

Questions

- 1) What is your favourite German word?

- 2) The German aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg commented that: 'Ein guter Ausdruck ist so viel wert als ein guter Gedanke, weil es fast unmöglich ist, sich gut auszudrücken, ohne das Ausgedrückte von einer guten Seite zu zeigen'. What might he have meant by this?

Prompts

Question 1

Why might one particular word be more interesting or powerful than another?

What unique possibilities are offered by your German word of choice which might not be available in other languages?

Question 2

How might you begin to extract meaning from an aphorism such as this one?

What might the difference be between a *Gedanke* and an *Ausdruck*?

What gives value to thoughts or expressions?

Suggested answers

Bear in mind while reading through this section that it is only guidance intended to explain the purpose of the questions and the way I personally might go about answering them. There are, of course, no objectively correct answers when it comes to open theoretical questions like these, so there is no need to worry if you did not address the questions in the same way I did or use the same examples, which I drew from the areas I know best. Rather, try to adopt a similar mindset and thought process so you can approach questions in an analytical and questioning manner.

Question 1: What is your favourite German word?

Deceptively simple questions such as this one are common in Oxbridge Humanities interviews. Whilst it should be relatively easy to highlight a few German words which particularly resonate with you, the difficulty lies in justifying your choices, elevating them from unqualified personal preference to considered reflections on the German language. This attitude of deeply interrogating answers which initially seem obvious or not insightful is characteristic of a good Oxbridge applicant.

My recurring answer to this question has been *Handschuhschneeballwerfer*, or – loosely translated – ‘person who throws snowballs with gloves on’. In other words, a bit of a wimp; the same concept expressed by the similarly tongue-in-cheek nouns *Warmduscher* and *Jeansbügler*. Not only is this word decidedly comedic, it also serves to illustrate one feature of the German language not shared by English: the ability to construct extended compound nouns. The word itself consists of two smaller compound nouns – *Handschuh* (‘glove’) and *Schneeball* (‘snowball’) – affixed together and given sense by the addition of the verb *werfen* (‘to throw’). The nominalisation of this verb, to render it as *Werfer*, also indicates a distinction between German and English. In German, all verbs can be made nouns by the addition of the suffix ‘-er’ (though this sometimes takes different forms, as in the case of *bummeln*, to stroll or wander, becoming *Bummler*, a drifter or laggard). Whilst in English this is also possible in many cases, it occurs far less frequently and rolls off the tongue far less pleasingly, hence the relative rarity of words such as ‘thrower’, ‘ironer’, or ‘showerer’.

Whilst these vast compound formulations may seem intimidating, their logical construction often means that, when reading or translating German, one has to reach for the dictionary less frequently than in other languages. Breaking down the literal meaning of *Handschuhschneeballwerfer* and then inferring its actual usage is certainly possible. This logical underbelly is also pleasingly evident in words such as *Hauptverkehrszeit*: ‘main-traffic-time’, which English renders somewhat less directly as ‘rush hour’. The succinctness of some of these formulations has resulted in them being

dubbed untranslatable. Here, the most obvious example is *Schadenfreude*, or ‘pleasure taken from the displeasure / pain of others’. Whilst the English ‘gloating’ and ‘malicious glee’ go some way to express this, they lack the precision and elegance of the German original, formed simply by combining the nouns *der Schaden* (‘damage’ / ‘injury’) and *die Freude* (‘pleasure’ / ‘delight’).

Yet more difficult to translate is *Treppenwitz*. Breaking down this compound noun into ‘stair joke’ (*die Treppe* plus *der Witz*) hints only obliquely at its meaning, which one might loosely render in English as ‘the situation of realising the perfect – often witty – reply to something only after the fact’, i.e. once one has already ended the interaction or conversation and has reached the stairs to leave the building. The German term is a loose borrowing from the French *l’esprit d’escalier*, or ‘the staircase spirit / mind’, and, although the English ‘after-wit’ loosely expresses the same idea of wisdom acquired too late to be of use, this term is archaic and loses the particularly compelling physical connotation of the stairwell.

Here, the motif of the compound noun has been used to illustrate a few of the unique possibilities offered by the German language in constructing words. Breaking down words, considering their make-up and origins, is a useful tool not only in linguistics but also when discussing literature, and will stand you in good stead for writing textual commentaries. I hope this answer demonstrates the need to really interrogate questions asked at interview, no matter how simple they may seem. Always focus on justifying your answers and situating them within the ‘bigger picture’, showing an ability to ‘zoom out’ and demonstrate an appreciation for context and perspective.

