Hello everyone,

and welcome to our German Word of the Day. This time we will have a look at the meaning of:

fehlen

If you're learning German, then you've made a mistake.
Wait, that's a weird phrasing. Learning German is the best decision of your life.
What I mean is that I'm pretty sure you've made mistakes in German.
You used Dative when it was actually Accusative and you used Accusative when it was supposed to be Dative. Or you used both to be on the save side, but then it was actually Genitive that you needed. So you made a mistake and the German word for that is der Fehler. What does this have to do with fehlen?
Let's find out.

Fehlen is the German version of the English word to fail and both come from French faillir. Brits imported the word pretty much without making any changes. To fail means about the same as to fail... it can be to err, to make a mistake or to not succeed but also to let down. But there is one more meaning of faillir and while it is not part of the English to fail it is pretty close to what the German fehlen is today. But let's go one step at a time...
So.. the Germans imported the word too... it was during the time of knights ... and in the beginning they used it for a very specific action of medieval tournaments... to miss your opponent or another target with the lance. But soon they started using it in a more broad sense, first as a general word for missing a physical target and soon it was also used for abstract goal... like getting a case correct. That's when the word Fehler came up. If you think "hit and miss"... a Fehler is a miss. This idea of fehlen the idea of missing a goal, of doing something wrong is essentially the same as the English to fail. And it is the basis for most of the words that have fehl in them.

- Niemand ist unfehlbar.
- Nobody is infallible.

- Du hast gedacht, ich bestehe den Test nicht, aber weit gefehlt! Ich hab' 'ne 1+.
- You thought I wasn't going to pass the test but... far from it! I got an A+.
George Clooney als Batman war eine krasse Fehlbesetzung.
George Clooney as Batman was horribly miscast

Zwischenrufe sind im Theater fehl am Platz.
Heckling is out of place at the theater.

All those share the idea of wrong ... even falsch the German word for wrong is based on this original fehlen (as is false by the way).
Hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooowever........ .......

the verb fehlen itself does mean something different today.... it means to be missing!

Im Kühlschrank fehlt ein Bier.
There is one beer missing in the fridge.

Not to miss, mind you... to be missing!
That isn't as random a change as it might seem.

The connection of "failing" and "missing"

A simple explanation would be this... a verb that means to miss can certainly also mean to be missing.
And then all it needs to do is get rid of the first meaning and voilá. I mean... why not, right?
But we can also dig a little deeper... shall we? I said... SHALL WE? .... hey.. hey that's not a question... continue reading!!
So... for one thing, the French faillir also has this meaning. I was really really surprised to find out that Il faut is actually based on this. When translated il faut mean something like one has to

Il faut discuter.
We have to discuss/one has to discuss.

The actual background however is the word faillir so taken super literally the sentence would be this

It is missing discussion.

So ... the "to be missing"-idea is not missing in the original French verb... pun was intended... took me 2 hours to come up with that.
Anyway... now some of you are probably like "Emanuel pleeeeeease, don't use French to explain German... that is like helping me carry a piano up the stairs by sitting on top of it and giving breathing advice."... a valid complaint indeed. So let's try another approach to making the connection between
mistake-fehlen to the be missing-fehlen.... theidea of letting down someone.
As we've learned this idea is part of to fail.

- You have *failed* me for the last time.

Darth Vader said that to Kirk in one Episode of Babylon 5. But anyway... failing someone basically means not doing what the person expected.
Now... there are numerous way to fail someone... and one of them is simply not being present.

- "I was hoping Superman would come and save us when our boat was sinking and sharks coming toward us. But he didn't show up. He *failed* us."
  "And then what happened?"
  "Well a tornad.. uh... you know what, let's just not talk about it."

If we now take this kind of failing, the being absent one, and apply it somewhere else... for instance at the kitchen table...

- There is not enough salt in this soup. Salt *fails* me... again!!
then we're THIS close to the German fehlen already ... uh... the THIS was referring to my hand gesture...
I was like holding them like really close together...but that doesn't transmit on the radio I guess....
anyway... here's the German

- Da ist nicht genug Salz in der Suppe. Salz *fehlt* mir.

Now... I don't know if this is how it really went down. Probably not. I think the real development of fehlen was just a reversed missing the target. Like ... the salt wants to target my soup and me but it misses us. But before I confuse you even further let's just look at an German example with fehlen...

- Meine Katze *fehlt* mir.

The translation of it is this:

- I *miss* my cat.

The literal translation is:

- My cat is *missing* to/from me.

And the original meaning could have been one of these:

- My cat *misses* me. (As in... it doesn't find my location so it is not where I am)
My cat *fails* me.... stupid cat, just running away. You're supposed to purr and spread a comfy vibe. You have failed me, you hear me? Now I know why they call you "failines"...

Either way. I hope you can make some sense of *fehlen* and *Fehler*. And if not... well then just use the simple explanation we had earlier. Why should a verb that meant *to miss a target* not change into *to be missing*? That's *fehlen*. To be missing.

**how to use "fehlen"**

And just to make one thing perfectly clear... *fehlen* does NOT translate to *to miss* directly... NEVER!!

Not in the sense of *not getting*... that would be *verpassen*.

- I *miss* the bus.
- Ich *fehle* den Bus...what?? This is not even understandable
- Ich *verpasse* den bus.

