

Historical reflections in contemporary German: Brief answer key

These aren't anything like full answers, but more suggestions of the directions to go in to understand the patterns. Each topic is treated in the book and in other worksheets from across the course.

1. Usually, where German has an *f* (sound, not spelling!), French or Spanish has a *p*, like these Spanish words: *Vater* ~ *padre*, *Fisch* ~ *pescado*, *Fuß* ~ *pie*, etc. If sound correspondences are systematic, how do we get *Person* but French *personne*, *Pause* but *pause*?

Why, these are loanwords of course, borrowed after Grimm's Law. We can date, to some extent, loans by what sound changes they did or did not participate in, including for the Second Sound Shift: Pfalz vs. Palast, and so on.

2. English nouns mostly just take *-s* to form plurals. Why does German have so many different plural forms for nouns? And if they are related languages, why doesn't English have any nouns with weird plurals like German?

Germanic, like other IE languages, had a whole set of noun classes with different inflectional patterns. And the plural system developed, classes took their on courses, with old masc. and neut. *a*-stems often showing schwa plurals (*Tag*, *Tage*), *i*-stems showing umlaut (*Gast*, *Gäste*), and *ō*-stem fem. nouns showing schwa in the singular and *-n* in the plural.

And English has a set of these, if only handfuls: *man/men*, *goose/geese*, *deer/deer*, *child/children* (a double plural marker!), *brother/brethren*, etc.

3. Normally, different forms of a verb all have the same stem (*mach-* in *mache*, *machte*, *gemacht*) or shows differences in the stem vowel (*finden*, *fand*, *gefunden*). **But** the verb *sein* is just crazy: *bin*, *ist*, *sind*, *war* and *gewesen* don't look much alike or at all alike. What's going on here?

A little Frankenstein's monster unto itself, assembled from a set of different IE verbs meaning 'to be', 'to exist', etc. There was, for example, once a verb *wesan* 'to be' and it yields *gewesen* and, with Verner's Law and rhotacism, *war*, *waren*, *wart*.

4. Most verbs have the same stem vowel at least in the present tense: *mach-* has *a* throughout and *find-* has *i* throughout. But in a set of strong verbs, the second and third person singular are weird in two different ways. What's going on with these two sets of verbs?
 - a. *helfen* ~ *hilft*, *treffen* ~ *trifft*, *sehen* ~ *sieht*
 - b. *tragen* ~ *trägt*, *fahren* ~ *fährt*, *fangen* ~ *fängt*

These reflect old inflectional endings -it and -is (later -ist). For verbs with e as a stem vowel, the following high vowel triggered height harmony (helfan ~ hilfis) and for those with a as a stem vowel (often class VI), it triggered umlaut (faran ~ feris).

5. I can deal with vowels changing with verb tense — English kind of does that too: *singen*, *sang*, *gesungen* is a lot like *sing*, *sang*, *sung*. But why do the consonants change sometimes too? Things like *war* ~ *gewesen*, *ziehen* ~ *gezogen*, *schneiden* ~ *geschnitten* and less common ones like *sieden* ~ *gesotten*, *kiesen* ~ *erkoren*.

Verner's Law, of course! All the way back in IE, the 'mobile' accent fell on different syllables in different parts of the verbal paradigm (p. 67), on the stem in the infinitive and pret.sg. but on later syllables in pret.pl. and past participle, where the first two are voiceless and the second two are voiced *werθan warθ wurđum wurđun*. With other changes like rhotacism ($z > r$) and shift of interdental fricatives to stops his creates patterns that are no longer just about voicing like *keusan*, *kaus*, *kurum*, *kuran* 'to choose'. These have overwhelmingly been lost, but a few stick around. If they bother you, hang around a few hundred years and there will probably be even fewer than there are today.

6. A whole lot of negative words in German start with *n-*, like *nicht*, *niemand*, *nie*. Is that a coincidence? Are there more words like this?

Negation was done in OHG with a particle *ni* (including in the speech of a famous set of knights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTQfGd3G6dg>). It was unstressed and tended to glom onto words it often co-occurred with, like *eo* 'ever', *eo wicht* 'any thing', etc. The particle is gone, but the *ni* lingers on.

7. I learned that past participles start with *ge-* (*gemacht*, *getan*, etc.) but there are a lot of nouns that start with *Ge-* that look like they're related to verbs: *Gespräch*, *Gebäude*, *Getue*, *Geschmack*, etc. Is there some reason?

That prefix was widely used earlier, often meaning 'collective' and such. Its restriction to past participles is late and in some dialects its incomplete. The standard language has one remnant, even: *ist gemacht worden*.

8. A bunch of adverbs about time end in *-s*: *abends*, *nochmals*, *vormittags*, *montags*. They even seem to have some similarity in meaning. Why?

The genitive of indefiniteness still lurks in phrases like 'eines Tages' and it got grammaticalized in some forms to create adverbs of indefinite time ... not any particular evening, but evenings in general.