

Word Formation in German:

While the German language has always been particularly willing to borrow from other languages to build its vocabulary, one of its glories is its ability to create new words by combining elements from within its own repertoire.

As Mark Twain wrote in his [Notebooks & Journals](#),

"The German language is a dozen fragments of words flung into an octagonal cylinder - take a good look at them before you begin to turn the machine, for you will never see them in their simplicity again - never never any more. Turn! - up spring your fragmental elements with Ver's & Be's & Ge's & Er's & lein's & chen's & ung's & heit's & keit's & zu's & a thousand other flashing and blazing prefixes, affixes & interjections broidered on them or hung to them. - Turn & turn! The combinations will be infinite, & bewilderingly enchanting & magnificent - but these, also, like the original fragments you shall see but once, then lose them forever. The patterns in this linguistic kaleidoscope are never repeated."

And indeed, whether starting with a verb, a noun, or an adjective, German can add prefixes, suffixes, or other entities to achieve both different parts of speech and new concepts. Many of the derived forms are not found in the dictionary, but their meaning is apparent to anyone acquainted with basic rules of word creation.

This does not, however, mean that beginning German-speakers can confidently coin their own words. The rules of word-formation also reflect historical arcana, arbitrary conventions, and other kinds of developments that mark human language. But anyone can recognize the ways in which many thousands of vocabulary items have come into being and thus learn how to understand them more easily.

Example: Derivations of other words from the verb "sprechen":

To see some of the possibilities, consider as an example the strong verb "sprechen" and its most common meaning, "to speak."



Speak languages (or: Languages speak).

"Sprechen" as a basis for certain nouns:

There are seven basic ways in which we can turn the verb "sprechen" into a noun:

1. By converting the infinitive into a neuter noun, "das Sprechen," which is equivalent to an English gerund and indicates *the act of speaking*. It has no plural form.
2. By adding an "-er" or an "-erin" to the stem to indicate a male or female who performs the action (*speaker*): "der Sprecher / die Sprecherin." In certain cases, the "-er" can also indicate an instrument: "der Fernsprecher" (*telephone*); "der Lautsprecher" (*loudspeaker*). The plural of these "-er" nouns is the same as the singular: "die Sprecher", "die Lautsprecher", etc. The plural of the feminine form is of course "-erinnen": "die Sprecherinnen." ([Link here to a further discussion of the suffix "-er"](#)).



Our money-holdings are secured by a time lock. Our employees have no control over shortening the set time.

[This notice contains many vocabulary items constructed by the methods discussed here.]

3. By adding an "-e" to the preterite form ("sprach") to create a feminine noun, "die Sprache" (*language; manner of speaking*). The plural adds an "-n": "die Sprachen." ([Link here to a further discussion of feminine nouns derived from verbs](#)).

4. By using an old form of the preterite to create a masculine noun, "der Spruch" (*saying; slogan; [legal] verdict*). The plural of this form of nominalization involves an umlaut when possible and a final "-e": "die Sprüche". ([See below for a further discussion of masculine nouns derived from strong verbs](#)).

5. By adding ge- to the umlauted preterite form to create a so-called "collective noun," "das Gespräch" (*discussion; conversation*). The plural adds an "-e": "die Gespräche." ([Link here to a further discussion of collective nouns](#)).

6. By turning the present participle into an [adjectival noun](#): "der Sprechende" (*the man who is speaking*) / "die Sprechende" (*the woman who is speaking*).

7. By turning the past participle into an [adjectival noun](#): "das Gesprochene" (*that which has been said*).

While "sprechen" does not offer this option, a number of verbs can also be converted to nouns by adding the suffix "-ung" to the stem. The result is a feminine noun that indicates an instance of the verb: "wandern" (*to hike*) becomes "die Wanderung" (*hike*); "trennen" (*to separate*) becomes "die Trennung" (*separation*). See more about "-ung" below, as well as in [the section on "-ung" in the general discussion of suffixes](#).