As a final recommendation, I would suggest the works of Adam Jacot de Boinod, which focus on highlighting words which have no direct equivalent in other languages – amongst them ‘tingo’, a word from an Easter Island language meaning ‘to borrow things from a friend's house, one by one, until there is nothing left’!

Question 2: The German aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg commented that 'Ein guter Ausdruck ist so viel wert als ein guter Gedanke, weil es fast unmöglich ist, sich gut auszudrücken, ohne das Ausgedrückte von einer guten Seite zu zeigen'. What might he have meant by this?

This question – in contrast to the one preceding it – could at first glance seem very intimidating. Working out how to engage with such questions is an important part of interview preparation. There is nothing wrong with not immediately having an answer to a question, nor with taking some time to think – evidence that you are considering your answers rather than blurting out the first thing that comes into your head is a very good thing. What is important is being able to make the step from being initially intimidated to offering some cogent thoughts on a topic, which may include subtly moving in a direction with which you are more comfortable. It is also vital to remember that you would likely not be asked to comment on a quote such as this out of the blue: rather, it would probably be included within a text you are given to prepare prior to the interview. With this in mind, try to spend some minutes brainstorming ideas and interpretations of this quote before properly expressing your thoughts.

What might some of these ideas and interpretations be? Lichtenberg's aphorism centres around the verb *ausdrücken* ('to express') in various forms. It suggests a distinction between an *Ausdruck* ('expression') and a *Gedanke* ('thought'), and also implies that there might be an important difference between an *Ausdruck* and *das Ausgedrückte*. Moreover, it raises the question of how we should evaluate the value of thoughts and expressions – what makes a certain thought a 'good' one, or better than another? Again, you are not expected to offer a polished answer to any of these questions – just demonstrating an ability to break down complex questions like this will be very appealing.

Regarding the first of these suggestions, it seems that Lichtenberg is highlighting the disjunction between the mental conceptualisation of an idea and its verbal (or for that matter written) expression. This disjunction has always been a source of profound anxiety for writers, amongst them Kafka, who repeatedly lamented how inadequately he felt the words on the page reflected the ideas in his mind, bemoaning that 'almost no word I write fits with any other'. There is one particular element of this anxiety to which Lichtenberg seems to be responding: namely, the idea that – no matter how good it is – what is expressed on paper can *never* be of the same value or quality as that which remains or originated in the mind.

Lichtenberg's denial of this inevitable gap in value is open to multiple interpretations. One reading might focus on the idea that the attempt to verbally express a certain thought itself has intrinsic value – at least in the majority of cases, hence *'fast unmöglich'*. Considering the verb *sich ausdrücken* in greater depth reinforces the importance of this process of *expressing*: viewed literally, it seems to bear corporeal connotations of 'pressing something out of oneself', a violent, potentially painful overstepping of the boundary between interior and exterior, self and world. *Druck* suggests a pressure, a force being exerted, possibly even a kind of will which actively *desires* expression. Through this expression, the thought gains something of the personal, becoming *das Ausgedrückte* as it is shown from a particular *Seite*: the side of the *Ausdrücker*, who implants something of their subjective self within the verbal expression. In this allusion to subjectivity, Lichtenberg evokes the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of perspectivism: loosely put, the idea that no impersonal 'objectivity' exists which is able to transcend the point of view from which one makes claims.

Another reading of Lichtenberg's aphorism might focus on the inescapability of language as the overwhelming means of expressing thoughts (though other means of self-expression do of course exist, showing the same ideas from different *Seiten*). The inevitability of language as a means of expression is also reflected in Ludwig Wittgenstein's imperative that 'wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen'. Whilst this might be interpreted as a simple admonition to avoid discussing topics about which one is poorly informed, the modal verb *können* suggests a more rigid and further-reaching reading: Wittgenstein is suggesting mankind's ultimate inability to express any thought which cannot be rendered through language. Stefan George takes this thought to its most extreme conclusion in his poem [Das Wort](#). Here, language is seen to be the only determinant of reality, as the lack of a name implies non-existence: 'So lernt ich traurig den verzicht / Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht'.

The beauty of the aphorism is the plurality of meanings its compressed form guards. As such, analysing and interpreting aphorisms is a particularly effective means by which to prepare for the kind of texts or statements you may encounter at interview, and to train the methods which will come in most handy. Lichtenberg's *Sudelbücher* are a great place to start.