

Word of the Day - "Steuer"

by German-is-easy - Tuesday, October 11, 2016

<https://yourdailygerman.com/2016/10/11/die-das-steuer-meaning-german/>

Hello everyone,

and welcome to our German Word of the Day. This time we'll have a look at the meaning of a word for something that many people are behind and against.... AT THE SAME TIME!!!

Ohhhhhh... so mysterious :).

"Well, actually... I can just stand behind a tree and lean against it. No big deal."

Shut up, inner critic. You're ruining my intro.

"Just sayin'. It's not all that myste..."

Well, how about this then: the word we'll look at today has two totally different meanings and you have to pay one for the other. Is that mysterious enough for you?

"Hmmm.. yeah, that's better. Although..."

Gee, whatever. Today, we'll look at

Steuer

Let's start.

There's *das Steuer* and *die Steuer* and For the first *Steuer*, we have direct English relatives.

- Ich kann mir nicht merken, welche Seite *Steuerbord* und welche Backboard ist.
- I can't get into my head what side is *starboard* and which is port-side.

You probably guessed it. *Starboard* has nothing to do with the stars. It comes from the verb *to steer*, which is about the idea of giving direction, and that's also the core of *das Steuer*. It is the device to "steer" with.

- Scandal - mayor drunk behind the (steering) *wheel* again.
- Skandal - Bürgermeister schon wieder betrunken hinterm *Steuer*.

- Telefonieren *am Steuer* ist verboten, und kann teuer werden.

- It's forbidden to talk on the phone while driving, and can be costly.

- Der neue Manager muss *das Steuer herumreißen*. (idiom)
- The new manager has *to do a full turnaround (in little time)*.

I guess we should mention that it's not the right word for bikes. That would be *der Lenker*. And the verb *lenken* is the right word for turning the steering wheel in your car.

- Ich *lenke* nach links.
- I *steer* to the left.
(*I'll add a link to the post on "lenken" below*)

But there's also the verb *steuern*. It's much more common in daily speech than its brother *to steer* and it's used in a rather broad sense of *guiding, controlling* and even just *going in a direction*.

- Die Software *steuert* die Futterabgabe und das Melken der Kühe.
- The software *controls* the feeding and milking of the cows.

- Die Stadt *steuert* auf die Insolvenz *zu*. (*infinitive is "auf etwas zusteuern"*)
- The town is *moving* toward insolvency.

- Wohin *steuert* Europa?
- Where *is* Europe *headed*?

- Mit der App kann man ein Modellflugzeug via Handy *fernsteuern*.
- With the app you can *remote control* a model plane using your cell phone.

- Die Aufnahme ist *übersteuert*.
- The recording is *clipping*.
(*literally, the volume control has been opened up too much*)

Cool.

So this was *das Steuer*. And the other one? What does *die Steuer* mean? Well, it means ... *tax*. *Das Steuer* is a *device for steering*, *die Steuer* is a *tax*. Hmm... sounds like a random pairing, but think of the ever rising tax on tobacco. That's the government trying to get the people to stop smoking. Taxes as a means of soft-"steering" the people. That makes a lot of sense. But then again...was that really what monarchs had in mind? Like... were health concerns the reason why the king of France came up with the much hated tax on salt?

*Proclaim to the realm: henceforth a tax shall be paid on salt,
for I am concerned about my subjects' blood pressure.*

Hardly. He just thought it was a clever way to get cash. So as compelling as the connection of tax and steering is, it's not how the words connect.

So how do they connect? Is there even a connection?

Yes, there is. *Steuer* is actually one of the many many offspring of the super ancient Indo-European roots **sta-*. That's where *to stand* and *stehen* come from and *die Steuer* was simply once a general word for something that was standing and that helps you stand, and it could be a pole, a pillar or more figurative support. Like ... a tax. Money helping the ruler "stand".

And what about *das Steuer* and *steering*? How does the idea of *giving direction* tie in? Well... [here's a picture](#).

Poling a raft or a boat. Using a large pole to move it and direct it. So essentially it went from *standing*, to *pole*, to *pole used for steering a boat* to *steering*. Quite a crazy evolution, right? Go ahead, put it on the list of stories to tell your crush on the first date. You'll be steering right for third base.

Big promise.

Speaking of broken promises... let's look how to say *tax cuts* and the other common tax words in German.

- Alle Kandidaten versprechen, die *Steuern* zu senken.
- All candidates promise to lower the *taxes/tax* cuts.

- Ich muss meine *Steuererklärung* machen.
- I have to do my *tax return*.

- Die *Mehrwertsteuer* beträgt in Deutschland für die meisten Waren 19%, aber es gibt Ausnahmen.
- In Germany , the *sales tax (VAT)* for most goods is 19%; but there are exceptions.

- Der Schauspieler ist wegen *Steuerhinterziehung* angeklagt.
- The actor is indicted for *tax evasion*.

And let's not forget the two verbs that are based on *die Steuer*.

- Muss man AirBnB-Einnahmen *versteuern*?
- Do I have *to pay tax on* income from AirBnB? (*yes, you damn well should*)
(*the German verb is focused on the idea of stating the income in your tax return, not the actual paying*)

- Wegen der extrem schlechten Haushaltslage denkt die Regierung laut darüber nach, Whatsapp zu *besteuern*.
- Because of the dire budgetary situation, government openly ponders *raising a tax* on Whatsapp.

- Das neue *Doppelbesteuerungsabkommen* zwischen den beiden Ländern hat viele Vorteile.
- The new *double taxation treaty* between the two countries has many benefits.

Jesus, *Doppelbesteuerungsabkommen...* this is humongous. By the way, do you know why the German language possesses such whales of words?

One theory says it's because of, get this, taxes!

Back many many years, a king of Bavaria had a problem. He wanted to build the Disney cartoon castle but he needed loads of cash. So he came up with a brilliant idea... a tax on words. Not only would that create massive revenue, it would also shut down the incessant chatter at court, that gave him such a headache.

Or so he hoped.

But since the dawn of time, man has unleashed his full divine creativity when it comes to tax evasion. And just like the Brits would wall up their windows to evade the window tax, the German people came up with a work around. Compounds. Prefix verbs were first, but soon the "words" got longer and longer and little money was payed.

Crestfallen, the king secluded himself more and more, and the castle ended up the pathetic piece of crap that today is know as... Neuschwanstein.

I'm not a historian though, so I might be off here and there. By the way, what about my inner critic?

Where has he been through all of this? Where are you when I REALLY need you, huh?!?! You let me down, man! You let everyone down!!!

Anyway, that's it for today. This was today's episode of "History with Emanuel", where some of it was

actually true :).

Oh, and we learned something about tax and steering, too.

As always, if you have any questions or suggestions or if you want to try out some examples, just leave me a comment. I hope you had fun.

Schöne Woche und bis nächstes Mal :).

further reading:

[Word of the Day - "lenken"](#)

**** vocab ****

das Steuer - the steering device

die Steuerung - the control

die Systemsteuerung - the control panel (Windows computers)

steuern - control, guide, head in a direction

übersteuert - clipped, distorted (for recordings)

ansteuern - head for something

die Steuer - the tax

die Steuererklärung - the tax return

die Steuererhöhung - blow to our economy and the middle class, a crime even

die Mehrwertsteuer - the VAT

besteuern - put/levy a tax on something

versteuern - pay a tax on something