Variations on "sprechen" as a basis for other verbs:

Inseparable prefixes:

We can also create other verbs by affixing a prefix to "sprechen". Here are some examples that employ "inseparable prefixes." As the name indicates, "inseparable prefixes" are a fixed part of the new verb. ([Link here to a general discussion of inseparable prefixes](#)):

"besprechen" (*to discuss*); "entsprechen" (*to correspond to; to be consistent with*); "widersprechen" (*to contradict*); "versprechen" (*to promise*); "sich versprechen" (*to misspeak*)

As is always in the case with verb prefixes, the basic conjugation stays the same as that of the original verb. However, an inseparable prefix replaces the "ge-" of the past participle:

Infinitive	Preterite	Past Participle	3rd-Person Sing.
sprechen	sprach	gesprachen	spricht
besprechen	besprach	besprochen	bespricht
entsprechen	entsprach	entsprochen	entspricht
widersprechen	widersprach	widersprochen	widerspricht
versprechen	versprach	versprochen	verspricht

Examples of their use - all of these prefixes are discussed in greater length in the general section on ([inseparable prefixes](#)).

Wir haben die Situation genau besprochen. *We discussed the situation thoroughly.*
[As in English (e.g. to belittle, besmirch, beknight, beget, bespeak, etc.),
"be-" makes a verb directly transitive.]

Das entspricht meinen Vorstellungen. *That corresponds to what I imagine.*
["ent-" often has the meaning of the English "dis-" ("entdecken" *to discover*;
"entkleiden" *disrobe*) or "away from" ("entfernen" *to remove*),
"entlassen" *to discharge; to lay off*)
- but neither of those meanings seems to apply here.]

Warum musst du mir immer widersprechen? *Why do you always have to contradict me?*

["wider-" means "against".]

Er versprach mir, sein Bestes zu tun. *He promised me to do his best.*

Als ich das sagte, habe ich mich versprochen. *When I said that, I misspoke.*

["ver-" has a great many possible functions. [Here is a general discussion of "ver-".](#)

When a verb has the prefix "ver-" and is reflexive, it can mean to make a mistake during that activity:

Er hat sich verlaufen. *He got lost [walking]*

Sie hat sich verfahren. *She got lost lost [driving]*

Ich habe mich bei der Addition verrechnet. *I miscalculated in my addition.*

Separable prefixes:

Separable prefixes form a much larger set of possibilities. These elements provide either a more precise, or a significantly different meaning of the modified verb. Thus they serve as the ["verb complement"](#). [Link here to a fuller discussion of separable prefixes.](#)

English has an analogous, but less frequently applied concept. Consider, for example, what happens when "up" is added to a verb like "to cut" or "to grow": "I cut it" -> "I cut it up"; "She grew" -> "She grew up."

Most, but not all, separable prefixes are derived from prepositions and retain much of the meaning that they had in that form. As with inseparable prefixes, the conjugation of the original verb remains the same, but, as their name would imply, separable prefixes can be detached. (There is a fuller discussion in the general section on [separable prefixes](#). The following illustrates only separable prefixes that are combined with the verb "sprechen"):

Take the example of **"durchsprechen"**. While the prefix "durch-" can have various definitions, here it takes on the meaning of entering a process with purpose and coming out the other end. Hence "durchsprechen" means: *to talk through; to talk over; to talk out; to argue something out*:

In the verb's infinitive form, the prefix is attached: **"durchsprechen"**.

In the finite form, the prefix separates from the stem verb and goes to the end of the clause, the position of the verb complement: "Er spricht die Lage mit mir **durch**" (*He talks over the situation with me*).

In the past participle, the prefix is attached, but, in contrast to inseparable prefixes, it does not replace the "ge-": **"durchgesprochen"**.

If the verb is in the form of an infinitive with "zu", the "zu" comes between the prefix and the original verb: "Er versucht, die Lage mit mir **durch**zusprechen" (*He tries to talk over the situation with me*).

