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Oh, the Weltschmerz of it all

Dan Hamilton

Want to win at English? Learn German. That's the unexpected message of the 2006 National Spelling Bee finals. America's new national champion, Katharine Close, won by spelling *Ursprache*. The runner-up, Finola Hackett, tripped up on *Weltschmerz*. Another favorite lost on *Heiligenschein*.

Katharine might be excused for a shade of *Schadenfreude* as she watched her friends falter, because behind all the prime time *glitz* and *angst* was a simple lesson. German and English are both Germanic languages. They share many word origins and characteristics. That makes German a good choice for every English-speaking *Mensch*, whether you are a *Kindergartner*, a *Student*, or just one of the *Familie*. It's übercool, Mann.

You don't have to be a *Wunderkind* to learn a little German. Even Einstein was no *Wunder* as a *Kind*. Once you learn the basics, words that stumped the super spellers are a piece of *Kuchen* – every first-year German student can master their domain.

German is basically a Lego language – just take word blocks like *Welt* and *Schmerz*, smash them together, and you've got some real *Weltschmerz*.

It may sound painful, but it can be practical. For starters, you'll finally be able to understand those Volkswagen ads. And for the *Doppelbonus*, you could actually pronounce *Fahrvergnügen*.

Here's the *leitmotiv*: German is very American. It has worked its way into our world. While some worry loudly about too much Spanish, German has become everyday English. We check the weather on the *Doppler* and the temperature in *Fahrenheit*. If your neighbor chokes on his *Bratwurst*, you give him the *Heimlich*.

German helps us make our way in American pop culture. How can one understand the deeper meaning of *Shrek* without some personal insight into Teutonic fairy tales? "You're a Harvard historian, for God's sake, not a pop *schlockmeister*," Dan Brown exclaims in *The Da Vinci Code*. And what about those 99 *Luftballons* on their way to the *Horizont*?

If you work really hard, you might actually be able to understand Arnold the Governor in *Kindergarten Cop* – although my Austrian friends tell me he still needs to work on his *Akzent*. Run, Lola, run.

German can be helpful wherever the *Zeitgeist* may take you. J.K. Rowling took some good old German *Sturm und Drang* and turned it into *Durmstrang* for Harry Potter's Tri-Wizard tournament. It sounds a bit creepy, but it's a whole lot better than *Hogwarts*. I can only imagine how she came up with *that*.

A little German can help you *meister* your business -- after all, it's the *Wirtschaft*, *Dummkopf*. Germany is the world's *Exportmeister*. Perhaps the ultimate tribute to Bill Gates was when he was dubbed the *Softmeister*. If a salesman seems to be giving you the same old *Spiel*, a bit of German might help you decipher whether he is truly a *Weltmeister* or just another *Spindoktor*.

A little German *Realpolitik* might even help in diplomacy. In the early 1980s our Ambassador to Germany, Arthur Burns, was called in by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to explain the Reagan Administration's overarching concept, its *Gesamtkonzept*, for American foreign policy. Without missing a beat, Burns replied, "Of course, Mr. Chancellor. Would you like the *Gesamtkonzept* from this week or from last week?"

Achtung, though, there are some tricks. Soccer is football and foosball is *Kicker*. A *Billion* is a trillion. If you take your *Beamer* for a spin, you'll be driving an overhead projector. If you are out *Smoking* you are in a tuxedo. A *Gymnasium* is a high school. A *Pickel* is a pimple. A *Reformhaus* is not a place for delinquents; it's a health food store. A *Roman* is not some Italian guy, it's a novel. The *Rathaus* is the town hall, not a place where rats live (some may dispute that). An *Evergreen* isn't a tree, it's a golden oldie. And if you say "Play Misty for me," you've really stepped in it.

Knowing some German can be practical if your *Auto* is *kaputt*, you have some *Wanderlust*, or you want to explore the *Hinterland* with your *Rucksack*. One time I found myself in a tourist area of rural Pennsylvania, and strolled by *das Gifthaus*. I kept walking, because in German, *Gift* is pure poison.

Of course, *kitsch* is *kitsch* in any language. And I'm not sure anyone can understand *Rammstein*. There are times when it is best not to know.

See how handy German can be? In fact, in German *Handy* is a mobile phone. *Handy*. I think they've got something here. It *is* handy. "Cell phone" sounds like a germ spewer. Let's go with *handy*.

Sure, English is a must. But German is a plus. So let's take a cue from Katharine Close and improve our English by learning a little German this week. After all, on *Freitag* the biggest sports event on the planet starts in Germany -- the Soccer World Cup. Grab your *Bier*, settle back and repeat after me: TOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOR!!! It's *wunderbar*.

And if you find you have celebrated a bit too much, just take some *Aspirin* and call me in the *Morgen*. *Gesundheit*.

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