Hello everyone,

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

**sondern**

or as I like to call it: the second one of the three *but-lings*. The three *but-lings* are the three German words *but* translates to. The hardest one to explain is *sondern*, so we will start with this one today. The other 2 *but-lings* are *aber* and *außer*. If you want to read up on *außer* click here. I will not discuss *aber* separately as it is kind of the default case, so when it is neither *sondern* nor *außer*, *aber* will be fine.

The 3 words stand for 3 different concepts and for a German native they are definitely not related at all. If you pick the wrong one, you might not be understood... so knowing the differences is really a "must have"... yeah ...marketing lingo is sooo coool.

I wasn't really able to dig out some etymological background on *sondern*... yes.. I do consider a Google search as digging... I mean... I did look at page 2 after all. Anyway... there is a sort of outdated verb *sondern* in German which means something like *to separate*. It is never used in daily speech though. I just mentioned it because it might help you to understand *sondern* and other things with *sonder* in them like *besonders* (particular-ly) or *sonderbar* (strange).

What's that? You want to get to the *but-ling* already? Ok ok. So *but* is translated to *sondern* whenever your structure or idea is something like this:

- **not A but** B instead.
- **not A but** rather B.
- **not only A but also** B.

Now I know how you hate real life examples. They really are a pain. But I will give them anyway... hah!

- I don't fly to London *but* to Paris.

- Ich fahre nicht mit dem Auto *sondern* mit dem Fahrrad.
- I don't go by car *but* by bike.

- Ich trinke meinen Kaffee nicht mit Zucker *sondern* mit Honig.
- I don't drink my coffee with sugar *but* with honey.

Obviously there is always some sort of contradiction or replacement indicated by *sondern*. The second
thing you mention, the one after the but, is instead of the first. This hint of course does not really apply for the not only but also construction. This, however, also works with sondern.

- Ich habe nicht nur mein Zimmer aufgeräumt sondern auch die Küche und das Bad.
- Not only did I clean my room but also the kitchen and the bathroom.

Now, this article here is certainly not the first attempt to explain the difference between aber and sondern. I have read some discussion boards and the core of most explanations is that it will be sondern if there is a "not" in the first part of the sentence... the part before the but. This is not wrong but it is NOT complete either, as having a "not" in the first part does NOT automatically make your but sondern. You really have to understand the concept of contradiction if you want to master sondern vs. aber. To make this contradiction a little more clear, let's try to directly compare sondern with the first but-ling aber. The translations are chosen to illustrate the meaning rather than being literal.

- Heute muss ich nicht um 9 arbeiten sondern um 11.
- Today I have to start working at 11 instead of 9.

- Heute muss ich nicht um 9 arbeiten aber um 11.
- Today I don't have to start working at 9 but I have to work anyway ... from 11.

So as you can see, there is a "not" in the first part in either version. I hope you can see the different focus of sondern and aber. Let's do one more of those examples.

- Meine Schwester hat das Buch nicht sondern mein Bruder hat es.
- Not my sister but my brother has the book. (And that is a huge difference as they live in 2 different cities)

- Meine Schwester hat das Buch nicht aber mein Bruder hat es.
- My sister does not have the book but my brother has it. (So it's ok as long as one of 'em has it)

So you can see that aber and sondern clearly have a different subtext. If you still feel uncertain about when to use which that is totally fine. If you are not used to the distinction between sondern (but instead) and aber (but) your first steps are sure to be a bit clumsy but you are not alone. Many European languages, mainly the Roman ones, do not have the distinction and they all have to get used to it when they try to learn a Germanic or Slavic language. But it is important that you try because to someone who natively makes this distinction aber and sondern are really not the same.

To wrap this up here is a little but-stuffed text... but-stuffed... hmmm... is that really appropriate... I guess it was until I asked :). Anyway, can you guess ... oh I meant determine the correct but-lings?

*Today I woke up pretty late but I still felt very tired. So I decided not to get up but to stay in bed a little longer. But then my phone rang. I tried to ignore it but it wouldn't stop. So I got up but it turned out that it wasn't anything important but just some stupid opinion poll. So I took my*
chance to bitch at the people a bit. I told them not only how puzzling it was that they had my number but also how daring it was to call at 1 pm in the morning. I waited for a response but the guy had nothing to say but "Sorry sir, good day sir."

The solutions: aber, sondern, aber, aber, aber, sondern, sondern, aber, ausser

The last one was unfair. That was the 3rd but-ling and we haven't talked about it at all today. But what's the golden rule of pedagogics? Always send home your students with the experience of epic failure. Because if they feel too smart they won't return :).

So this was our Word of the Day sondern. If you have questions or suggestions just drop me a comment. I hope you liked it and see you next time.