

23 German Idioms To Spice Up Your Conversations

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Have you ever been in a conversation with a native German speaker and found yourself struggling to keep up? Do you feel like you're missing out on cultural references and inside jokes? If so, you may want to consider learning German idioms.

In this article, we will explore the world of German idioms, why they are important to learn, how to learn them, and provide some common examples.

What are German Idioms?

Let's start with the basics. What exactly are German idioms? An idiom is a **group of words whose meaning cannot be inferred from the individual words themselves**. In other words, the phrase means something different than the literal meanings of the words would suggest.

Idioms are commonly used in everyday conversation, and mastering them is essential to understanding and participating in German language and culture.

German idioms can be tricky for language learners because they are often based on cultural, historical, or regional references.

For example, the phrase “Da steppt der Bär” translates to “The bear (step-)dances there,” but its actual meaning is “It’s a great party!” Back in the day, when there was excitement in a town, it was often due to a circus or fair.

During these events, it was common to have a bear perform tricks, and some were even trained to dance, giving rise to the phrase “the bear is dancing” as a way to describe a lively and exciting atmosphere.



“Da steppt der Bär!”

Why Are German Idioms Important to Learn?

So, why should you bother learning [German idioms](#)? The answer is simple: idioms make language more colorful, expressive, and natural. If you want to speak German like a native, you need to learn how to use idioms correctly.

Idioms also convey cultural and historical context. They provide a window into the way Germans think and feel about certain topics, such as relationships, work, and food.

For example, the idiom “Den Teufel an die Wand malen” translates to “Painting the devil on the wall,” but its meaning is “to be overly pessimistic.” The original wording of this expression was: “Man braucht den Teufel nicht über die Tür zu malen, er kommt von selbst ins Haus.“ (You don’t need to paint the devil on the door, he comes into the house by himself.)

As it was believed that certain symbols could summon evil spirits, *painting* the devil was at least as feared as naming him. Historically, as superstitious thinking gave way to more rational thought this phrase now simply admonishes to not be overly pessimistic and to fear the worst.



“Den Teufel an die Wand malen.”

Furthermore, using idioms in conversation can make you sound more fluent and confident. It shows that you have a deeper understanding of the language and are comfortable using it in a variety of contexts.

What Are Some Common German Idioms and Their Meanings?

Now that you know how to learn German idioms, let's take a look at some common examples:

- **“Alles hat ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei”**. Translation: Everything has an end, only the sausage has two. Meaning: This idiom is used to convey that all good things must come to an end. It emphasizes the fleeting nature of life's pleasures and the inevitability of change.
- **“Aus dem Schneider sein”**. Translation: To be out of the woods (literally “cutter”). Meaning: This idiom is used to convey that someone has escaped from a difficult situation. It suggests that the danger has passed and that everything is now okay.
- **“Da liegt der Hase im Pfeffer”**. Translation: There lies the rabbit in the pepper. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe a problem or difficulty that has been discovered. It suggests that the root of the problem has been found.
- **“Die Daumen drücken”**. Translation: To press one's thumbs. Meaning: This idiom is used to convey good luck or to express support. It suggests that the speaker is hoping for a positive outcome. Note the subtle difference vs English: “to cross one's fingers”.

Do German Idioms Have Equivalents in Other Languages?

German idioms are unique to the German language and culture, but many idioms have equivalents in other languages. However, it is important to note that idioms can vary widely from language to language, even when the literal translation seems the same.

For example, the English idiom “Don't count your chickens until they are hatched.” has an equivalent in German, “Das Fell des Bären verteilen, bevor er erlegt ist,” which translates to “Divide the bear's fur before it has been shot.” Although the meaning is similar, the references are completely different.

Funny German Idioms



“Du gehst mir auf den Keks!”

German idioms can be humorous and quirky. Here are a few examples of funny German idioms:

- **“Ich verstehe nur Bahnhof”**. Translation: I only understand train station. Meaning: This idiom is used to convey that someone does not understand anything. It suggests that the speaker is completely lost and confused.
- **“Du gehst mir auf den Keks”**. Translation: You’re walking on my cookie. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is annoying or bothering you.
- **“Einen Kater haben”**. Translation: To have a tomcat. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe a hangover. It suggests that the person feels as if a tomcat is clawing at their head.

- **“Es ist mir Wurst”**. Translation: It’s sausage to me. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe something that doesn’t matter. It suggests that the person doesn’t care one way or the other.

