

False friends for beginners

When it comes to doing business, you always need to be prepared. If you are doing business in English, but your mother tongue is German, then you need to be prepared for the traps that the English language holds for you.

The following chapter will provide you with information about:

- the different kinds of false friends (page 6),
- the effect on your business contacts of language errors (page 8),
- typical mistakes in CVs, applications and interviews (page 9).

Different types of false friends

Same or similar word but different meaning

Take the German word *Mappe*. 'Map' exists in English but, while you are talking about something to put papers in, your English-speaking business contact thinks you mean a large piece of paper with roads and towns on it (*Landkarte*). The correct English word for *Mappe* – in this particular case – is 'folder'. Other examples are Gift/gift, Kredit/credit, Fabrik/fabric. You will find a list of the more frequently heard false friends in the latter half of this book.

Same or similar word and similar meaning

These are words that generally mean the same, but it depends on the context. Here is a standard example: *extra* and *Extra-*. If you say in German *Ich habe es extra so hingestellt, damit du es sofort siehst*, you would need to say in English 'I put it there deliberately so that you would see it'. If you are in a restaurant, though, and order *eine Extra-Portion Gemüse* you can say in English 'an extra portion of vegetables'. There is one verb which deserves special mention here, because it is probably the most frequently made mistake, namely: *machen/make*. We make mistakes, we make coffee, we make a fuss, but we do sports, we do courses and we do the accounts.

Via direct translation

You probably already know not to describe an *Unternehmer* as an undertaker, unless of course that particular entrepreneur or business owner really is an undertaker (*Leichenbestatter*). Similarly, it is widely known that a *Hochschule* is not the same thing as a high school.

Pseudo-anglicisms

These are English words that have found their way into everyday German usage but mean something completely different to the original English word, such as *Handy*, *Peeling* and *Body*. Others, such as *Wellness* and *Neckholder*, do not even exist in English; and some can shock your audience or perhaps make them laugh although you meant to be serious: take *public viewing*, for instance, which until now meant solely *öffentliche Aufbahrung (einer Leiche)*! It is better to talk about a 'live transmission on a big screen'. Who knows, perhaps these terms will gradually find their way into everyday English.

Non-existent English words

There is a strange phenomenon which occurs with just a few German words. They are often translated by German speakers into words that do not exist in English. One false friend of this type is *reservieren*, which many express as 'reservate'. 'Reservate' does not exist, but it is said automatically by many people due to what they have learnt so far of the English language.

Only a false friend in certain contexts

Take the German word *isoliert*: if the context is a location that is far away from anywhere else, then the translation is indeed 'isolated'. However, this is a false friend if we are talking about buildings and stopping the heat escaping from them; in this context you need to speak of 'insulation'.

Degrees of confusion

How disappointed or confused (or perhaps shocked!) will your conversation partner or email recipient feel if you use a false friend? The answer is: it depends. It depends on the word itself, and on how tolerant your opposite number is of hearing mistakes. It also depends on whether the person you speak or write to has any knowledge of German. The less German they know, the more potential there is for misunderstandings.

The cringe factor

Below is a simple scale to show you how other speakers of English, but especially native speakers, may feel when they hear mistakes made by (other) non-native speakers. These signs will help you to see how critical the use of a false friend can be, and it will hopefully help you to recognize which things you need to pay particular attention to:

- ↓ small error; it can cause some confusion,
- ↓↓ more critical; potential for big misunderstandings,
- ↓↓↓ don't say this: it may cause shock or embarrassment!

Applying for a job

There is no denying it: English is everywhere. If you are searching for a new job, it is likely that you will see under the list of requirements for the position: *gute* (or perhaps *hervorragende*, maybe *verhandlungssichere*) *Englischkenntnisse*. What sort of things should you be aware of when you apply?

Example 1: letter of application containing false friends



Dear Sir/Madam

I am applying for the job of photograph which you advertised in the Daily Times on Friday 3 September 2010.

Enclosed is my CV. You will see that I started to study to become an advocate, but I discovered a love of cameras and decided to become an undertaker instead and started up my own photo studio ...

