

Word of the Day - "handeln"

by German-is-easy - Thursday, October 04, 2018

<https://yourdailygerman.com/handeln-verhandeln-behandeln-meaning/>

Hello everyone,

and welcome to our German Word of the Day. This time we'll take a look at the meaning and family of

handeln

But we'll need some mind bending today, so let's stretch our brains together a little to warm up.

Handeln is of course related to English *to handle* and they both come from the old Germanic noun **handeigh* which was the word for "portable phone". Back then, it was much harder to see each other in person because there were no cars and no planes and the people were practically dependent on their cellphones to keep in touch. Just as Cesar noted in his diary...

Germanum sine portabile in mano rarum est.

That's Latin. In my dreams anyway.

Anyway, the tribesmen were always with their phone, and so it's no wonder they eventually came up with the word *hand* which literally meant "thing that holds the portable phone".

Everybody thinking "What the hell?" yet?!?! Yes?

Well, perfect. Your brain is all warmed up now, ready for real info. So let's jump right in...

The origin of *handeln* and *handle* is of course the word *hand*. It's actually unclear where that comes from, except that it had something to do with *grabbing, seizing*. And that's also what the original meaning of *handeln* and *handle* was. But that really doesn't do them justice. Our hands are actually quite the marvel. Super sensitive, fine tuned mechanical wonders, and we can do really complex, complicated stuff with them like calligraphy, guitar playing, knitting, forging weapons, forging sophisticated jewelery. Gee, I sound like a hand sales man :).

But yeah, what I'm going for is that it's no wonder that the meaning of the verbs soon broadened waaaay beyond mere grabbing.

In English, it first become "using with your hand" and then, a step more abstract, it took on the broad idea of "(successfully) dealing with tackling" a problem or challenge.

The German *handeln* is kind of similar but doesn't imply a challenge or a success. Instead, *handeln* simply means *to act* (in the sense of *taking action*, not putting up an act).

- Wir müssen *handeln*.

- We have *to act*.

- Maria hat richtig *gehandelt*.
- Maria *took* the right *course of action*.

The noun is *die Handlung* and it can mean something like *course of action*.

- "Du isst schon wieder Kuchen???"
"Ja, *Übersprungshandlung*. Ich kann mich nicht zwischen Pilates und Cross-Fit entscheiden."
- "You're eating cake AGAIN??"
"Yeah, *avoidance behavior*. I can't decide between Pilates and Cross-Fit. "

Not the best example, I know, but I can't think of a better one for this *Handlung* because it's not that common and sounds a bit scientific. What makes *Handlung* useful, especially if you like talking about movies or books, is its other meaning: *plot*.

- *Die Handlung* des Films war ein bisschen dämlich.
- *The plot* of the movie was a little stupid.

Yes, *die Handlung* is the German word for *plot* and it make a lot of sense, I think. *The plot* is what is basically what happens, what is being done.

And with that meaning of the noun in mind it's also logical acceptable that the verb *handeln*, or *handeln von* to be precise, means *to be about*.

- Der Film *handelt* von einem Löwen der Vegetarier werden will.
- The movie *is about* a lion who wants to become a vegetarian.

In fact, *handeln* can actually mean just *to be*.

- Es *handelt sich* um ein Missverständnis.
- It *is* a misunderstanding.

- **Bei** dem Objekt auf deinem Teller **handelt es sich um** frittierte Einhornseele mit Püree aus Wünschen und Träumen. Und brauner Soße.
- The object on your plate **is** fried unicorn soul on mashed wishes and dreams. And gravy.

This only works in phrasings like the two above.

So you can't say

- ~~Ich handele mich um Thomas...~~ **WRONG**

And it does sound a bit formal and it's usually used when you want to give a little more explanation about reality. Kind of like "*The plot of this, the core story of this is...*", if that makes sense.

Yeah... I know, we just went from **to handle** to to be in like three minutes. Don't think about it too hard, or you'll get really confused :).

And that's actually still not all there is. Take the word

Buchhandlung

Based on what we've learned so far, this should mean the **plot of the book**.

Well... nope. It means **book store**. Because **handeln** also carries the idea of **trading**. Which makes a lot of sense actually. Just think of a busy market - goods and money go from one hand to another. And by the way... the word **trade** is related to **tread**, and one of its older meanings was path and also *course of action*.

Anyway, here are some examples.

- Maria **handelt** mit Einhornfellen.
- Maria is **trading** in unicorn fur.

- Als **Aktienhändler** höre ich natürlich gerne beliebigen Lounge-Jazz.
- As a **stock trader**, of course I like listening to arbitrary lounge jazz.

- Der **Welthandel** ist um 3 Prozent gewachsen.
- **World trade** grew by three percent.

Oh, and it can actually also mean **to bargain**.

- In Deutschland ist es nicht üblich, zu **handeln**.
- In Germany, it's not customary to **bargain**.

Bargaining is a way to agree on a price, so this use makes perfect sense. And it brings us right over to the first very very important prefix version of *handeln*.

verhandeln

And *verhandeln* is basically the more general brother of to bargaining. Like... the general way of coming to an agreement. Do you know what I'm going for ;)?

