

## Word of the Day - "peinlich"

by German-is-easy - Thursday, September 27, 2018

<https://yourdailygerman.com/peinlich-embarrassing-german/>

Hello everyone,

and welcome to our German word of the Day. This time, we will talk about ... my pee stain. I was in a café, a very crowded café I should say, and I had to go to the bathroom. And as the guys among you know... sometimes a few drops come out late, no matter how thorough you are. That's what happened to me that day. And as I washing my hands (like real gentlemen do), it formed. A pee stain. Roughly the shape of Australia. Eight inches in diame... okay, okay, I'll stop. Of course, we're not gonna talk about that pee stain. There never was such a pee stain to begin with. The reason I made it up is that it has a lot to do with the word we'll look at today:

### *peinlich*

And *peinlich* does have a lot to do with pee stains because *peinlich* means *embarrassing*. Why it means that, and why the translation is not always straight forward, that's what we'll look at today. So let's jump right in...

The origin of *peinlich* is the Latin word *pena*. The original sense of that was about *punishment, retribution*. A sense that we can still see in the word penalty. But because things were generally a bit rougher back then, it is no wonder that *pena* broadened to include the ideas *torment, suffering* and eventually made its way into several European languages as the general word for *pain*.

The German tribes liked their own word for *pain* better: *der Schmerz*. And I kind of get it. I mean... Schmerz does sound like someone twisting the skin on your arm.

- Das Einhorn kriegt von Grammatik **Kopfschmerzen**.
- The unicorn gets a **head ache** from grammar.
  
- Maria ist genervt, weil Thomas mal wieder **Weltschmerz** hat.
- Maria is annoyed because once again Thomas "*is suffering pain because of how the world is*".  
(*Is there an idiomatic translation for it? Danke :)*)

But German does have an offspring of the Latin *pena*, as well: the noun *die Pein*. It means something like *torment*, *agony* but it's pretty rare nowadays and you rarely hear it in daily life.

Except as a part of the German word for *embarrassing*: *peinlich*. Originally, it meant something like *painful* and this is actually still kind of visible in the phrasing *peinlich genau*. Which is about being so precise, it hurts.

- Marias Oma wiegt alle Zutaten *peinlich genau* ab.
- Maria's grandma *painstakingly* weighs all the ingredients. *Lit.:* "*painfully exact*".

But the idea of *embarrassing* isn't all that far either. Walking out of the bathroom into a crowded café with a six inch pee stain does kind of hurt. I mean... I think. I've never experienced it.

Anyway, examples.

- Es ist *peinlich*, wenn man im Restaurant nicht genug Geld dabei hat.
- It's *embarrassing* if you don't have enough money with you at a restaurant.
  
- Die Qualität des Essens, der Service, die Musik... das alles war einfach nur *peinlich*.
- The quality of the food, the service, the music... all that was simply a *shame/embarrassing*.
  
- "Und, hat euch der Film geflasht, Bros?"  
"Mamaaa, hör auf, so zu reden. Du bist voll *peinlich*."
- "So, was the movie lit, bros?"  
"Moom, stop talking like that. You're so *cringe*."
  
- "Hast du gesehen, wie Thomas die Frau angetanzt hat?"  
"Ja, das war über *peinlich*."
- "Did you see how Thomas was flirt-dancing with the woman?"  
"Yeah, that was *super embarrassing/super cringe*."

And if we want to add the person for whom something is embarrassing, you can do that with the *Dative case*.

- "Komm, sing mal!"  
"Nee, das ist *mir peinlich*."

- "Come on, sing."  
"Nah, that is **embarrassing to me**."  
*(I feel like there's a more colloquial way to express that... help please :)*
  
- Es war **dem Kellner** sehr **peinlich**, dass er das falsche Getränk gebracht hat.
- The waiter was really **embarrassed** that he had brought the wrong drink.
  
- **Dir** ist auch gar nichts **peinlich**, oder?
- You have no **shame**, have you? (small scale)  
Lit.: **Nothing is embarrassing to you, is it?**

Now, even though they're overall pretty good translations for each other, there's a couple of things we need to note.

For one thing, at least to me **peinlich** is a little less grave than **embarrassing**. Like... a drunk prime minister urinating on the flag of his own country would be too big an embarrassment to be called **peinlich**. There, **beschämend** is probably the better translation.

- Dieses Video war **beschämend**.
- This video was **embarrassing** ("be-shaming").

But the more important difference has to do with the related words. We've already seen the origin of **peinlich** and the only relatives, **Pein** and the noun **die Peinlichkeit**, are pretty rare.

**Embarrassing** on the other hand comes from the verb **to embarrass**, which is not rare at all, and neither is the form **embarrassed**. The origin of the verb is a combination of the prefix **en-** and a Latin word **-barra** which was about barring something, just in case you're interested.

Anyway, the thing that's a bit tricky is that those rarely translate to something involving **peinlich**.

- I feel a little **embarrassed**.
- Das ist **mir peinlich**. (*you did something weird*)

Ich fühle mich **bloßgestellt**. (lit.: "**put down bare**")(*if you've been exposed, sounds formal*)

Das *ist mir unangenehm*. (source of embarrassment is outside, feeling of discomfort)

- I don't want *to embarrass myself* in front of everybody.
- Ich will *mich* nicht vor allen *zum Affen machen*.
  
- With his comment about unicorns, Thomas completely *embarrassed* himself.
- Mit seinem Kommentar über Einhörner hat sich Thomas total *blamiert*.  
(*blamieren* is a false friend of *to blame*. The German version is all about "making a fool", not "making accusations")
  
- Maria's *embarrassment* was obvious. (her feeling embarrassed, moderate intensity)
- Marias *Verlegenheit* war offensichtlich.
  
- Unicorns and their recent behavior are an *embarrassment* for God, their creator. (strong cause of the feeling of embarrassment)
- Einhörner und ihr Verhalten in letzter Zeit sind ein *Schande* für Gott, ihren Schöpfer.

Now you're probably like "Oh my God, so many options. How am I supposed to memorize that."

And you're right to be worried because mixing those up is incredibly *peinlich*. Everybody will laugh. The good news is, though, that you can avoid it. All you have to do is to make sure you have a big pee stain on your pants. That's an ancient technique called pisstraction, and it's from the book the Art of Warhol by Macchiavelli.

"Emanuel... does the fact that you're talking nonsense mean that we're done for the day? Because then we'd leave. We have stuff to do, you know."

Well, you got me there. We're pretty much done :).

Just to make sure though... of course it is NO problem if you don't have the right translation for a given context. The ones I gave you weren't even all there are. All that matters is that you remember that *peinlich* does NOT work as a translation for the entire embarrass-family, but only for *embarrassing* and *cringy*.

So, that's it for today. As always, if you have any questions or suggestions or if you want to share a

peinliche situation from your life in German, just leave me a comment.  
I hope you liked it and see you next time.

*\*\* vocab \*\**

*peinlich - embarrassing*

*der Schmerz(en) - the pain*

*die Kopfschmerzen - head ache*

*das Schmerzmittel - the pain medicine*

*die Schmerztablette - pain killer (aspirin)*

*die Schande, the disgrace - strong embarrassment (causing the feeling)*

*die Verlegenheit - a feeling of light embarrassment*

*bloßstellen - expose;embarrass*

*sich blamieren - to embarrass oneself*

*sich zum Affen machen - to make a fool of oneself*

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