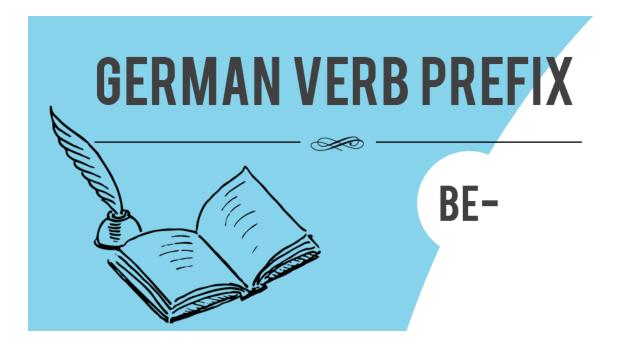# The German Prefix "be-" Explained

André Klein · Monday, September 14th, 2020

Once you've started learning a few German verbs, you'll notice that there are a number of awkwardly similar verbs which have a slightly similar yet sufficiently different meaning. I'm talking about those pesky German verb prefixes which sometimes are just two or three letters long but completely change the meaning of the verb.

Let's take the verb **gehen** (go/walk) for example and look at how adding prefixes can change the meaning:

> **weg**gehen – to go away
>
> **vor**gehen – to go ahead
>
> **nach**gehen – to pursue
>
> **ent**gehen – to avoid/escape
>
> **auf**gehen – to rise/"go up"
>
> **durch**gehen – to go through

(These are just some of the options. Take a look at this monster of a list for a more comprehensive overview of possible combinations.)

Some of these are more straightforward than others. Especially those which describe a position in three-dimensional space like -auf, -ab, -unter, -hinter, -über, etc. are pretty logical:

weg = away ? weggehen = to go away

auf = up ? aufgehen = to "go up" (rise)

durch = through ? durchgehen = to pass through

So if you know the meaning of prefixes you can easily understand new verbs that you haven't seen before, simply by splitting them into their parts, at least in theory.

The problem is that we have many prefixes which don't seem to have a clear-cut meaning, such as dar-, ge-, zer-, etc. How can you make sense of these? Well, it's complicated, and instead of making sweeping generalizations which then require a million exceptions, it's helpful to look at these prefixes in more detail.

Today I'd like to talk a bit about the prefix be-, since I received the following question on the newsletter:

> *There are a quite a few cases where there are verbs and related be-verbs, such as danken and bedanken or folgen and befolgen. If one looks these words up in a dictionary often the meaning is identical or very close. In particular when would one use folgen (and not befolgen), and when would one use befolgen (and not folgen)? – Myron*

To "be-" or not to "be-" …

First of all, let's look at some verbs and how they change when adding "be-":

sprühen – to spray

besprühen- to spray on

kleben – to glue

bekleben – to stick (something) on (something)

gehen – to walk

begehen – to walk on

At first glance, it seems simple, right? The prefix "be-" simply seems to mean "on". And yes, *sometimes* it does appear like that, but this will only get you so far. Let's look at some more examples:

schreiben – to write

beschreiben – describe

leben – to live

beleben – to enliven

rühren – to stir

berühren – to touch

As you can see the idea that "be-" means "on" already falls flat here. In fact, can you spot any shared meaning here at all? No? Well, you're not alone. That's because the prefix "be-" **has no explicit meaning**.

But then what's happening here? Why do these verbs use this prefix all? Is it completely random? *Natürlich nicht.*

According to Duden, the German grammar and spelling bible, the prefix "be-" has two very specific functions:

1. a) transforms intransitive verbs into transitive ones
b) takes the prepositional object in intransitive formations and transforms it into an accusative object.

2. expresses within formations with nouns (or 2nd participles) that a person or thing is being endowed, equipped or provided with something

Too much jargon? Don't worry, we'll unpack these step by step.

1. a) Transitize this!

Before we continue, here's a quick reminder about the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs:

Transitive verbs are verbs which **must** *or* **can** have an object:

> Sarah braucht Geld. – Sarah needs money.

> Peter isst (einen Döner). – Peter is eating (a doner kebab).

Intransitive verbs never have an object:

> Sarah schläft. – Sarah is sleeping.