Further examples of separable prefixes that can be added to the base verb "sprechen":

absprechen - *to arrange (through discussion); jemandem etwas absprechen* $\hat{=}$ *to deny someone something*

Wir haben einen neuen Termin abgesprochen. We have agreed on a new due date. Du kannst deinem Kind nichts absprechen. You aren't able to deny your child anything.

ansprechen - *to address; to accost; to approach (to initiate a conversation with)*

Er spricht jeden Passanten an. *He addresses (accosts; approaches) every passer-by.*

aussprechen - *to pronounce; to vocalize*

Sie spricht das deutsche "r" falsch aus. *She pronounces the German "r" wrongly.*

einsprechen ("ein-" can mean: *to zero in on; to home in on*)

Um die Lautstärke zu checken, spricht er das Mikrofon ein. *To check the volume, he tests the microphone by speaking into it.*

fernsprechen - *to telephone* (now replaced by "telefonieren" and "anrufen," this word still occasionally shows up in the noun form, "Fernsprecher" [telephone])

lossprechen - *to absolve; to begin to speak*

Ich spreche dich von deinem Versprechen los. *I absolve you from your promise.*

Sprechen Sie los! "Fire away [with what you have to say]!"

mitsprechen - *to speak along (with); to join in speaking*

Ich lese die Verbformen vor, und du kannst sie mitsprechen. *I'll read the verb forms aloud, and you can say them along with me.*

nachsprechen - *to repeat after*

Ich lese die Verbformen vor, und du kannst sie nachsprechen. *I'll read the verb forms aloud, and you can say them after me.*

vorsprechen - *to call on* Sie möchte mal bei ihm vorsprechen. *She'd like to call on him sometime.*

There is some disagreement as to whether "dagegensprechen" (to contradict) and "dazwischensprechen" (to interrupt) are verbs with separable prefixes or set "verbal ideas" to be written as two words: "dagegen sprechen" and "dazwischen sprechen." A similar debate exists between "kennenlernen" and "kennen lernen." Other than in the orthography, the distinction is inconsequential.

Again: there is [a fuller discussion in the general section on inseparable prefixes](#).

Deriving adjectives and adverbs from "sprechen":

The present and past participles of verbs can also become adjectives or adverbs. As in English, when an adjective is derived from **a past participle**, the result indicates that the modified noun is the object of the action: "das gesprochene Wort" (*the spoken word*); "der abgesprochene Termin" (*the agreed-upon date*); "das versprochene Geld" (*the promised money*).

Als in English, when **a present participle** becomes an adjective, it means that the noun that it modifies is performing that activity. German creates a present participle by adding a "-d" to the infinitive form of a verb: "ein sprechendes Pferd" (*a talking horse*).

Certain suffixes are available to turn "sprechen" into an adjective or adverb via its noun-forms "Sprache". (Link here to [a fuller discussion of forming adjectives and adverbs with suffixes](#)).

"-lich" means "*pertaining to*":

Er hat seinen Aufsatz sprachlich verbessert.
He improved his essay linguistically.

"-los" means "*without*" or "*-less*":

Ich war auf seinen Besuch so unvorbereitet, dass ich nur sprachlos da stand.
I was so unprepared for his visit that I just stood there speechless.

The suffix **"-bar"**, meaning "*-able*", can be attached to the verb stem to create an adjective or adverb:

Bevor sie ihren Morgenkaffee trinkt, ist sie nicht ansprechbar.
Before she drinks her morning coffee, she is unapproachable (she can't be spoken to).

Nouns derived from variations on "sprechen"

(Link here to [a fuller discussion of the suffix "-er"](#)).

der Sprecher / die Sprecherin *speaker* (der Redner / die Rednerin is more common)
Die Sprecherin brauchte kein Mikrofon.
The (female) speaker didn't need a microphone.

der Fürsprecher / die Fürsprecherin *advocate; intercessor*
Bei der Schulleitung war der Fußballtrainer unser bester Fürsprecher.
The soccer coach was our best advocate with the school administration.

der Fernsprecher *telephone*

Heutzutage ist es nicht leicht, einen öffentlichen Fernsprecher zu finden, weil alle Handys haben.

