Hello everyone,

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

Kommen means to come and unlike most of the prefixes vor has only one core: the idea of "in front"-ness. And it's actually a rather simple straightforward prefix verb. It has a modest 4.4 MBU (mind bend units) on the Mind Bend Scale, nothing compared to the "logic" of bestellen with its 1,2 million MBU. And just to put these numbers in perspective ... understanding bestellen is like kissing your belly button, vorkommen is more like touching your shins.

So, really nothing too demanding. So without any further ado, let's get right to the first meaning of vorkommen and that is... to happen.

Now you're like "That's not simple at all." and you're right, I just wanted to scare you a little. The actual translation for vorkommen is to occur.

"Emanuel, this is NOT any better."

Oh yes, it is. The verb to occur comes from Latin. It's a combination of the prefix ob- which meant against, toward and the verb currere, which meant to run. That is where current comes from, by the way. So, the literal meaning of occur once was simply to run toward. From there, it changed to the more general idea of to present itself, to show up - a meaning that is still part of to occur in contexts like, say, the number of occurrences of a word in a text. How often does a word present itself, show up, occur in a text. And guess what... that's also a meaning of vorkommen

- In philosophischen Texten kommt selten das Wort Scheiße vor.
- The word "shit" rarely occurs in philosophical texts

- Forscher vermuten riesige Erdölvorkommen unter der Arktis.
- Scientists expect/suspect there to be enormous oil reserves/deposits under the Arctic.
Die Butterblume kommt in der Arktis vor.  
The buttercup can be found/"occurs" in the Arctic zone.

And when we take the last example we can see that it's really just a very small step from this meaning to the idea of to happen.

Schneestürme kommen oft in der Arktis vor.  
Snow storms often happen/occur in the Arctic zone.

The snow storms "come forth", they show up, take place, happen. I hope you can see the connection.

"Ich hatte gestern 1 Stunde keinen Handyempfang."  
"Das tut uns natürlich leid, aber bei so einem starken Sturm kann das schon mal vorkommen."  
"I didn't have reception for about 1 hour yesterday."  
"Of course we’re sorry for that but during this strong of a storm that can happen."

Das darf nie wieder vorkommen.  
That must never happen again.

Wenn das noch mal vorkommt, wird es Konsequenzen geben.  
There will be consequences if that happens again.

Now, the number 1 German word for to happen is passieren. Vorkommen is by far not as general. Uses like the ones in the examples are the most common ones and there are a few contexts in which vorkommen does not work at all. For one thing, it sounds a little bit slow, so it doesn't work well for quick or sudden events. Like, you hear glasses crashing from the kitchen or your friend calls you and breaks down crying.... vorkommen would sound super out of place and unidiomatic here.

Was ist vorgekommen?... NOPE, sounds wrong  
Was ist passiert?... yup  
What happened?

Also, you wouldn't use it to refer to single instances of events so you'll pretty much never find vorkommen in combination with a specific point in time.

[Bluh bluh] ist am Montag vorgekommen... NOPE, sounds wrong
- [Blah blah] ist am Montag *passiert*.... yup
- That *happened* on Monday.

And last but not least *vorkommen* absolutely doesn't work when you want to say that something *happens to someone*. It's the same for *to occur*.

- It *happened* to me that she fell asleep.
- It *occurred* to me that she fell asleep.

These two are totally not the same. *To occur* now expresses the idea of personal impression. And it's the same with *vorkommen*. When you add a person the verb turns away from a real event toward an personal perception. And in contrast to to occur, *vorkommen* actually is much more personal. Like... to occur to me is about recognizing something that is the case. *Jemandem vorkommen* is about getting the impression something MIGHT be the case. As similar as they are, the two are actually never translations for each other. Think of *vorkommen* as *to seem* (for to occur the better translation is *einfallen*).

- Das *kommt mir* komisch *vor*. The *seems* strange/fishy to me.