Now let’s look at some more idioms from various areas of life:

German Idioms about Love and Relationships:

- **“Auf Wolke Sieben schweben”**. Translation: To float on cloud nine. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is very happy and content. It suggests that the person is experiencing pure bliss. (Note the difference of 7 -> 9 between German and English.
- **“Hals über Kopf verliebt sein”**. Translation: To be head over heels in love (literally “neck over head”). Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is deeply in love. It suggests that the person is completely consumed by their feelings for another.
- **“Jemandem Honig um den Mund schmieren”**. Translation: To smear honey around someone’s mouth. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is trying to flatter or sweet-talk someone. It suggests that the person is being insincere.

German Idioms about Food and Drink:



“Tomaten auf den Augen haben”

- **“Die Suppe auslöffeln müssen.”** Translation: To have to spoon out the soup. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who has to face the consequences of their actions. It suggests that the person must take responsibility for their mistakes.
- **“In den sauren Apfel beißen.”** Translation: To bite into the sour apple. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who has to do something unpleasant. It suggests that the person must endure a difficult situation.
- **“Das ist kalter Kaffee.”** Translation: That’s cold coffee. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe something that is old or outdated. It suggests that the thing in question is no longer relevant.
- **“Tomaten auf den Augen haben.”** Translation: To have tomatoes on your

eyes. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is not paying attention. It suggests that the person is unaware of what is going on around them.

- **“Wie eine beleidigte Leberwurst.”** Translation: Like an offended liverwurst. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is easily offended or upset. It suggests that the person is being overly sensitive.

German Idioms about Animals and Nature:

- **“Wie die Kuh vom Eis kommen.”** Translation: To come off the ice like a cow. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe a difficult situation that has been resolved. It suggests that the person has come out of a dangerous or challenging situation unscathed.
- **“Der Fisch stinkt vom Kopf her.”** Translation: The fish stinks from the head. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe a situation where the problem comes from the top. It suggests that the leaders or decision-makers are responsible for the issue.
- **“Eine Schnecke sein.”** Translation: To be a snail. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who is slow or takes a long time to do something. It suggests that the person moves at a leisurely pace, like a snail.
- **“Wie die Made im Speck leben”.** Translation: To live like the maggot in the bacon. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe someone who lives a life of luxury and abundance. It suggests that the person has everything they need and want, just like a maggot living in a piece of bacon.
- **“Mit jemandem ein Hühnchen rupfen”.** Translation: To pluck a chicken with someone. Meaning: This idiom is used to describe a situation where someone needs to have a serious talk or confrontation with someone else. It suggests that the conversation will be intense and may involve conflict, just like plucking a chicken can be a messy and difficult task.



“Sei keine Schnecke!”

How Can You Learn German Idioms?

Now that you understand why German idioms are important, let's explore how to learn them. Here are a few methods you can try:

1. Watch German TV Shows and Movies

One of the best ways to learn idioms is to hear them in context. By watching [German TV shows](#) and movies, you can immerse yourself in the language and pick up on idioms naturally. Pay attention to the context in which the idiom is used and try to deduce its meaning.

2. Read German Literature

Reading [German literature](#) can expose you to idiomatic language and provide cultural context. German authors often use idioms in their writing, and by reading their works, you can gain a better understanding of the language and culture.

3. Use Language Learning Apps

There are many [language learning apps](#) that offer lessons on German idioms. Look for lessons that include explanations and examples. Additionally, download [worksheets](#) designed to practice idioms.

4. Speak with Native German Speakers

Speaking with native German speakers is one of the best ways to learn idioms. They can provide you with real-world examples and help you understand the cultural and historical context behind the idioms. Practice using idioms in [conversation](#) and ask for feedback on your usage.

Conclusion

Learning idioms can be both fun and challenging, but it's important to remember that it takes time and practice to become proficient.

It's also worth noting that idioms can be very context-dependent and may have multiple meanings depending on the situation. Thus, it's important to pay attention to the context in which they are used and to be aware of any cultural or historical references that may be involved.

By learning idioms through different methods such as watching TV shows and movies, reading literature, using language learning apps, and speaking with native German speakers, you can improve your language skills and feel more confident when speaking or writing in German.

So, embrace the world of German idioms, and who knows, you may even find yourself having a "Lachenfall" (laughing fit) the next time you use one in conversation.

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