Nowadays it isn't easy to find a public telephone, since everyone has a cell phone.

der Lautsprecher *loudspeaker* (but a speaker that is part of a sound system is "die Box")

Die Durchsage kam über einen Lautsprecher.

The announcement came over a loudspeaker.

Adjectives that have been derived from "sprechen" can in turn go on to become [adjectival nouns](#)):

der Sprechende (*the man who is speaking*); das Gesprochene (*that which has been spoken aloud*); das Besprochene (*that which is or was being discussed*); das Versprochene (*that which has been promised*); das Sprachliche (*the linguistic element*), etc.

Variations on "die Sprache", using prefixes:

We saw above that adding an "-e" to the preterite form ("sprach") can create a feminine noun, "die Sprache" (*language; manner of speaking*). The same goes for some of the other verbs created with separable prefixes:

die Ansprache *address [speech]*

Zur Begrüßung hat der Schulleiter eine Ansprache gehalten.

By way of greeting, the school principal gave an address.

die Aussprache *pronunciation*

Ihre Aussprache war so grässlich, dass ich kein Wort verstanden habe.

Her pronunciation was so execrable that I didn't understand a word.

die Mitsprache *"co-determination"* (usually: "das Mitspracherecht" *right of co-determination*)

Beim Entwerfen des Lehrplans haben die Schüler kein Mitspracherecht.

The pupils have no official say in the design of the curriculum.

die Ursprache *protolanguage, original language*)

Indogermanische war angeblich die Ursprache der europäischen Völker.

Indogermanic was supposedly the original language of the European peoples.

Variations on "der Spruch", using prefixes:

der Spruch *dictum, judgment [verdict], saying, slogan*

Der alte Spruch lautet: Übung macht den Meister.

The old saying goes: practice makes perfect.

der Anspruch *claim, demand; right*

Der Finder hat keinen Anspruch auf eine Belohnung.

The finder has no right to a reward.

der Ausspruch *sentence; dictum; statement*

Wie so oft der Fall, stammt dieser Ausspruch über den Umweltschutz nicht wirklich von einem Indianerhäuptling.

As is so often the case, this statement about environmental protection did not really originate with an Indian chief.

der Einspruch *appeal, protest*

Ich sollte eine Geldstrafe bezahlen, aber ich habe Einspruch erhoben

I'm supposed to pay a fine, but I've submitted an appeal.

Widerspruch *contradiction; objection* Ein gerechter Krieg ist ein Widerspruch in sich.

A just war is a contradiction in terms (oxymoron).

Das Urteil wurde ohne Widerspruch bestätigt.
The judgment was affirmed without opposition.

Variations on "sprechen", using prefixes and the suffix "-ung" (Link here to [a fuller discussion of the suffix "-ung"](#)).

die Entsprechung *analogy; equivalent*
Gibt es eine englische Entsprechung dieses deutschen Sprichwortes?
Is there an English equivalent to this German proverb?

die Besprechung *discussion; conference; meeting*
Heute muss ich an einer wichtigen Besprechung teilnehmen.
Today I have to take part in an important meeting.

die Versprechung *a (usually vain or empty) promise*
Er hat sie mit leeren Versprechungen hintergangen.
He deceived her with empty promises.

More on nouns derived from strong verbs:

Here are many of the nouns that are derived from strong verbs, together with their most common meanings (in a couple of cases, the primary word does not produce a noun, so a variation is listed). Note that the nouns in this category are masculine and tend to form the plural with an umlaut and "-e". Note that this list is organized according to the strong verb patterns.

