



Context is king when speaking in German

- Subscriber only

Let's talk about how you make yourself understood in German. It is not another grammar rule to memorise but it is about the differences between English and German. There are also some exercises waiting for you at the end.

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It's all about the context in German

Context is king when you're speaking in German. Have you ever seen a side-by-side view of a German and an English version of the same text? If not, don't worry; I can tell you first-hand that the German version is likely to be the longer one.

The reason? Germans need context. Germans crave context like mosquitos crave your precious blood on a hot summer night. Give them what they lust after and make it easy for Germans to understand you.

Why there's more context needed

Remember, the German language doesn't feature the so-called progressive/continuous verb form. 'I'm swimming,' 'I'm washing' or 'I'm cooking' don't exist in German.

Instead, Germans will say *Ich schwimme, Ich wasche, Ich koche*

AND

add words like *gerade*, *jetzt* (right now) or *im Moment* (at the moment)

AND

add more context on top of that.

The fact that Germans can't express '[...] is doing [...]' by employing the progressive feature of the English language has a wider impact than just the use of words like *gerade*, *jetzt* or *nun*.

What it boils down to is context. Germans need to know about the circumstances of an action to make sense of it all.

Start, middle and end to stories

On a more concrete note, Germans tend to add the following:

A start, middle and end to their stories.

Unlike with English, where you might say

He is cooking,

Germans would have to add things around it to be understood properly. They might say

He started to cook (beginning), then he put up a pot of water and started to prepare the vegetables for the soup (middle) and when he was about to drop the spaghetti into the water, the phone rang (end).

Er hat angefangen zu kochen, dann hat er einen Topf mit Wasser aufgesetzt, angefangen das Gemüse für die Sauce fertig zu machen und als er dabei war, die Spaghetti in das Wasser zu schütten, hat das Telefon geläutet.

Wrapping your sentence in a beginning, middle and end is one way to ensure that everyone is still with you.

But you can also turn to another technique that you usually deal with in a lot of other scenarios as well.

Never forget about your goals

Another way to add context and a touch of progression is to mention the goal of a certain action.

You could say (literally)

His mum rang him when he cooked for his wife (reason for cooking).

Seine Mutter hat angerufen, als er dabei war, für seine Frau zu kochen.

You have probably come across this goal-oriented thinking when you learnt about German prepositions. Prepositions are known for traumatising learners of any foreign language. Test yourself and try to translate these prepositions into German: on, over, under, next to, in, down or across. Do you also know which case they take?

While in English you would simply say, 'I'm going TO the movies and then TO the pub,' or, 'Tomorrow I will have to go TO the doctors and afterwards TO work,' Germans have about six different words for the TO in English. The reason for it:

Goal-oriented thinking

The German language focuses on what you will end up doing once you've reached your destination.

Instead of saying

We're going TO the movies

Germans will say

We're going IN the movies (*Wir gehen ins Kino*).

Germans say 'in the movies' because when going to the movies, people end up sitting inside, scooping up popcorn and staring at the screen. Germans focus on the fact that we will be spending time indoors, in the movies.

Exercises for more

Hopefully, you have the gist of how it works. How about you give it a go yourself and try to think of what you can add to the following sentences? Here's an example:

English

The man is walking.

German

Der Mann geht.

With context

Der Mann verlässt das Haus (start), spaziert über den Bürgersteig (middle) und geht zum Auto, um in die Stadt zu fahren (goal).

The man leaves the house (start), strolls along the footpath (middle) and walks towards the car to drive to the city (goal).

Email me your context ideas

On the following pages you'll find a few example sentences (with answers/suggestions); I want you to add the needed context. It can be a lot of context, or it can be just a word or two. You can write it in German, or you can make it up in English if you can't say it in German yet. There's no right or wrong answer; simply having a try is our main goal here.

Don't forget to email it to me. I'd love to see what you've come up with:
anja@thegermanz.com

I'll try to respond to as many emails as possible.

Exercises

There are so many ways you can add context to the following sentences, so it's not about being right or wrong, but just practising adding either a goal, a time reference, a start, a middle or an end to the sentences. Have fun!

Example #1

English: The woman is laughing.

German: *Die Frau lacht.*

With context

Example #2

English: The child is running.

German: *Das Kind läuft.*

With context

Example #3

English: The customer is shouting at the waiter.

German: *Der Kunde schreit die Bedienung an.*

With context

Answers

Of course, the sentences here are not an exhaustive list of how you could have done the exercises. They are only a couple of suggestions of what could have been said. If you have any questions, please email to anja@thegermanz.com and tell me what you would like to know.

Answer #1

English: The woman is laughing.

German: *Die Frau lacht.*

With context

Die Frau lacht, als ihr Ehemann nach Hause kommt.

The woman is laughing when her husband gets home (time).

Die Frau lacht, weil sie ihren Hund mit einem Mülleimer auf dem Kopf gesehen hat.

The woman is laughing because she saw her dog with a rubbish bin on his head (reason).

Answer #2

English: The child is running.

German: *Das Kind läuft.*

With context

Das Kind läuft von einer Ecke des Gartens zur anderen als der Wassersprinkler angeht.

The kid is running from one corner of the garden to the other when the sprinkler switches on (time).

Das Kind läuft auf das Tor zu, um ein Tor zu schießen.

The kid is running towards the goal to shoot a goal (goal).

Answer #3

English: The customer is shouting at the waiter.

German: *Der Kunde schreit die Bedienung an.*

With context

'Nein, das Essen war nicht gut.' Der Kunde schreit die Bedienung an.

'No, the food wasn't good.' The customer is shouting at the waiter (reason/start).

Der Kunde schreit die Bedienung an, um die laute Musik zu übertönen.

The customer is shouting at the waiter to be heard over the music (goal).