German Adjective Endings 3

by German-is-easy - Monday, February 03, 2014

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Hello everyone,

and welcome to the last part of the mini series on

German adjective endings

So far, things were simple. Part 1 (find it ***here***), the most important one, was about adding an *-e* to the adjective as soon as it precedes a noun, no matter what. Seriously. If you haven't read it, then do it. In part 2 (find it ***here***) we learned to add an extra -n to that whenever the article looks weird. If you just do that, you should get about 70 % correct. Today, we'll take care of the extra 15 %. Oh... I mean 25% . Sorry... haha... a bit shaky with the math right there.
Now, so far it was all easy peasy but this is gonna end today. "German grammar ist kein ponyhof" as a common proverb says. Have you heard of the 80/20 rule? It's like... you can drink 80% of an XXL Latte with hazelnut with joy and little effort but you need to really want to finish it to drink the remaining... uhm... the remaining percent. It's no different for adjective endings. Today will be theoretical and tedious. You will be super exhausted and so frustrated that you will never want to speak German a
 (wait a second... that's not how they explained it at this "Explain things seminar". What did the guy say? ... uhm... pretend that it's easy... yeah, that's it... quick... must act or I'll lose them)
        why today it'll be surprisingly easy. We'll breeze through a few rules and a few concepts and shabams... we're done. We're basically done already, we just need to wrap up the whole thing. It'll be a walk in the park...
(By the time they realize it's the Rocky Mountain national park, it's too late...) guahahhahahahaha... oh... did I just do the evil laughter aloud? Damn... anyway... without any further ado, here we go.... with a little bit of background.

The Awful German marking system

German. It has ~~three~~ way too many genders, ~~four~~ way too many cases and ~~2715~~ WAAAAAY to many ways to build the plural. That's why linguists call it a WTM-language by the way. But German doesn't only have those forms. It also likes to show them around. Like... you're just sitting there trying to read a book and German keeps waving its grammar in your face.
"Hey look what I got. Look! Masculine singular accusative!", it says. And you're just like "Ugh..."
German is not the only language to do that. Many languages belong to the WTM-club and in most them the grammar is "marked". A very common way of marking things like gender or number are endings. In English an *-s* marks plural for instance. And that's exactly what the adjective endings are doing. Alongside with nouns, articles and pronouns they have to carry around certain marks for gender, case and number.
Now, we could ask "Okay, cool, so... what marker are the adjectives carrying?"
That works fairly well for Spanish

- o - masculine, singular
- a - feminine singular
- os - masculine plural
- as - feminine plural

And it is similarly straight-forward in Italian. But in German it is not that simple. Hey... STOP... come back! You can't run away, you hear me? Learning Spanish will not solve your problems with German. Seriously though, the German marking system is REALLY messed up. Because back in the day, when the question of who has to carry what mark came up in one of the design meetings for the German language, the nouns were quite unwilling to participate. They were like
"We already carry the meaning. We will not carry anything extra. Let the articles do it."
Of course the articles weren't too pleased.
"What?! No fair! We are so small and we're supposed to carry gender, case AND number while the nouns only carry ONE thing??? We're articles, not slaves."
And so started a debate that raged on forever. The nouns threatened to go on strike, then the articles threatened to go on strike. Then experts for efficiency were brought in. Then some sound designers. Even a student... he failed you all. And finally, after centuries of barter and bargaining, a compromise was found. A political compromise. And we all know how these THOSE look like... millions of regulations and special cases to satisfy every last group of interest... except the learners, of course.
Is it really THAT messed up? Long answer: Nouns kind of focus on plural, articles on gender and case, but they can use the same form for different things, everyone can carry everything at times or everyone just carries parts of a mark or a mark is missing entirely... it is horribly intertwined...

- den schönen Wagen... accusative - singular - masculine
- der schöne Wagen... nominative - singular - masculine
- der schönen Wagen... genitive - plural - masculine
- den schönen Wagen... dative - plural - masculine

I mean... can you see ANY system in that? And yes, the first and the last one are identical. It is really beyond works. And because this system is so awful, we had our German is Easy grammar team create a visualization. They said they had to use really complicated math and that it needed 3 full days to render... I haven't looked at it myself yet so let's have a look together right now
here it is .
Oh... uhhhhh... I... uhm... it all becomes clear once you see it in 3D, I suppo ... oh wait, never mind. it doesn't. It does in 6D but I haven't had enough glasses for th.. uhm... I mean... I don't have the glasses for that. Anyway... we do not need to understand the whole system. We just need to get our adjective endings right to pass the exam :). All we need to take away from this is that it is a quasi chaotic mess and if you're confused by it that means you're a human being.
So... what's do the adjectives do? They support the articles with their marking chores. To be precise ... the d-articles. Hmm...d-articles. I guess we need to paint some more background...

d-articles and ein-articles

The d-articles are led by the ones we all know and love... *der, die* and *das*. Other ones in that group are *diese/n/m/r/s*, *jene/n/m/r/s* or *manche/l/k/x/t/ß*. Those are pretty hard workers and they do a lot of the marking for gender and case. What do they mar...oh wait...let me guess... it is totally messy and

impossible to sum up. If we ignore the plural, a very rough summary is this... in nominative and accusative, the gender is clear while the case is only for masculine.