Verb	Noun	Plural	Meaning
brennen	der Brand	die Brände	<i>fire</i>
fallen	der Fall	die Fälle	<i>fall; case</i>
fangen	der Fang	die Fänge	<i>catch</i>
gehen	der Gang	die Gänge	<i>gait; passageway</i>
hängen	der Hang	die Hänge	<i>slope</i>
raten	der Rat	die Räte	<i>council</i>
[but also]	der Rat	die Ratschläge	<i>advice; piece of advice</i>
schlafen	der Schlaf	[no plural]	<i>sleep</i>
schlagen	der Schlag	die Schläge	<i>blow</i>
stehen	der Stand	die Stände	<i>stand; class; condition</i>
stehlen	der Diebstahl	die Diebstähle	<i>theft</i>
zwingen	der Zwang	die Zwänge	<i>compulsion</i>
graben	der Graben	die Graben	<i>ditch</i>
[but also]	das Grab	die Gräber	<i>grave</i>
[but also]	die Grube	die Gruben	<i>pit</i>
beginnen	der Beginn	[no plural]	<i>beginning</i>
gewinnen	der Gewinn	die Gewinne	<i>profit; gain</i>
betrügen	der Betrug	die Betrüge	<i>deceit; deception</i>
finden	der Fund	die Funde	<i>discovery; trove</i>
fliegen	der Flug	die Flüge	<i>flight</i>
schließen	der Schluss	die Schlüsse	<i>conclusion</i>
[but also]	das [!] Schloss	die Schlösser	<i>lock; castle</i>
springen	der Sprung	die Sprünge	<i>leap; crack</i>
schwingen	der Schwung	die Schwünge	<i>momentum; vim</i>
verlieren	der Verlust	die Verluste	<i>loss</i>
werfen	der Wurf	die Würfe	<i>throw</i>
wachsen	der Wuchs	die Wüchse	<i>figure; growth</i>
ziehen	der Zug	die Züge	<i>train; pull; draft</i>

biegen	der Bogen	die Bogen/Bögen	<i>bow; bend; arch</i>
stoßen	der Stoß	die Stöße	<i>blow; impact; jar</i>
beißen	der Biss	die Bisse	<i>bite</i>
greifen	der Griff	die Griffe	<i>grip; handle</i>
kneifen	der Kniff	die Kniffe	<i>pinch</i>
pfeifen	der Pfiff	die Pfiffe	<i>[sound made by a] whistle</i>
reißen	der Riss	die Risse	<i>rip</i>
scheißen	der Schiss	<i>[no plural]</i>	<i>shit</i>
<i>[but also]</i>	die Scheiße	<i>[no plural]</i>	<i>shit</i>
schießen	der Schuss	die Schüsse	<i>rip</i>
schleifen	der Schliff	die Schliffe	<i>polish</i>
schneiden	der Schnitt	die Schnitte	<i>cut</i>
schreiten	der Schritt	die Schritte	<i>step</i>
streichen	der Strich	die Striche	<i>stripe; stroke</i>
beweisen	der Beweis	die Beweise	<i>proof</i>
scheinen	der Schein	<i>[no plural]</i>	<i>shine; appearance</i>
schreien	der Schrei	die Schreie	<i>shout; scream</i>
streiten	der Streit	die Streite	<i>quarrel; fight</i>
scheiden	der Abschied	die Abschiede	<i>farewell</i>
treiben	der Trieb	die Triebe	<i>drive</i>



Your economic recovery begins with a conversation. You will learn in a consultation at the Deutsche Bank how you can personally profit from the German economic recovery.

Certain nouns from weak verbs have the same pattern:

tauschen	der Tausch	die Tausche	<i>exchange</i>
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Examples of feminine nouns derived from strong verbs:

waschen	die Wäsche	<i>[no plural]</i>	<i>laundry; linens</i>
lügen	die Lüge	die Lügen	<i>lie</i>
nehmen	die Einnahme	die Einnahmen	<i>revenue</i>

Here are some that are feminine and add "-t" or "-st":

ankommen	die Ankunft	die Ankünfte	<i>arrival</i>
fahren	die Fahrt	die Fahrten	<i>drive; trip</i>
können	die Kunst	die Künste	<i>art; craft</i>
laden	die Last	die Lasten	<i>burden</i>
machen [!]	die Macht	die Mächte	<i>power; might</i>
tun	die Tat	die Taten	<i>deed</i>