So, according to our grammar bible adding the prefix "be-" should transform intransitive verbs to transitive ones. Let's try it out:

> Peter labert. – Peter's babbling.

> Peter **be**labert Sarah – Peter's babbling at Sarah.

b) From Prepositional Object to Accusative Object

The second use case of "be-" is where we have a transitive verb with a prepositional object that gets transformed into an accusative object.

Quick reminder: a prepositional object is an object that is connected to the verb via a preposition:

> Ich warte auf den Zug. – I'm waiting for the train.

> Sie springen ins Wasser. – They are jumping into the pool.

So, "be-" is supposed to transform these prepositional objects into "regular" old accusative objects. Time for an example:

> Sie bauen auf der Wiese. – They're building on the meadow.

> Sie **be**bauen die Wiese. – They're building on the meadow.

As you can see the meaning of the sentence doesn't change here, but the

structure does. We can say the same thing either with a prepositional object or — by adding "be-" — with an accusative object.

It's precisely this function of the prefix "be-" which gave us the (false) notion above that it means "on". Let's look at sprühen/besprühen again:

Ich sprühe auf die Wand. – I'm spraying onto the wall. (prepositional object)

Ich besprühe die Wand. – I'm spraying onto the wall. (accusative object)

Something similar happens with one of the verbs Myron asked about, with a small twist:

Ich danke für die Blumen. – I'm thanking for the flowers.

Ich **be**danke **mich** für die Blumen – I'm thanking for the flowers.

While at first glance it looks like the prepositional object ("für die Blumen") hasn't changed, we still see the introduction of an accusative object. How? By adding "be-" to danken, the verb becomes reflexive! And the reflexive pronoun ("mich") now occupies the position of the accusative object. Confusing? Just keep in mind that **(sich) bedanken** is reflexive, while **danken** is not, and you should be fine.

2. Let's Get Equipped

The second function mentioned by Duden is when "be-" takes a noun, and turns it into a verb which expresses that someone or something is being endowed, equipped or provided with said thing:

die Blume – flower

Ich **be**blume den Balkon. – I equip the balcony with flowers.

Der Balkon ist jetzt **be**blumt. – The balcony is now equipped with flowers.

der Schlips – tie

Sarah **be**schlipst Peter. – Sarah equips Peter with a tie.

Peter ist jetzt **be**schlipst. – Peter is now equipped with a tie.

Summary & Exception

I hope this hasn't been too confusing so far. Let's do a quick recap:

- "be-" has no explicit meaning, but:
    - it transforms intransitive verbs into transitive ones
    - it changes prepositional objects into accusative objects
    - it creates verbs out of nouns which express that something is being equipped with said noun

So far so good. But we still haven't talked about the other verb pair that Myron asked about: folgen/befolgen. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to follow any of the functions discussed above:

folgen is not an intransitive verb (1a)

folgen does not come with a prepositional object (1b)

befolgen does not express that something or someone is being equipped with something (2)

So what's going on here? Let's take a closer look at how this verb + prefix works:

Wir folgen der Anweisung. – We're following the directive.

Wir befolgen die Anweisung. – We're following the directive.

As you can see above, both sentences have the exact same translation, but the difference is in the object case. Folgen requires a dative object, whereas befolgen uses an accusative object. Does that mean that folgen and befolgen always mean exactly the same thing? Well, they can, but they don't have to.

folgen means to follow (both literally, i.e. physically following and figuratively, i.e. to act according to a plan, protocol, etc.)

befolgen means to follow, but **only** figuratively

So I can say:

Ich folge dem Hund. – I'm following the dog.

But saying: "Ich befolge den Hund" while grammatically correct, is complete nonsense, because a dog is not a plan, set of orders, directive, etc. But you could totally say:

Ich befolge den Ernährungsplan für meinen Hund. – I'm following the nutrition protocol for my dog.

So, when should you use folgen or befolgen?

If you don't want to make a distinction between *physically* following an object, animal or person, or more *abstractly* following a plan, protocol, etc. use **folgen**. It always works.

If you want to talk *explicitly* about following a plan, set of directives, rules, protocol, etc. (in contrast to physically following an object, animal or person) use **befolgen**.

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