- nominative : die, der, das
- accusative: die , den, das

In Dative and Genitive the case is sort of clear.

- Dative: der, dem, dem
- Genitive: der, des, des

Sounds super vague but it's really all we need to know. All right let's talk about the *ein*-articles. Remember that long debate about who has to carry which mark? Well... the *ein*-articles got themselves some nice privileges. Back in the days, e*in* had argued that d*as* in "*das Bier*" had to only refer to one beer, while the *ein* in "*ein Bier*" was potentially referring to every single beer that ever existed. And that, so *ein* said, was much more work than what *das* does.... yeah... I don't get it either. But then the possessives chimed in ... *mein* (*my*) and *dein(your)* and *unser (our)* and so on .... and they said " *Ein* is right. It should have to carry less marks than *das*." And then they went on to demand the same for themselves.

"We're carrying info about the owner so we also need marker relief.", they reasoned. They made a convincing argument and eventually this group, the *ein*-articles, were granted a "partial gender waiver". A what?

- *Der* Kaffee ist heiß.
- *Das* Auto ist teuer.

- *Ein* Kaffee ist heiß.
- *Ein* Auto ist teuer.

The *ein-articles* (ein-, kein-,mein-, unser-...) are basically not making a distinction between neuter and masculine, as we can see in the example. And now we're set for the adjectives... finally.

Adjectives - taking up the mark

We've already learned and forgotten that the adjectives support the *d*-articles with their markings. So let's maybe say it again... the adjective endings suppo blah blah blah boring.
When there is a such a d-article the adjective kind of only cheers it on.

- *das* schöne Fahrrad

The adjective is just like... "Yeah, nominative or accusative, go *das* go!"

- ***dem*** schönen Fahrrad

Now it is like "Yeah, NOT nominative or accusative, go ***dem***, go!"
We can also reuse what we've learned last time... if the d-article is "normal" then the adjective ends in *-e*.
If it is weird, it ends in *-en*.
But the adjective's time to shine comes whenever there is no d-article around. And for one thing, that is
the case if we have an ***ein-article***. And with those, the adjective will sport the missing gender-marker - s
for neuter, e for feminine and r for masculine.

- da-***s*** schöne Fahrrad (the pretty bike)
- mein schöne-***s*** Fahrrad (my pretty bike)

- de-***r*** schöne Mann (the...)
- ihr schöne-***r*** Mann (her pretty man)

- die schöne Farbe
- keine schöne Farbe (no nice color)

In the last example, the marker is -e for feminine. But -e is there anyway, so nothing to add here. For all
the othe... wait a second. What about the second example? It is ***ihr***. There is no ***ein*** in ***ihr***. But it is a
possessive article and those are part of the ***ein***-articles, even if some of them have no ***ein*** in them. And ihr
doesn't tell us the gender either. Anyway... for most of the ***ein***-articles the adjectives don't have to do
extra work, because the ***ein***-articles do the same marking as the ***d***-ones.

- meinem schönen Mann (to my nice husband)
- unserer netten Lehrerin (to our nice teacher)
- seines schönen Fahrrads (his nice bike's)
- ...

So... when there is an ***ein***-article around, the adjective will get the few gender marks that those are
missing. Those instances are incredibly common though, so you should really get used to it. If it is just
ein or ***mein*** or ***dein*** or so... an adjective would get the missing mark. *S* for neuter, *r* for masculine.
All right. Now, there is another opportunity for the adjectives to stand in the lime light... when there is
NO article around.

- "What are you havin'?"
  "Water. No article."

But with ice, please. Because that'll make it cold... you know... like... with an adject...never mind.
Example

- ***Cold water*** is refreshing.

And in those situations, the German adjective will take up whatever marker the ***d-***article would have been
carrying and wear it.

- *Da-s* kalte Wasser ist erfrischend.
- Kalte-*s* Wasser ist erfrischend.

- De-*r* heiße Kaffee schmeckt gut.
- Heiße-*r* Kaffee schmeckt gut.

And it doesn't matter what mark it is. The adjective will take anything...

- Zu de-*m* gute-*n* Wein esse ich Käse. (I eat cheese with the good wine.)
- Zu gute-*m* Wein sag' ich nicht nein. (I don't say no to good wine.)

- Ab de-*r* nächste-n Woche habe ich mehr Zeit. (I will have more the starting the following week)
- Ab nächste-*r* Woche habe ich mehr Zeit. (same as above)

Even plural.

