

German in English I

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By Stefan Israel

Gesundheit!



Bless you? **Gesundheit!** In the American melting pot, you hear bits of the various ingredients still in the mix. Sneeze, and someone may wish you health, *gesundheit* (“guh-ZOONNT hite”)- the *-sund-* part is related to our ‘of *sound* health’. Myself, I still automatically say *gesundheit*.

We toss around Scandinavian words like *fjord* or Japanese ones like *tsunami*. The beautiful *mustang* horse gets its name from the Spanish. Your New England *chowder*? It’s thought to come from Quebecois French *chaudière* ‘bucket’. It all goes into the stew.

Why did we take a spin through some of the words that German immigrants brought across the sea?

Don’t get **fresh** with me!*



┌- huh- what? What does non-staleness have to do with cheekiness? English had the word *fresh*, but German migrants brought two words, *frisch* and *frech*. *Frisch* means non-stale, it’s the German version of our word ‘fresh’, but *frech* means cheeky, impudent. In formal German, it’s pronounced... well, it’s pronounced like this:

frech vs. frisch

We don’t normally have that *-hy-* sound at the end, though many Americans run the *hy-* sound of *huge* (*hyooj*), *human*, *Hubert* together into that sound. But colloquially, lots of Germans pronounced it as *fresch* - just like English *fresh*. So when German immigrants said not to get *fresch* with them, American English’s *fresh* picked up that meaning, too. Those cheeky Americans.



Kaput! When something’s *kaput*, like German *kaputt*, it’s broken, ruined, no good any longer.

Schmutzig! I've known various German-Americans who still know- and cringe at- the word schmutzig 'dirty', from their German-born grandmother's insistence on rigorous cleanliness. It's related to the word 'smut', including in the meaning of the black mold on corn that looks like dirt.

There are a lot of little remnants of German in American English like that, still used in families. My father sometimes affectionately calls my sister *nixnux*, which doesn't mean anything. But *nixnutz* or *nichtsnützig* does mean something, it means 'not worth anything, useless.' !? How could he say that? Well, he doesn't speak German, it's just a term of affection, and whatever older people he picked it up from used it for affectionate teasing. *Silly* comes from 'soul', 'soulful', *nice* from Latin *nescius* 'doesn't know anything'. Words can change like leaves in the fall.

Kindergarden. That is just slightly Anglicized from Germans *Kindergarten*, children's garden, a lovely way of saying it.



We'll come back periodically to more of these Germanisms, plus Scandinavian and Dutch words that have snuck in as well.

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\*P.S. the Batman cartoon was recaptioned into German Swabian dialect: Robin says 'All Swabians are dumb!' and an offended Batman replies 'a few [slaps] across yer trap, ya lousy jerk!' Swabians love their mother Swabian dialect!

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