Verhandeln means *to negotiate*. And it works in all kinds of contexts.

- Maria hat bei ihrem Gehalt gut *verhandelt*.
- Maria *negotiated* well for her salary.

- Die *Verhandlungen* sind gut verlaufen.
- The *negotiations* went well.

- "Kannst du bitte öfter abwaschen?"
"Nein. Wie oft ich abwasche ist nicht *verhandelbar*."
- "Could you please do the dishes more often?"
"No. How often I do the dishes is not *up for negotiation*."

- Der Kühlschrank kostet 40 Euro *VB*. (short for *Verhandlungsbasis*)
- The fridge is 44 Dollars, *price negotiable*.

By the way, the background of to *negotiate* is actually quite interesting. The origin is the Latin word *negotium*, which meant *business, occupation*. So we have a direct connection to trading here. And the word is a combination of *neg-*, the negation-syllable, and the word *otium* - which meant *ease, leisure*. So the Latin word for *business* was kind of "*no free time*".

Looks like sometimes Latin isn't as boring as it is. Wait... does that even make sense?

Anyway, besides *verhandeln* there's also *aushandeln* and *raushandeln*, which put a slight focus on the outcome of the negotiation.

- Die Mitbewohner haben einen Waffenstillstand *ausgehandelt*.
- The flatmates *negotiated* a truce.

- Ich habe einen kleinen Extra-Rabatt *rausgehandelt*.

- I have *negotiated* a little extra discount.

Oh, and there's the *der Unterhändler*, which is a *negotiator*, but this one is only used in context of mediating serious conflicts and it does not exist as a verb anymore.

Cool.

Now, I know, we've had a lot already, but are you ready for some more?

"Not really, actually. My head is full."

Well.... actually, this isn't a Verhandlung ;).

"Emanuel, you're treating us like we're your reading slaves."

Well, no, but *behandeln* is just too important to skip.

So read along, my minions.

behandeln

The be-prefix often carries a notion of "onto", and a vibe of *repetition* and *intensity*. So taken super literally, *behandeln* means to "put hands onto repeatedly". Or if we use the basic meaning of *handeln*, to act, we get to *act onto*.

And I think we don't need much mind yoga to see why *behandeln* is the German word for ... *to treat*.

When a doctor treats someone, they do literally put their hands on the patient. And when we treat someone nicely, we basically act nice.

Behandeln has a super wide range of uses but even if to treat isn't the right translation, I think it'll all make sense in context.

- Das Eichhörnchen *behandelt* die Einhornbisswunde.
- The squirrel *treats* the unicorn bite wound.

- Die Praktikanten von Emanuel werden extrem gut *behandelt*. Berichte über eine Peitsche entsprechen nicht der Realität.
- The interns Emanuel are being *treated* extremely well. Reports about a whip do not reflect the reality.

- In diesem Artikel haben wir das Wort *handeln behandeln*.
- In this article, we've discussed/talked about the word *handeln*.

The noun die *Behandlung* means *treatment* but except for a medical context, I think people would usually use a phrasing with the verb instead.

And last but not... well actually last AND least, there are two more prefix versions, *abhandeln* and *einhandeln*. The former is about *treating*, discussing a topic completely. And *sich einhandeln* means to get as a result of your actions and it's usually used in context with getting negative things.

- Das Wort *abhandeln* haben wir mit zwei Sätzen *abgehandelt*.
- We've *dealt with, discussed* the word *abhandeln* in two sentences.

- Thomas hat sich mit seinem Kommentar über Marias Gewicht viel Ärger *eingehandelt*.
- Thomas *got* himself a lot of trouble with his comment about Maria's weight.

But both are quite rare and thus definitely a case for the passive pile.

That's .. erm... that's the pile of words you can kind of understand but you can't use.

And that's it for today :).

This was our look at the super important *handeln* its various super useful meanings and its super important prefix versions. If you need to review all the meanings, check out the little vocab list below. And as usual, if you have any questions or suggestions just leave me a comment.

I hope you liked it and see you next time.

Oh by the way... I reorganized the category archive for the all the words. It's not finished yet, but I think it's definitely easier to navigate now. If you want, you can [check it out here](#).... feedback welcome :):):)

Get the vocab as a .csv-file to import into your flash card app - [click here](#)
(separator is a semi colon ... ";")

** *vocab* **

handeln - to take action, to trade, to bargain

handeln von - to be about (for stories)

die Handlung - the plot, the course of action (rare), store

sich handeln um - to be (es handelt sich um, bei X handelt es sich um)

der Handel - the trade

der Einzelhandel - retail sector

der Händler - the trader

verhandeln - to negotiate

die Verhandlung - the negotiation

aushandeln, raushandeln - negotiate with focus on outcome

der Unterhändler - negotiator, mediator (only for big scale conflicts)

behandeln - to treat, also: discuss/talk about a topic

die Behandlung - the treatment

abhandeln - to fully discuss a topic

die Abhandlung - a treatment, treatise

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