are stating the perhaps surprising fact that it also applies to X. e.g.

¹Some sources might state that allow + gerund is allowed. The gerund is just a noun made directly from a verb (by adding -ing), which means the action of the verb. It can be compared to the *das* + infinitive construction (das Schreiben, das Lesen). See the following:
Die Berechnung ist schwierig means The calculation is difficult
but *Das Berechnen ist schwierig* means Calculating is difficult
in both English and German, the sentences are similar in meaning, but the first refers to a specific case, and the second to the more general process.

The four-momentum contains both the energy and the momentum of the object in question.

If we know the four-momentum, we can calculate the rest mass as well as the magnitude of the momentum.

(Here, it is no surprise that we can calculate the magnitude of the momentum, having the four-momentum. If you didn't know it already, however, you wouldn't necessarily expect to be able to calculate the rest mass as well.)

2.6 Dafür

This word looks like it should translate as **therefor*. Unfortunately, the modern meaning of *therefore* (as a consequence or *deswegen*) has completely replaced this old one, so you have to write for this.

2.7 However

A good piece of padding in German is *Wie auch immer*. This doesn't translate directly, as *however* is a formal word for *but* (good at the beginning of sentences). English *whatever* can be used.

2.8 if clauses

I am not going to go into the detail of the different types of if clause, mainly because there is only one mistake that Germans regularly make, although it is made by some Germans I know who generally have a very high standard of English. Specifically, one hears sentences like

**if I would do that, I would have no money left.*

In one of the many great conflicts that the English language has with logic, this isn't right: *would* cannot follow an *if*.² In sentences where you are tempted to use *if + would*, use instead the simple past tense:

*if I did that, I would have no money left.*³

²I know sweeping statements like this one should generally be avoided, and irritatingly there is one exception I know of to this rule: *if you would like to come, please let me know: would like* has travelled so far from its original conditional meaning that it almost acts like a verb on its own.

³I prefer to see this in a non-standard, and perhaps overcomplicated, way, having learnt German. Please note this is not the view of a learned professor, but speculation by me that, even if it turns out not to be true, helps me get a bit of perspective.

In German, there are two conditional tenses: *ich würde kommen* and *ich käme*. These have equivalents in English: *i would come* and *i came*. Note that in German, the simple past and the second conditional are very similar (*ich kam* and *ich käme*), but in English they became ever more similar, so that eventually, long before the modern day, they became identical.⁴

In both languages, the first form is much more common, but one usage remains in English in which one is obliged to use the second form: precisely this if clause which is the subject of this section.

⁴Except for one verb: *to be*. It is for this reason that you will sometimes hear, particularly from pedants like me, *if I were you, I'd hand your work in on time* or *if he were capable of that, he'd have done it a long time ago*, where the simple past in each case would be *was*.

2.9 in case

Falls can sadly not be directly translated as *in case: normally, *if* is sufficient, but a stronger way of writing *if* is *in the case that*. *In case* is really *für den Fall*.

The comparable construction *in diesem Fall* translates directly: *in this case*.

2.10 *in the last years

In den letzten Jahren is best translated as *in the last few years*, e.g.:

In the last few years, the speed of one-loop calculations has increased dramatically

2.11 *in the moment

Momentan and *im Moment* are best translated as *at the moment*. *In the moment* is more like *im Eifer des Gefechts*, although a bit weaker (a stronger form is *in the heat of the moment*, or for the full strength of the German, you can use *in the heat of battle*.)

2.12 Look like

I have noticed a few people get mixed up when translating *Wie sieht das aus?* Both *What does that look like?* and *How does that look?* are correct, and they have the same meaning, but **How does that look like?* is incorrect.

2.13 Nach

Nach is usually *after*, when referring to time, for example, but there are two important cases where it is not:

- *Nach Professor Schmidt*, is according to Professor Schmidt (can be written or spoken) or *in Professor Schmidt's opinion* (less good written). The former can also be used for references (according to Peskin and Schroeder). If, instead of referring to their text, you are referencing a diagram that you have taken directly out of their work, the correct version is *from* or *taken from*:⁵
Fig. 5: Three sample schematic mass spectra (taken from [1])
- *Die Fahrt nach Siegen* when there is motion to a destination, you need to use *to*:⁶

⁵There actually still is an archaic usage of *after* in this context, but it can be hard to understand and should be avoided

⁶I don't actually know any Germans who get this wrong, I only really put it in for completeness.

