

## Word of the Day - "die Taste"

by German-is-easy - Tuesday, August 11, 2015

<https://yourdailygerman.com/2015/08/11/taste-abtasten-antasten-meaning/>

Hello everyone,

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

### *die Taste*

And I have to say... I don't have degree in seeing but to me *Taste* looks a LOT like *taste*. However, most of you probably know that the German word for *taste* is *der Geschmack* ... or at least you know it's something with *smack* or *shmack* or something.

*Die Taste* on the other hand means *the key*. Not in sense of lock, but in sense of buttons. A piano, a computer keyboard, the new iPhone Press® ... they all have *Tasten*.

Looks like German was dancing again. It has done the twist... haha... or has it? Let's find out :)

Die Taste and the taste are not just two words that are spelled the same by coincidence. They are related. So who messed up, German or English. Place your bets now. The origin is the Latin verb *tangere*.

*Tangere* is where words like *tactile*, *tangible* or *contact* come from... words that still conserve the meaning of *tangere*... *to touch*. Seems like German stayed the course. So what happened in English?

Well, English and German both imported the verb from Old French *taster* which in turn came from Latin *taxtare*, an intensified version of *tangere*. Think of a merchant touching some fabric or something trying to determine the quality, the value. That is *taxtare*. Touching with an added notion of examining. By the way... this idea of examining, estimating value is also the base for the word *tax*. Anyway, *taxtare* was then imported to French, the language that invented the Gourmet. No wonder it soon took on the side notion of *checking out food by mouth*. Then, English imported it, and first it could mean *to touch*, *to examine* but also *to take a small sample* in context of food. And that's what it eventually focused on. So the development is something like this ... touching, checking out by touching, checking out, checking out samples of food, taste. Makes sense once you know it.

All right.

The German version of the verb, *tasten*, has stayed true to the original idea of touch. BUT... there is a biiiig difference between the verbs *to touch* and *tasten*. They're pretty much never translations for each other. Why not? Because you can *touch* something, but you cannot really *tasten* something. *Tasten* is not about making contact, it's about the motions you do. Like... you can actually *tasten* without touching.

*Tasten* has this notion of search. Here's an example:

- Frodo *tastete* nach seinem Ring.
- Frodo *felt* for his ring.

This means that Frodo has a vague idea where the ring is but I can't look so he carefully pats around the area. No idea if English has a verb for that. Here's another example.

- Thomas *tastet* im stockdunklen Hausflur nach dem Lichtschalter.
- Thomas *fumbles/searches with his sense of touch* for the light switch in the pitch black hallway.

So yeah...the core idea of *tasten* is definitely *touch*. Heck the German term for *sense of touch* is *der Tastsinn*. But if you need a translation for to touch, you'd need *anfassen* or *berühren*. Oh or *anstasten*... which brings us to the prefix versions of the verb.

*Antasten* does mean *to touch*, but only in sense of "undoing untouchedness"... uhm... like...

*anstasten* kind of means *not leave untouched*. I don't know how else to say... *antasten* is touching something that is untouched and shouldn't be touched, mostly in context with abstract things. Let's just look at two examples...

- Die Regierung hat versprochen, die Mehrwertsteuer nicht *anzutasten*.
- The administration has promised not to *touch* the VAT/leave the VAT untouched.
  
- Die Würde des Menschen ist *unantastbar*.
- The dignity of man is *inviolable*.

I hope those give you an idea.

Next, there is *rantasten* (the r-version) or the formalerer *herantasten*. This one combines the notion of care, that *tasten* has with the idea of search. Like... imagine your foot hurts and you're trying to pinpoint the exact origin of the pain. You would start somewhere a bit remote and slowly, carefully close in. That is *(he)rantasten* in the most literal sense. But it's mostly used in abstract contexts and is not about actual touching.

- Um eine Phobie zu heilen muss man sich langsam *rantasten*.
- If you want to heal a phobia you need *take in small steps*.
  
- Der Brauer *tastet* sich langsam an das perfekte Pale Ale *heran*.
- *Step by step* the brewer *closes in* on the perfect Pale Ale.

The next one is *abtasten*, and this one is full out touching and full out examination. It's what air port security does when they pat you down but it's also used in context of gathering information about a surface via a laser or radar or something.

- Der Bodyguard *tastet* mich *ab*.
- The body guard *pats* me *down/frisks* me.
  
- Der Doktor *tastet* meinen Bauch *ab*.
- The physician *feels/palpates* my belly.
  
- Um ein 3D Modell zu erstellen wird der Körper mit einem Laser *abgetastet*.
- To create a 3D model the body is *scanned* with a laser.

Last but not least, there is *ertasten* and that is basically touching in search combined with the idea of finding.

- Der Masseur *ertastet* eine Verspannung.
- The massage therapists *finds* the tense muscle by "*investigatively*" *touching*.

And... I think that's pretty much i... oh no wait, we didn't actually do any examples for die *Taste*. Here are the German names of some of the most important *Tasten*

- *die Leertaste - space* ("empty key")
- *die Entertaste/Eingabetaste - enter*
- *die Feststelltaste - caps lock* ("set fast/fixed key")
- *die Rautetaste - hash key/pound key* ... this one "#".

And then there is die *Tastensperre* (the keylock) and of course die *Tastatur* which is *the keyboard*. Cool :). Now we're really done.

This was our little look at the family of *die Taste*. The very core of it is *touch* but it has the added notion of examination. In English that slowly shifted toward examining by mouth, in German it hasn't changed much and that's why we have a really nice pair of false friends today :).

As always, if you have any questions or suggestions just leave me a comment. I hope you liked it and see you next time.

**\*\* vocab \*\***

*die Taste - the key (keyboard, button stuff)*

*die Tastatur - keyboard (piano, computer)*

*die Tastensperre - the key lock*

*die Leertaste - space (key)*

*die Enter-/Eingabetaste - enter (key)*

*antasten - touch (mostly abstract, not in an affectionate sense)*

*unantastbar - untouchable, inviolable*

*sich (he)rantasten - to proceed in (very) small steps (not literal)*

*abtasten - "go over a surface to gather information" (pat down, frisk, palpate, scan)*

*ertasten - find through touching*