It is also not *to miss* in sense of not hitting a target... what? ...oh you're right, that used to be the very first meaning of *fehlen* in German... *to miss a target with the lance*. But German doesn't care what makes sense. German's just like "Hmmm... I'm bored... I'll shift some meanings. That always cheers me up. From now on *fehlen* shall mean something different."
And the Germans are like "And what are we supposed to say now if we miss a target?"
And German's like "Just add a prefix... take *ver*... that can be used for everything."
And so to miss a target is *verfehlen* today.

- I *miss* the target.
- Ich *fehle* das Ziel.... *is wrong*...and again barely understandable
- Ich *verfehle* das Ziel.

Finally, *fehlen* does not mean *to miss* as in to be sad that it's gone.

- I *miss* my cat
- Ich *fehle* meine Katze.... *is super wrong*

People would think you meant to say

- Ich *fehle* meiner Katze... with an *r*.

But this in fact means

- *I am missing* to my cat... or simply
- My cat misses me.

And now the other way around
I miss my cat.
Mir fehlt meine Katze... is correct... or
Meine Katze fehlt mir.... it's the same

So... *Fehlen* is to *be missing*, not simply *to miss*. And it is used quite a lot I would say. In fact *fehlen* is pretty broad and certainly more than the translation *to be missing* suggests. That is really just capturing the grammar of it. *Fehlen* can just mean literally not being there.

- Maria hat heute im Unterricht *gefehlt*.
- Maria *was missing* in class today.

- "Wie ist die Suppe?"
  "Ganz gut... aber es *fehlt* ein bisschen Geschmack."
- "How's the soup."
  "It's all right... but a little bit of taste *is missing* ."

- Mist, mir *fehlen* 30 Cent für einen Döner.
- Crap. I am 30 cent short of a kebab.

- Diesem Film *fehlt* eine gute Story.
- To this movie a good story *is lacking*. (lit.)
- This movie lacks a good story.

But as we've seen already it can also express the feeling.

- *Thomas* (to him) *fehlt* seine Frau (she)
- *Thomas* (he) *misses* his Misses (her).

Oh God, I hope the example isn't too confusing. I used colors to tell you *who does it (subject)* and *who it is done to (object)*. Grammar. It's confusing.
The 2 structures you should keep in mind are.
- Etwas/jemand fehlt.
  - Something/someone is not present.

- Etwas/jemand fehlt mir (dir/ihm...).
  - Something/someone is not present for me (you/him...) (lit.)
  - I (you, he...) miss/lack/am short of something/someone.

So...

- Ich fehle...

doesn't mean that YOU are not present.

- Mir fehlt...

doesn't mean that something else is not present FOR YOU.

All right. Oh did I mention that fehlen is NOT simply to miss? I did? Good:). I am really stressing this so much because I imagine it is to be super confusing... especially once you look at fehlen as an adjective.

- Die Elfen haben die fehlende Stück des Amulets gefunden.
  - The elves have found the missing piece of the amulet.

- Missing link finally found... according to Google it's on Bing.
  - Fehlendes Glied endlich gefunden... meh... doesn't translate that well

Did I mention that feh... okay okay I'll stop. We'll stop too in a little bit but there are a few more things we should mention. For one thing fehlen is also used by a doctor to ask what your problem is.

- Was fehlt Ihnen denn?
This is basically asking for your symptoms and it is an incredibly common question. A variant of that is the more colloquial

- **Fehlt** dir was?
- Are you all right?

Next, we have a very common idiom with *fehlen*.... imagine you have a really bad day, your hair looks awful, the milk you put in your coffee was rotten but you realize it too late, your car has a flat tire, your computer crashed and all your data is lost, one of your children has the flue and need to see a doctor and then you get a call from work telling you that this project you thought was due next month is now due... now... that is the perfect time to say

- Das *fehlt* mir gerade noch!
- Oh that was just what *was missing*. (lit)

This is pure irony and it actually means

- Oh that is the last thing I needed now.

And then lastly, we have already talked about the compound nouns that have *fehl* in them and I said that most of them use the *wrong*-idea... so they come from *Fehler*. But some come from *fehlen*.

- Ich habe 4 *Fehltage*.
- I have 4 days of absence.

- *Der Fehlbetrag* wird immer größer.
- *The missing amount* grows ever bigger.

So if you see a word with *Fehl* and the wrong-idea doesn't really make sense... try the *missing*-idea.

Cool. So I think that's it for today. That was our German Word of the Day *fehlen*. It is related to the English *to fail* and used to mean "to miss a target with a lance"... but it has changed since and today it means *to be missing*. And if we look at it with a bit of distance we can see that this is actually not that far from the word *Fehler*. I mean.. English is pretty similar in that words for absence and words for errors are closely related. The difference is just that German looks from the perspective of the thing that is *missing* (*fehlen*) while English looks from the person who lacks or misses it. And that's why the grammar is so different.
So... a driver is the one who drives and Fehler as the one who is missing... a "misser" or simply a miss. And lastly, what is it called if you sign up for German class and then you don't show up even once?

Epic Fehl!

If you think that there is something that fehls or if you find any Fehler or if you just have question or suggestions go ahead and leave me a comment. I hope you liked it and see you next time.