Hello everyone,

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

überlegen is a fairly important word that you get to hear often in daily conversation. And yet, it kind of flies under the radar of many learners of German. Because for each of its three meanings, there's another, more "obvious" translation.

Oh and yes, I just said three meanings. But don't worry, they're all kind of about thought in a way. It can be to ponder, to decide and to make up.

But we can't just plug in überlegen as a synonym because of its slightly complicated grammar. Yeah, I know you're now like "Wow, that's gonna be my new favorite word... NOT."

But seriously... people use überlegen a lot and it'll make you sound much more like a native speaker, so let's have a look at what it means and how to use it.

Überlegen consist of two parts - the basic verb legen and the prefix über. Legen basically means to lay (or to put, in a broader sense) and the prefix über carries the idea of above.

So if we take it literally, we get something like laying, putting over.

And indeed, überlegen can mean that.

• Ich lege mir eine Decke über.
• I put a blanket over myself (lit.)

As you can see, the prefix is at the end here, so it's a separable verb. This use super rare though and you can trust me that you won't need this one.

What we need is the inseparable überlegen. And the big, overarching theme that all the translations have in common is

thinking

Now you're probably like "What the hell... how does that tie in with laying over?"
And that's an excellent question, that actually got nominated for the "Outstanding Questions Award 2020". It won't win though, because all we need to answer it is the verb *to cover*. You see, *covering* is kind of laying something over, right? But covering is also used in context with topics for example. And when you cover a topic, what do you cover it with? Exactly, with thoughts. Tadah! So it makes perfect sense that *überlegen* is about thinking. Or, maybe not perfect sense, but at least it's not super random crazy. Anyway, so now that we have the basic theme, let's get to the actual uses and translations and there, we can distinguish between a bare *überlegen* on the one hand and *sich überlegen* with a serving of self reference - for extra complication :). Let's start with the bare one.

### überlegen

*Überlegen* without anything (nerds would call it intransitive), means *to think*. It's not as broad as *to think*, though. *Überlegen* is NOT the philosophical kind of thinking. That would be *denken*.

- Ich *denke*, also bin ich.
- *I think* therefore I am.

And *überlegen* is also NOT *to think* as in *to believe* or *to reckon*. Once again, *denken* or, maybe even better, *glauben* are the words you need.

- Ich denke, das ist schon ganz ok so.
- *I think* that IS about okay that way.

- Was *glaubst* du, wer du bist? (sounds always negative)
- Who do you *think* you are?

So what kind of *thinking IS überlegen*? It is *to think* in a sense of searching your mind for a result.

- "How can we fit our infinite abundance of beachwear into our trunk."
  "That's tough. Let's *think*.
- "Wie kriegen wir unsere schier unendliche Fülle an Strandbekleidung in den Kofferraum?"
  "Oh das ist nicht einfach. Mal *überlegen*."


Now some of you may be like “But Emanuel, what about nachdenken?"
And indeed, überlegen and nachdenken are fairly close in meaning.

- Let me think...
- Lass mich mal nachdenken /überlegen...

However, there are two big difference between the nachdenken and überlegen.
The first one is grammatical. Nachdenken can take an object, so you can nachdenken about something or someone. This does NOT work with überlegen. Überlegen cannot take an object, it can only take an action.

- I think about the movie.
- Ich überlege über den Film.
- Ich denke über den Film nach.

"Do you want to go to the movies with us today?"
'I'll think about it.'
"Willst du heute mit ins Kino kommen?"
"Ich überlege darüber."
"Ich denk' drüber nach.

These are wrong and they sound really really bad with überlegen.
And here are a few examples where überlegen is prefect... it's basically actions, particularly questions.

- Ich überlege, wo mein Telefon ist.
- I think about where my phone is (if that makes any sense)

- Ich überlege, wie ich am schnellsten zum Zoo komme.
- I am thinking about what would be the fastest way to get to the zoo.

- Ich muss mal überlegen, wann ich Zeit habe.
- I have to think about when I'll have time.
"Oh ich muss dieses Kleid einfach haben."
"Aber überleg doch mal, was das kostet."
"Oh I simply must have this dress."
"Think about, how much that costs, though!"

And this leads us to the second difference between nachdenken and überlegen. We could call it the goal or the scope. Überlegen pretty much always deals with one specific everyday question. Nachdenken on the other hand works for the "bigger" questions, too, and it can be less goal oriented than überlegen. You cannot really überlegen "What is the purpose of our existence?" and you wouldn't say you spent 4 hours in your chair with überlegen.

- Ich habe in letzter Zeit viel nachgedacht.
- I have been thinking a lot recently. (does that make sense?)

With überlegen, that sounds a bit odd. Like you have a bad memory and you spend a lot of time trying to find things in it. Generally, we could say that überlegen is limited to mundane everyday questions. But that doesn't mean that it's not common. Quite the opposite as you can see here:

As you can see, überlegen is clearly a word worth adding to your active vocabulary. To be fair though, more then half of the überlegens are probably on account of the other überlegen... the one with the self-referential one. So let's talk about that next.

**Sich überlegen**

And actually, this headline would be more helpful if it were mir überlegen, because the self reference with überlegen is in DATIVE. It is to oneself rather than oneself.