- Di-*e* schöne-*n* Frauen trinken Prossecco.
- Schön-*e* Frauen trinken Prosecco.

Whatever the *d*-article does, the adjective will do. They are really just copying and there is no special rule or anything. It's like... the d-articles are sort of the standard for what has to be marked, as random as that may be... and the adjectives help out. And that's alrea... wait... my red exception phone is ringing, let me take this call real quick... hey John man, I totally expected your call today... yeah, I know, I'm so glad I don't have to learn this stuff.... ... haha... definitely... so what do you have for me.... uhu....... oh the Genitive,..... .. fascinating... ... ... see, examples for that are so rare and contrived that I didn't realize... thanks a lot man, bye... All right. I'm back with you. So this was John from the exception-copter and of course there is an exception to what I just said: In Genitive masculine and neuter singular the adjective will actually NOT take on the mark. Instead it will stick with it's -en ending that it is usually wearing if the article is "weird"... as we've learned in part 2. And it does that because... the noun already has the mark... which is an -*s* by the way... so... *s* marks Genitive and neuter. Did we mention that the marking system is awful? Good.

- Der Geschmack de-*s* teure-*n* Weine-*s* wird überschätzt. (The taste of the expensive wine is often overestimated... is that idiomatic?? Natives to the rescue)
- Teure-*n* Weine-*s* Geschmack wird überschätzt. (The taste of expensive wine...)

For feminine and plural genitive, the adjective will take up the mark though... because it would be missing otherwise.

- Di-*e* hohe*n* Bäume sind beeindruckend. (the tall trees are impressive.)
- Hoh-*e* Bäume sind beeindruckend (tall trees are impressive)

- Der Schatten de-*r* hohe*n* Bäume ist lang. (the shade of the large trees is long)
- Auch hohe-*r* Bäume Schatten ist manchmal nur ein Punkt. (Also tall trees' shade is sometime but a dot.)

The last one is an old Chinese proverb I just made up. They were so wise back then. The meaning is that even a small thing can make a big difference... wait... does that make sense? Anyway. When it comes to adjective endings small things can make a big difference ...
but they rarely really do.
They're just there and suck out the fun. Adjective endings, especially if they have to carry the load of the articles is German at its most awful. If I had to learn this I would probably be like... screw that. And that is also my advice for you. Do NOT learn this systematically. Because there is NO system. Just try to pick it up over time by reading things and listening to people talking. The more you force it the more frustrated you will get.

The three things you need to have in the back of your head are the following:

1. add an *-e*. No matter what. It is always there.... okay almost always
2. add an *-en* whenever the article ending is weird or is plural (check out <u>part 2</u> for more on that)
3. if there is a mark missing the adjective will take it

And the last point is what you need to take home with you of today. There is the concept of "markedness". That is, German marks gender, case and number using endings. The system is downright absurd and attempts at understanding it can lead to brain damage. But the *d-article*s are the reference for what gets marked in a given situation and how. If the *d-article* is missing, the adjective fills in. "Wait... so I have to know the d-article ending in order to get the adjective ending correct?" Exactly. But if you don't know the *d-article* ending for a situation you're not at a stage where you should worry about adjective endings. Not because you're stupid or a beginner or anything. It would be just a waste of time. Just stick with step 1 and 2 and then one day, you will be like

- Wieviel kostet ein große Kaffee... wait... ein großer Kaffee because it is der Kaffee.

Getting those marks right is nothing to stress out about. Just be aware that this system of *markedness* is around, and that the d-articles are the role-model. And that is it. That was our mini series on adjective endings. And if your disappointed now because you were hoping for something more "tangible"... well, at least I think that that is impossible to do. If you really want the specifics then you can always use the tables and all that theoretical crap like strong,weak and mixed declension. Those terms are weapons of mass demotivation and should be banned.
The concept of markedness doesn't tell you right away which ending to use but it is an idea of what's going on under the hood if you will. And it has another benefit... because the very same idea is behind all those weird pronouns

- Wem gehört da-*s* Fahrrad? Das ist mein-*s*.
- To whom does the bike belong? That is mine.

- De-*r* kleine Hund ist ihre-*r*.
- The small dog is hers.

- Bist du mit de-*m* rot*en* oder dem blau*en* Auto gefahren?
  Mit keine-*m*, ich bin gelaufen?
- Which car were you driving with? The red one or the blue?

With neither, I walked.

And that is quite something, I would say... now we don't even have to do a mini-series on THAT mess :). That's it with the adjective endings. If you have any questions or suggestions or if you want me to give you more examples - I feel like I have been a bit stingy today :) - just leave me a comment.
I hope you liked it and see you next time.

Oh by the way... here's a small exercise. And if you fail, then it's my fault :)

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