2.14 Nebenbemerkung

Although *side remark is not difficult to understand, the correct translation is aside.

2.15 Paint

The german word *malen* mainly means paint, and *zeichnen* is draw, but the divisions are in a slightly different place. In English, the division is all to do with the materials: paint only refers to making a picture using paint and a brush, and draw is with any other implement (including chalk, pen and pencil).

This contrasts with *malen*, which is for pictures, and *zeichnen* for diagrams, etc..

I have noticed that occasionally, people get confused and say, for example
*I have painted all three Feynman diagrams on the board.

which should be

I have drawn all three Feynman diagrams on the board.

2.16 Past Participles

Participles are adjectives formed from verbs. The past participle is the same form as that used in the perfect tense (adding -ed for regular verbs).

The route walked by the group was a long one.

The bible, translated into English, is now accessible to everyone.

Past participles are adjectives that are in some sense passive: the route is walked, the bible is translated. There are two major differences between their english and german usages (other than the fact they are more common in English):

- Unlike for most adjectives, it is preferred to put the past participle after the noun: The files produced are then passed to the next computer (I like to think that the past participle is placed there so that a by the routine can easily be slotted in after it).
- Sentences in which the adjective is composed of several words
*The by this programme produced files are passed on to the next computer
*The into English translated bible is accessible to everyone
are very inelegant or wrong in English. It should be moved to after the noun, and if it is more than a few words, the sentence should be rewritten with it in a clause of its own.

2.17 Seit

There are two ways to use *seit*:

- Referring to a particular point in the past, which is translated with since + perfect continuous

Seit meiner Ankunft in England trinke ich jeden Tag mindestens drei Tassen Tee.

Since my arrival in England, I've been drinking at least three cups of tea a day.

- Referring to a stretch of time which goes up to the present, which is translated with *for* + perfect continuous
Seit fünf Jahren trinke ich jeden Tag tee.
I have been drinking tea every day for five years.

2.18 Sensibel

It is very tempting to translate this as *sensible (which is really *vernünftig* or *sinnvoll*), but it is actually sensitive:

The experiment will be sensitive to neutrino masses above 1eV.

2.19 Sozusagen

A very good piece of padding in both languages. The correct translation is *so to speak*, rather than *so to say.

2.20 Wobei

A difficult word to translate. Despite appearances, and even some dictionaries, it very rarely translates as *whereas*, as this is used as a fancy word for *but* when one group contrasts with another:

Whereas in English the length of a spoken consonant is irrelevant, in Finnish and Italian, changing the consonant length can change the meaning.

When *wobei* is used to define terms in a formula, as is very common in physics papers, a good translation is *where*.

3 A few points on the spoken language

- The “y” in Greek-based words (symmetry, physics, cryptic) is pronounced in English as an “i”, like in fish or *Fisch*, rather than the *ü* sound used in German.
- When, e.g. $\frac{x}{2}$ is said in English, it is *x over two* or *half x* rather than *x half
- The pronunciation of *simplest* is ironically not simply *simple then st*, but *sim-plist*.
- 10^4 , for example, is *ten to the power four* or *ten to the four*.
- ... *oder so*, an informal piece of padding at the end of a sentence, usually translates as *or something* or *or something like that*. ... *or so* is used in the

context of a numerical measurement:
I first went to Alton Towers a year or so after I moved here
The detector is ten metres or so long
These usages are, as in German, too informal to write.

4 Notes on notation

- I have used an asterisk to indicate incorrect expressions, hoping this makes it clearer. I stole this notation from linguistics.
- It is technically standard in English always to capitalise **English**, **German**, etc., regardless of whether they are nouns or adjectives (although this rule isn't always adhered to). I don't think this makes any sense so I don't do it.

5 References

I got the opinion of *Englische Grammatik* by Ellen Henrichs (2005), published by Bassermann Verlag on Section 2.8

The [1] to which I refer in 2.13 is a genuine reference:

S. P. Martin “*A Supersymmetry Primer*” arXiv: hep-ph/9709356v5 10 Dec 2008.