- Ich überlege mir... (not mich, mich would be doubleplusnunright)
- Du überlegst dir...
- Er/sie/es überlegt sich...

So the person is the receiver of their own überlegen, NOT the topic. Think of it as the same concept like in to buy (oneself).

- I bought [myself] two chocolate bars [for myself].
- Ich habe mir 2 Schokoriegel gekauft.
I "überleged" something for myself.
Ich habe mir etwas überlegt.

And what does überlegen mean in the second sentence?
Well, it's quite similar to the überlegen we already know, the thinking-one. Only that this time, the focus is not on the process, but on the result of the thinking. Which can be for instance a decision. That's why it can mean to decide and that also gives us the difference to entscheiden, which also means to decide.
Sich überlegen kind of inlcudes the thought process, while entscheiden is purely focused on the result and can be done on a whim.
Here are some examples.

• "Weißt du schon, ob du dieses Wochenende zu deiner Schwester fährst?"
  "Nee noch nich'. Das überleg' ich mir morgen/Das entscheide ich morgen."
• "Do you know yet, if you are going to go visit sisters this weekend."
  "Nah, not yet, I'll decide tomorrow."

• Ich habe mir überlegt, dass ich im Sommer mal nach Italien fahren will.
• I have (thought about and then) decided that I want to go to Italy this summer.

• Hast du dir überlegt, ob du mit in die Oper kommst?
• Have you decided, if you want to come with to the opera?

• Überleg dir mal, was du heute abend essen willst!
• Make up your mind about what you want to eat tonight!(lit.)
• Let me know when you've decided what you want to eat tonight. (maybe)

The last example is kind of hard to translate without losing the tone. The German version sounds doesn't sound pushy or offensive at all. It's kind of nice and inviting actually.
Anyway ... to decide is actually not the only translation for sich überlegen.
Another goal of thinking can be to come up something new.
And so it makes perfect sense that sich überlegen can also mean to come up with stuff.

• Ich hab' mir überlegt wie wir all unsere vielen Strandklamotten in den Kofferraum kriegen.
• I've concocted /conceived of (ahhh... synonyms, so nice) a plan to fit all our and so on and so
Actually, let's look at überlegen and sich überlegen back to back and see how the focus shifts from process to result.

- Ich habe überlegt, wie ich das Problem lösen könnte.
  * I have been thinking about how I could solve the problem.

- Ich habe mir überlegt, wie ich das Problem lösen könnte.
  * I have come up with a way to solve the problem.

- Ich habe überlegt, wen ich zu meiner Party einlade.
  * I have decided who to invite to my party.

So... having that indirect self-reference (for myself) in there changes what you do from simply thinking about the question into reaching a result by thinking about the question, be that a decision or a solution.

Let's do one more example...

- "Versuch mal, jeden Tag 2 Wörter zu lernen. Nur 2."
  "Und dann, was soll das bringen?"
  "Naja, überleg mal, dann weißt du nach einem Jahr schon über 700."

- "Try to learn 2 words every day. Just 2."
  "And what's the point of that?"
  "Well, think about it, after a year you'll know 700 already."

- "Ich habe zwei Karten für das Festival. Lust mitzukommen?"
  "Ach, ich weiß nich'..."
  "Überleg's dir und sag mir Bescheid."

- "I got 2 tickets for that festival. Wanne come with?"
  "Pfff, I don't know..."
  "Well, think about it and let me know."
So in the first example the speaker wants the other person to think about the whole scenario for a second (not for day, that would be nachdenken then), while in the second dialog, the person wants a decision.

I'm sure some of you feel a little anxious right now by all this grammar and the nuances. You probably will forget most of the details like one hour after reading this. But that's okay! You will encounter it in daily life and then you'll be like "Hey, I think I understand."

What really matters is that you remember that (sich) überlegen is about a thought process in daily life... sometimes just the thinking, sometimes with a decision or idea. But the base is always the same.

Cool.

Now, before we wrap up, let's quickly mention that überlegen can also be an adjective at times. Then, it means superior.

- Thomas fühlt sich Maria geistig überlegen.
- As far as brain smarts are concerned, Thomas feel like he is superior to Maria when it comes to brain smarts.

- Das Team war seinem Gegner in allen Belangen überlegen.
- The team was superior to its opponent in all respects.

And of course, as any language that is spoken by real people, we do have more superior in German. It is used very often in context of sports.

- Die überlegenere Mannschaft hat gewonnen.
- The more superior team won.

Some people say that the comparative überlegender shouldn't be a thing, and the same goes for more superior. But I don't really have an opinion about that

(pssst... I actually do, I think it's fine, but I can't say that because I'm a "teacher";))

Cool... now, let me überlegen if that is all... hmmm... yes, I think it is. So we're done for today. This was our word of the day überlegen. It is thinking about the everyday questions of life and when you add a mir or dir or that kind of stuff, it turns into decide or come up with. It is a word you'll definitely hear people say. Should you use it too? Well, überleg's dir :).

If you have questions or suggestions just leave me a comment. I hope you liked it and see you next time.

further reading:
Word of the Day - "nachdenken"