

"Only" in German - "erst, nur, einzig"

by German-is-easy - Tuesday, April 15, 2014

<https://yourdailygerman.com/only-in-german-erst-nur/>

Hello everyone,

and welcome to another German Word of the Day "What is the difference"-special. In these specials we look words that seem to have the same... blah blah bla yada yada yada... 'll look at the difference between

- *erst, nur* and *einzig*

What's that? Oh don't think it is a problem? Well, I do because my students keep making mistakes like this one:

- "Ich war die nur Spanier im die Kurs."

As always, I then say something along the lines of "Geez, what a big, dumb mistake. Can't you even get one sentence correct?"

Seriously... I've lost a lot of students because of that mistake. That's why we'll try to clear that up today. So... take a seat, turn of your phones, take out your pen and paper and get ready for half an hour of good, old fashioned [Frontalunterricht](#). It'll be the super fun.

The problem: people mix up *erst, nur* and *einzig*/r/m/s/c/?/?.

The cause: all three words are translations for *only*.

The solution: look at all 3 words one by one

We'll start with.. hmmm... let's start with *einzig*..uhm... I mean "Class! We shall commence with *einzig* and we shall skip the whole ending tail now."

Einzig

Einzig directly comes from *eins* which means *one*. The *ig*-ending usually makes an adjective out of something and the *z* ... well, that's just there for harshness. So *einzig* is technically the most literal translation of *only*... *one-ly*.... *one-like*. *Only* used to be an adjective too, so it was originally only used in phrasings like this one:

- This path is the *only* way across the icy mountains.

Only then broadened and became the word it is today (I think it's an adverb... when in doubt, it's usually an adverb). *Einzig* on the other hand didn't change and it is an adjective to this day.

- Ich war der *einzig*e Spanier im Deutschkurs.
- I was the *only* Spanish guy in German class.

- Das *einzig*e, was mir gefallen hat, war, wo er mit dem Drachen gesprochen hat.
- The *only thing* that I liked was when he was talking with the dragon.

In the second example, there is no noun following the *einzig*e. This is because in German all adjectives can do the job of a noun.

- Thomas ist der *einzig*e, dem Maria ihr Geheimnis verraten hat.
- Thomas is the *only one*, whom Maria has told her secret.

Now, whenever people feel like *einzig*e is not only enough, they go for *einzigste*... we could think of it as "*only-est*". Sound stupid but it is very wide spread. There's a website that collects snapshots of it ... it's everywhere... in ads, in signs... even in a tattoo (check out the page [here](#)). You should definitely stick with *einzig*e for now :).

Now, you can find *einzig* here and there outside of this adjective context...

- Du bist echt *einzigartig*.
- You're truly *unique*.

- Das ist *einzig und allein* Thomas' Schuld.
- That is *solely* Thomas' fault.

- Das Essen war echt lecker, *einzig* der Suppe hätte ein bisschen mehr Geschmack gut getan.
- The food was really good, *only* the soup could have benefited from a little more taste.

Neither of those is rare but especially the last phrasing does sound scripted and I don't think people *say* it that often. You can of course use it if you want but what you really need to remember is that whenever you have a phrasing like

- the/my/your... *only* something

that'll be

- der/die/das/mein... *einzig*e

If you use *nur* in that case, that sounds really really wrong and I am not sure people would understand. Why not? Well, because *nur* has never been an adjective. Not even close.

nur

Nur has been a sentence.... sort of. It comes from *ni waere* which is (very) short for *wenn nicht wäre* and that translates to *if there weren't*... let me give you an example. In an old Germanic village people sit around the fire, eating boar and drinking beer. Then, the brewer stands up and says

- "Wir haben kein Bier... (everybody goes like Huh?)... **Ni wären** die 10 Fass hier. (everyone is relieved).
- "We've got no more beer... **if it wasn't** for those 10 barrels.

Obviously the old Germans didn't bother all that much with word placement and agreement of subjunctive mode and that ~~erap~~ interesting grammar like that. This is how the phrase was used so the German **nur** was born from the idea of "if it wasn't for that there wouldn't be any". It became a fixed phrase, people used it a lot, and they got lazy about it, so the phrase was shortened. Much shortened. But it does make some sense... **ni waere** ... I mean ... endings get skipped all the time so we have **niwaer**, and if you fuse the **i** with an English version of **w** then you're already at something that sounds like **newer**. And from there to **nur** it's not that far.

As the phrase shortened, the meaning broadened and today it does a lot that **only** also does. It can tell us that something is considered "not a lot"

- Wie soll ich das alles machen? der Tag hat **nur** 24 Stunden.
- How am I supposed to do all that? The day **only** has 24 hours.

- "Kommst du?"
"Ja, ich will **nur** noch schnell eine Email schreiben." (*here, it's "not much" that we have to do*)
- "Are you coming?"
"Yeah, I **just** want to write an email real quick.

It can tell us that there is there is "not much variety".

- Ich esse viel Pasta, aber **nur** Capellini.
- I eat a lot of pasta, but **only** angel hair.

It can express a condition, a requirement

- **Nur**, wenn du die richtigen Worte sagst, geht die Tür auf.
- **Only** if you say the right words will the door open.

- Ich mache den Abwasch **nur** für eine Massage.
- I'll do the dishes **only** in exchange for a massage.

As we're at it, the same sentence again with a "not much"-**nur**.

- Ich mache den Abwasch für **nur** eine Massage.
- I'll do the dishes for (**just**) one massage (**only**) .