- Das *kommt mir* Spanisch *vor*. *(common idiom)*
- That *seems* strange to me.

- *Manchmal kommt es mir so vor*, als ob du gar nicht richtig da bist.
- *Sometimes it seems to me* like you're not really there/here.

- Die Stimme *kommt mir* irgendwie bekannt *vor*.
- The voice *seems/sounds* somehow familiar to me.

- *Kommt es nur mir so* vor oder ist dieser Sommer scheiße.
- *Is it just me* or does this summer suck.

And then there's this phrasing: *ich komme mir vor*. Literally, it is "*I occur to myself*" and it's about what impression you have of yourself within a certain environment but the actual translation is *to feel*.

- Whenever I talk to Maria's brother I *feel* like an idiot.
• 5 Euro für einen Kaffee?! Ich *komme mir* ein bisschen verarscht *vor*.
• 5 Euro for one coffee?! *I feel* a little cheated.

Not bad, huh... a word that can mean *to happen* and *to feel*. Sounds super crazy but it actually makes perfect sense. "Perfect" as in "kind of", I mean :). Seriously though... the core is *to show up* and that can be bent either way... *taking place, happen or appear, seem*.

Let me maybe point out again that for the appear-sense you absolutely NEED this *mir/dir* bit.

• It *seems* fast.
• Es kommt schnell vor.... NOT A TRANSLATION
• Es kommt *mir* schnell vor. .. this works

All right.
So this was *vorkommen* and it's cool meanings and everyday usages. Now for the boring rest... the r-version.

**hervorkommen**

Which isn't even an r-version, because pronouncing a single *r* in front of a *v* would be kind of hard.
There's only *hervorkommen* and this is about the idea of coming out from somewhere hidden into the open.

• Der Bartender *kommt* hinter dem Tresen *hervor*.
• The bar tender *comes out from behind* the bar.

• Die Sonne *kommt* hinter den Wolken *hervor*.
• The sun *comes out* from behind the clouds.

• Wenn Thomas Wein trinkt, *kommt* seine romantische Seite *hervor*.
• When Thomas drinks wine, his romantic side *comes out*.

What it doesn't mean, even though that would make sense, is the super literal idea of *come to the front*. The proper word for that is *nach vorne kommen* (though you can also find *vorkommen* in some contexts)
• Tim, *komm* bitte nach vorne/(vor) an die Weltkarte und zeige uns, wo Norwegen ist. (*a teacher in geography class*)
• Tim, please *come* to the world map *in front* and show us where Norway is.

• So *kommt* Ihr Foodblog bei Google ganz nach vorne.
• This is how your food blog *makes the first page* on Google.

And since we're at it, we might as well also mention the word *vorankommen*, which what all learners want... *make progress*.

• In dem Sturm *kommen* wir nur langsam voran.
• In this storm we can *move forward* only slowly.

• "Wie läuft's mit deiner Hausarbeit?"
  "Super, ich *komme gut voran."
• "How's it going with your paper?"
  "Great, I'm *making good progress."

Cool.
And I'd say we're done. This was our look at the prefix verb *vorkommen* which organically stretches from *to happen* and *to feel*, even though it may *vorkommen* you super crazy at first ;).
As always, if you have any questions or suggestions or if you want to try out some examples, just leave me a comment.
I hope you enjoyed it, and see you next time.

** *vorkommen* - fact sheet **

*meaning:*

*vorkommen* - to occur, to happen
*mir/dir/... vorkommen* - occur to me, seem to me
*sich vorkommen wie* - feel like something

*past:*
form of sein + vorgekommen
kam- ... vor

*related words:*

das Vorkommen(·) - the deposit (natural resources only)
die Vorkommnisse - the occurrences (usually with a negative tone, rare)
keine besonderen Vorkommnisse - nothing to report
hinter etwas hervorkommen - come out from behind something
vorankommen - make progress

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