**Language and Culture Show and Tell: German**

**Dagmar Paulus**

**Transcript**

In this video, I would like to talk about both the German language and about German culture, so you can get an idea of what we’re doing in German Studies here at University College London.

We will look at an image taken from UCL’s museum collection. I will talk a bit about that image and its context, namely nationalism and national identity. Afterwards, you will have the chance to learn a bit of basic German grammar, to do with articles and with a thing called compound nouns.

This image is a print by W. Lang after a drawing by Ludwig Rohbock. It shows a river landscape, with views of Lahneck Castle, Stolzenfels Castle and Niederlahnstein along the Rhine River, near Koblenz, Germany. The print was made around 1863.

This was an interesting point in the history of Germany. As you may know, there wasn’t actually a German nation state up until 1871, when the so-called Second Reich (after the Holy Roman Empire) was founded. Instead, what is now Germany consisted back then of a tapestry of smaller and larger states, loosely connected by the German Confederation but mostly independent of one another. Here’s a map:

The trouble with that kind of political arrangement is: What does it mean to be German? How can we define our nationhood? It’s all very well for the French or British, who each had their own clear-cut state! For Germans, the question was more difficult. Since there was no such thing as a nation state to represent nationhood, Germans reverted to other ways of forging their identity. Nationalism was all de rigueur in the 19th century, and Germans certainly joined in.

So what did Germans use then to build their national identity? Well, language, for one – hence the work of the brothers Grimm. They’re most famous for their fairy tale collection but they also compiled the first German dictionary. It’s huge, and has only recently been completed! It’s available online, if you’d like a look.

People back then (and still today) thought that language is an excellent marker of national identity. Whoever is a native speaker of German, is German, and a German state should include all the regions where German is spoken. Of course, this is not what happened – German is spoken in Germany (duh) but also in Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, and Luxembourg. So language takes you only so far but it was a start.

Another aspect is landscape – maybe not quite so obvious as language. Yes, landscape was very much a carrier of national identity in the nineteenth century.

The Rhine, in particular, was seen by many as the quintessentially German landscape – so idyllic, with the spectacular river, deep woods and mountains crowned with castles. In our image alone there are three!

The Rhine is also a region with a lot of local legends and fairy tales, which the members of the Romantic movement had been very fond of.

Tourism became a thing at about the same time, too, with the Rhine a popular destination for travellers from across Europe.

The British artist William Turner for example produced a whole series of paintings of the river.

But the most popular way to spread images of the Rhine were prints like the one in UCL’s collection. New technologies allowed quick and comparatively cheap production of prints in large numbers, and they were extremely popular with tourists and other Rhine enthusiasts. These prints unite a nostalgic longing for the past with modern technology. They were popular both in Germany and in Britain.

Interestingly, people only started to discover the Rhine and its natural beauty when industrialisation had finally taken hold in Germany in the nineteenth century. So, at a time when people began to turn nature into a commodity and the river itself had become a busy waterway for trade and industry, travellers discovered their penchant for times past, when everything had been clean and simple, or so they thought. Hence the appeal of the castles – they evoke the Middle Ages, a period safely in the distant past, that people liked to romanticise. Just think of Wagner’s Ring des Nibelungen which he composed between 1848 and 1874, and which is based on a medieval epic located on the Rhine.

In historic situations when significant changes sweep politics and society, nostalgia for the past can seem an attractive way to compensate. This print with its idyllic depiction of the river may have provided people with a welcome respite from the challenges of modernity such as rapid urbanisation, social and political unrest, and industrialisation.

And now for the language-based part of this presentation!

Let’s look at a few German words in this picture.

Schiff

wald

Burg

Fluss

Berg

You may notice that some of these words are somewhat related to their English equivalents. Since German and English belong to the same language family – the Germanic languages – there are quite a few things that are similar.

English nouns do have grammatical genders, but they correspond with natural gender. So every female being is feminine, every male being masculine, and the rest is neuter. How nice!

German is not nice, of course. Genders in German are pretty much random. For example, we say ‘die Burg’, which means it’s feminine, although there’s nothing particularly female about a castle. We take this very seriously, also referring to a castle as ‘she’, not ‘it’.

It’s ‘der Fluss’ – so, for us, a river is masculine, and the corresponding pronoun would be ‘he’.

The word for ship, Schiff, is neuter, so das Schiff.

Here are the three articles in German at a glance:

I’m afraid that there are quite a lot of rules in German like this one which may make German appear somewhat daunting to learn.

But on the other hand, German can also be really playful. Let’s look at those compound nouns I mentioned earlier.

Compound nouns are basically a sequence of two or more nouns, forming a new meaning. Here are a few example based on the words we’ve already learned.

Note that it’s always the gender of the last component that determines the gender of the new word.

burg + berg becomes Burgberg

wald + burg

berg + fluss

It’s actually possible to form new words as you go along. Some compound nouns are so common that they count as individual words themselves, and have their own entry in a dictionary. Others are rather less usual, but native speakers will still understand what you mean.

Here are a few more outlandish combinations – not part of everyday speech, but possible and completely understandable:

Waldburgberg – mountain in forest with castle

Bergwaldfluss – a river through wooded mountains

Bergwaldflussburg – a castle on a river that flows through wooded mountains

You get the idea. And you could continue the game. How about these:

Bergwaldflussburglandschaft

a landscape that contains a castle located on a river that flows through wooded mountains

* die Bergwaldflussburglandschaft + das Gemälde (painting)
* = das Bergwaldflussburglandschaftsgemälde
* (a painting of a landscape with a castle on a river through wooded mountains)

OK, one more:

* = das Bergwaldflussburglandschaftsgemälde

die Sammlung = collection

die Bergwaldflussburglandschaftsgemäldesammlung

43 letters!!

And you could go on. So, don’t believe anyone who says they know the longest word in German -there is no such thing. You could always glue a new word to whatever Behemoth you’ve already created. But let’s stop here, shall we?