

Yes, mein freund, it's a matter of language

Want to better understand the English language? Learn German. That's the unexpected message of the recently completed 2006 National Spelling Bee finals. America's new national champion, Katharine Close, won by spelling *ursprache*. The runner-up, Finola Hackett, tripped up on *weltschmerz*. Another favorite lost on *heiligschein*.

Katharine might be excused for a shade of *schadenfreude* as she watched her friends falter because behind all the prime-time *glitz* and *angst* was a simple lesson. German and English are both Germanic languages. They share many word origins and characteristics. That makes German a good choice for every English-speaking *mensch*, whether you are a *kindergartner*, a *student* or just one of the *familie*.

You don't have to be a *wunderkind* to learn a little German. Once you learn the basics, words that stumped the spellers are a piece of *kuchen*.

Here's the *leitmotiv*: German is very American. It has worked its way into our world. While some worry loudly about too much Spanish, German has become everyday English. We check the weather on the *doppler* radar and the temperature in *fahrenheit*. If your neighbor chokes on his *bratwurst*, you give him the *Heimlich*.

German also helps us make our way in American pop culture. How can one understand the deeper meaning of "Shrek" without some personal insight into Teutonic fairy tales? And "you're a Harvard historian, for God's sake, not a pop *schlockmeister*," Dan Brown exclaims in "The Da Vinci Code."

German can be helpful wherever the *zeitgeist* may take you. J.K. Rowling took some good old German *Sturm und*

Drang and turned it into Durmstrang for Harry Potter's "tri-wizard" tournament. It sounds a bit creepy, but it's a whole lot better than Hogwarts. I can only imagine how she came up with that.

German can also help in diplomacy, even if the inconvenient truths of *realpolitik* sometimes get in the way of America's *idealpolitik*. In the early 1980s our ambassador to Germany, Arthur Burns, was called in by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to explain the Reagan administration's overarching concept, its *gesamtkonzept*, for American foreign policy. Without missing a beat, Burns replied, "Of course, Mr. Chancellor.

Would you like the *gesamtkonzept* from this week or from last week?"

Knowing some German can be practical if your *auto* is *kaputt*, you have some *wanderlust* or you want to explore the *hinterland* with your *rucksack*.

See how handy German can be? In fact, in German *handy* is a mobile phone. Handy. I think they've got something there. It *is* handy. "Cell phone" sounds like a germ spewer.

Sure, English is a must. But German is a plus. So let's take a cue from Katharine Close and improve our English by learning a little German this week. After all, last *Freitag* the biggest sports event on the planet started in Germany — the soccer World Cup. Grab your *bier*, settle back and repeat after me: *Toooooooooooooooooo!* It's *wunderbar*.

And if you find you have celebrated a bit too much, just take some *aspirin* and call me in the *morgen*. *Gesundheit*.

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IN MY OPINION