What needs improving?

- The German word is *Fotograf* and the English for this is 'photographer'. This applicant has just described himself as a photo. ↓

- An advocate is someone who supports, for example, an idea, e.g. 'he is a strong advocate of renewable energy'. It is not the same as *Advokat*, which in English is 'lawyer' or 'attorney'. ↓↓
- If only the English for *Unternehmer* were undertaker – life would be so easy! An undertaker is, as already mentioned, *Bestatter*, and the word the applicant should have used is 'entrepreneur' or 'business owner'. ↓↓↓

Example 2: letter of application with some false friends



Dear Sir/Madam

I have been following the developments of your company for a while now with great interest. It is my wish to work for a globally successful company and so I am sending you my CV in case you actually have a vacancy for someone with my qualifications.

I was an executive assistant in the direction of a medium-sized German company for three years and am a very engaged team worker. My former chief was very satisfied with me and I am enclosing the reference that he wrote ...

What needs correcting?

- The German adverb *aktuell* and the English 'actually' are very similar but they mean different things. *Aktuell* translates as 'currently'. The English adverb 'actually' means *eigentlich*. ↓
- The applicant says she worked 'in the direction', which means *in der Richtung* ... What she should have written

was, for example, **'in the office of the board of directors'** or **'at head office'**. ↓↓

- Last but not least we have the classic false friend *Chef*. Although there are titles such as 'Chief Accountant' (*Hauptbuchhalter*) and 'Chief of Staff' (*Generalstabschef*), 'chief' also means *Indianerhäuptling*! The correct translation for *mein Chef* is **'my boss'** or **'my manager'**. ↓

Example 3



Dear Ms Terry

With regard to your announcement in the Good Thinking magazine on 15th January I would like to apply for the job of Sales Assistant.

I enclose my CV which shows that I have worked in the sales resorts of several companies. I read about your fusion with Alex plc and I am sure that a fresh and competent face in your sales department will bring your company many benefits ...

What's not right?

- Announcement. *Annonce* is so similar to this. However, 'announcement' means *Ankündigung*. The correct thing to say in the case above is **'advertisement'**. ↓
- We speak of 'holiday resorts' in English (*Ferien- / Urlaubsort*) but not of sales resorts or personnel resorts. The right word for this is **'department'**. ↓↓
- The applicant mentions a 'fusion' of Alex plc and the company she is writing to. Does she know that she has used

the translation of *Verschmelzung*? The word that describes the joining together of two companies is '**merger**'. ↓

Useful vocabulary

catch on	Schule machen; sich durchsetzen
recipient	Empfänger
opposite number	Gegenspieler; Verhandlungspartner
cringe	schaudern

Your CV

This is an interesting challenge: trying to fit the details of a large part of your life on just one or two pages. That is why it pays to get it right first time. There is not much you can do wrong with your personal details, but things like your education and work experience need a little care.

Example 1: CV containing false friends



Education

- 1992 - 1994 Promotion in Business Administration, University of Bayreuth
- 1987 - 1991 Diploma in Business Administration, University of Bayreuth
- 1979 - 1986 Unting Gymnasium

Be careful!

- When you talk or write about the achievements in your educational history, do find the correct translation. The English word 'promotion' means *Beförderung* in German. The qualification you gained was in fact a '**doctorate**' or '**PhD**'. ↓↓
- 'Diploma' is a universal word. It can be used for all kinds of qualifications after various lengths of study and/or work experience. If you studied for several years at a university, though, it is safe to call your final qualification a '**degree**'. ↓
- Do not say you went to school at the 'gymnasium'. That is the hall in which you do sports activities and exercise (*Sporthalle*). You can choose between '**secondary school**' and '**high school**' to refer to *Gymnasium*. ↓↓↓

Did you know that 'bachelor' also means *Junggeselle*? Say 'He's got a bachelor in Chemistry' or 'He did his bachelor's in architecture two years ago'. If you say 'He's a bachelor', you might need to explain whether you mean he has this qualification, or that he is unmarried.