So, if only is used as an adjective then it will be **einzig** but other than that **nur** is a fine translation... unless... well... and that brings us to **erst**.

erst

The number one translation for **erst** is **first** but as similar as they may look, they are not related. **First**

come from fore and that goes back to the overwhelmingly ancient Indo-European root **per*... you might know it from prefixes like *ver-* or *pro-* or prepositions like *für* or *for*. We can take *forward* or *forth* as a basic idea here, so *first* is essentially about being locally ahead of the pack.

Erst is originally the most-form what would later become the English word *early*. *Early, earlier, earliest*. Yep, that totally makes sense. We'd have to take out something, but that was *a lie* anyway... .. ahem.... I thought that was clever but anyway...

Erst comes from *early* and it is about being ahead of the pack in time. But I mean... time and space really go hand in hand... when you're the winner of a marathon, you ahead of everyone else (first) and you arrive the earliest (erst).

All right.

So, just like *einzig*, *erst* started off as an adjective and it is still used that way.

- Die *erste* Frau.
- The *first* woman.

And, just like first, it is also used as .. uhm... let me think... uhm... an adverb of time... probably.

- *Erst* Koche ich, dann esse ich.
- *First* I cook, then I eat.

But that's not it. From there, *erst* broadened even further and became one of those hard to grasp word. It's really hard to describe what it does in one sentence. But luckily we've already talked about *erst* in detail (I'll add a link below) so we'll just focus on the part that matters today:

Just like *nur*, *erst* can express that the speaker considers something "not much" but it talks about ongoing processes. Which makes sense, because *erst* used to be a time-word. *Nur* talks about what is there. *Erst* (as a translation for only) talks about what is there plus it expresses that the speaker thinks its "work in progress".

Imagine you, your loved one and a few work colleagues are going out for a few drinks.

- Ich habe *nur* zwei Bier getrunken.
- I('ve) *only* had two beers.

- Ich habe *erst* zwei Bier getrunken.
- I've *only* had two beers (so far).

The first sentence works perfectly fine the next day. The second one would be appropriate if your loved one wants to go home. Note that it DOESN'T necessarily imply that you will have more. You'll probably give in and go home. The *erst* just expresses that you thought you were going to be there longer. It expresses that you think it's "early" in an ongoing process. And that is lacking in *nur*.

- Ich war *nur/ erst* einmal in Paris.
- I've *only* been to Paris once (so far)

With *nur*, this is a simple counting. The *erst* doesn't really express that I have plans to go there again. Maybe I really hated Paris. But it acknowledges that I am alive and that is an ongoing process. I mean, who knows, maybe I'll have to go for job reasons.

- I had been learning German for **only** 2 months, so I couldn't really talk all that much **yet**.

There is no **so far** here, but still there are enough hints. The **had been learning** instead of just **learned**, the context, and of course the **yet**... all those suggest that, I considered the learning at this particular time as ongoing. So it should be **erst**.

- Ich hatte **erst** seit zwei Monaten Deutsch gelernt, konnte also **noch** nicht wirklich viel sagen.

Nur wouldn't be totally wrong because the whole thing is in past. But in the following example it would stick out quite a bit.

- My son was **only** 2 years old when he could already pontificate.
- Mein Sohn war **erst** 2 als er schon geschwollen daherreden konnte.

Why would **nur** stick out here? Well, we're talking about age, and that is a "work in progress". Living beings always age (except men, or course; we ripen). So the "ongoing-ness" of this verb (be some age) is so strong that the exact phrasing or context doesn't matter. It'll always be **erst**, and never **nur**. Let's do another example.

- I've **only** been in Berlin since Monday.

This is another example where **nur** would stick out as wrong. And the reason is **since**. **Since** clearly tells us that I haven't left. No need for a **so far** or a **yet**. **Since** in this phrasing makes it clear that it's ongoing.

- Ich bin **erst** seit Montag in Berlin.

All right. So this is **erst**. You need it whenever you want to express that you consider something ongoing or of something is kind of ongoing by default (like life). Using **nur** is understandable but people will definitely notice. Just keep in mind. **Nur** really only counts and deems it "not much". **Erst** comes from early and brings in a time-component... like a preliminary result. Sometimes, we can add that component by using extra words, by the way. For instance in the beer-example.

- Ich hatte **bis jetzt nur** zwei Bier.
- I've **only** had two beers **so far**.

This is perfectly fine and communicates the same as **erst** would. But this only works for "countable" things.... like beers, or times in Paris. It would sound wrong with age, for instance.

All right. We're almost done here, but there is one more use of **erst** that doesn't really fit in with what we've learned so far.

- only then.

This can be either... **erst dann** or **nur dann** but there is a difference.

- You need **to do** this, this and finally this, **only then** the door will open.

If you use *nur* here, you're expressing that the door will only open IF you've done all this.

If you use *erst*, you're saying that the door will only open AFTER you've done all this. Just think "earliest then". *Nur* is about condition, *erst* is about time.

So ... what would we need here?

- You need this, this and this. *Only* then the door will open.

We need *nur* because we're just listing items. There is no time involved.

But enough with the boring nuances that no one can remember. This is it for today. This was our What is the Difference-Special for the German words for *only*. We could just say it'll be *nur* except when either:

- the phrasing is similar to "The only blah" - then it'll be *einzig* in German
- or we are talking about a work in progress and there might be more to come - then it'll be *erst*

And now is the perfect time for an exercise.

1. There is *only* one sentence in this exercise.

The exercise has exercised a lot. That's why it is so little.

And with that unfunny pun, we're done. Yay! Voll gut! Go ahead and try your own example with the words in the comments. And of course if you've questions or suggestions - tell it to the hand so it tells it to the keyboard so it tells it to the browser so it tells it to the router so it tells it to t

I hope you liked it and bis nächstes Mal :).