

# Need just the right word? German probably has it.

“German must have a word for it.” Most such internet assertions are false. But in my opinion as a German American and a linguist, this one turns out to be nearly true. Let me explain some of the tricks of the German word factory. There are quite a few Germanisms that have become part of English vocabulary, such as *Schadenfreude*, but let’s talk about the more subtle *Fingerspitzengefühl*. It means the sixth sense someone might have for the right move in a difficult situation.

Let’s dissect the word. It is a compound noun, just like *swan boat* or *apple juice* in English. German prefers to write its compounds without spaces or hyphens. The two nouns that come into play are *Fingerspitze*, itself a compound that means “fingertip,” and *Gefühl*, which means “sense” or “feeling.” German compounds (English ones, as well) are right-headed: The noun on the right



IN A WORD  
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determines the kind of thing referred to, so *Fingerspitzengefühl* talks about a kind of sense (just as a swan boat is a boat and apple juice is a certain kind of juice). The other noun modulates the meaning in some way. So *Fingerspitzengefühl* is a kind of sense or feeling that has something to do with fingertips.

Your fingertips are sensitive parts of your body, useful for delicate manipulations, such as undoing a stubborn knot in your shoelaces. But *Fingerspitzengefühl* doesn’t just refer to this physical sense. The next stage in the word factory is the one that associates transferred, metaphorical meanings with words that are originally rooted in the physical world.

So, what about the claim that German has a word for everything? Well, given the relative freedom of compounding and metaphorical extension, German speakers could manufacture a word for anything they wanted. Most of the time,

it isn’t worth the trouble. There are other ways: One could use a sentence or two to describe the thing in a more complex way. One could make up a noncompound word. One could borrow a word from another language and be done with it. German liberally borrows words, especially from English. Last year’s top 10 new words selected by the German Society for Language included the English-derived *Lockdown-Kinder* and *Booster*.

There’s another assertion floating around the web. This one is patently false: Doesn’t the fact that one language has a word for something, while others don’t, reveal that your native language gives you exclusive access to aspects of reality that are not even perceptible to others? Well, no. More on that some other time.

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