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Arbitrary or Rule-based?

Rethinking how we teach the German
articles *der, die, das*

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Roadmap



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1. The Puzzle

“In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has.”

(Mark Twain in 1880, desperately trying to learn German)

2. The Sell

“If it weren’t for the Vikings, you’d all be speaking like the Germans.”

(inspired by Davos 26)

3. The Natural

“Second language acquisition follows a predictable developmental sequence.” (Pienemann 1998)

4. The Crutch

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

(attributed to Albert Einstein, 1930s)

1. The Puzzle



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“In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has.”
Mark Twain (1880), desperately trying to learn German

Gender Assignment of der, die, das

Semantic motivation

natural gender (99%):
der Mann ‘**man**’ (m), die
Frau ‘**woman**’ (f) / der
Anwalt ‘**lawyer**’ (m), die
Anwältin ‘**lawyer**’ (f)

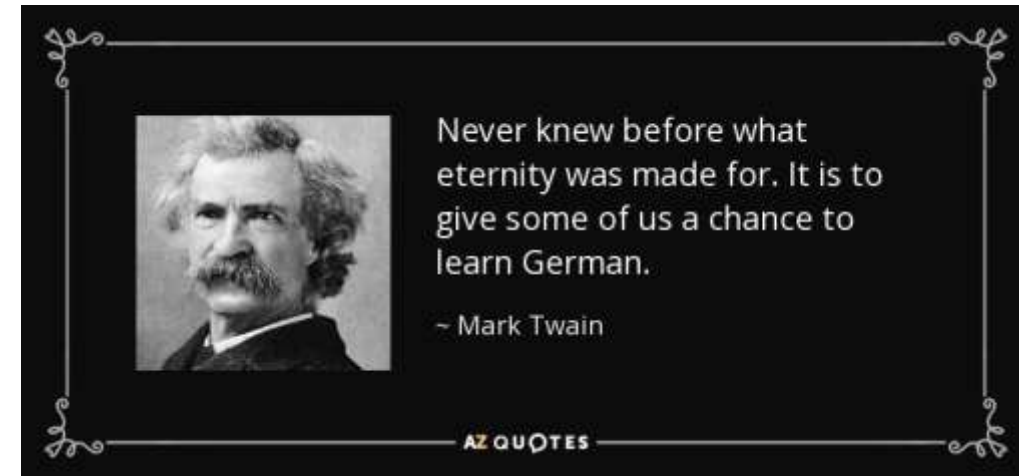
morphological / phonological motivation

the suffixes:
- chen / -lein: das Mädchen
‘**girl**’ (n), das Mäuslein ‘**little
mouse**’ (n)

morphological / phonological motivation

the schwa-rule /ə/ (90%):
die Katze ‘**cat**’ (f), die
Lampe ‘**lamp**’ (f), die Rübe
‘**turnip**’ (f), die Socke ‘**sock**’
(f)

the mono-syllabic rule (52%):
der Hund ‘**dog**’ (m), der
Tisch ‘**table**’ (m), der Baum
‘**tree**’ (m), der Strumpf
‘**sock**’ (m)



the arbitrary / the exceptions

der Löwe ‘**lion**’ (m), der
Drache ‘**dragon**’ (m), das
Buch ‘**book**’ (n), das Haus
‘**house**’ (n), die Kuh ‘**cow**’
(f), die Maus ‘**mouse**’ (f)

Sources:
- Köpcke et al (2010)
- Wegener (1995)

1. The Puzzle



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“The defining characteristic of gender is agreement” Corbett, G. (1991)

Case Marking and Gender Agreement

Case = grammatical role in sentence (who does what to whom)

Agreement = matches and links elements to the noun (how everything connects)

Die **große Katze** jagt **den kleinen Hund**. **Sie** ist schneller. **Er** ist klüger.

The big cat chases the small dog. ?It is faster.
?It is smarter.





2. The Sell

The Sociolinguistic Angle

or: If it weren't for the Vikings, you'd all be speaking like the Germans. (inspired by Davos 26)

Declension

Declension of <i>sē</i> hide ▲			
<i>singular</i>	masculine	feminine	neuter
nominative	sē, þē	sēo, þēo	þæt
accusative	þone	þā	þæt
genitive	þæs	þære	þæs
dative	þām, þæm	þære	þām, þæm
instrumental	þon, þý, þē	þære	þon, þý, þē
<i>plural</i>	masculine	feminine	neuter
nominative		þā	
accusative		þā	
genitive		þāra	
dative		þām, þæm	
instrumental		þām, þæm	



Articles in Old English (500-1100)
https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=se&oldid=65184297#Old_English

“The history of English is a history of simplification” – after Jespersen (1909-1949)

2. The Sell

The Clarity Angle

or: How to be a man (or woman or person) of few words.

Die große Katze jagt den kleinen Hund.
Sie ist schneller. Er ist klüger.

The big cat chases the small dog. ?It is faster. ?It is smarter.

The big cat chases the small dog. The cat is faster. The dog is smarter.



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2. The Sell

The Flexibility Angle

or: How to be a poet.

Die große Katze jagt den kleinen Hund im Park.

Den kleinen Hund jagt die große Katze im Park.

Im Park jagt die große Katze den kleinen Hund.



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“The common people (= das Völkchen) never sense the devil (= den Teufel), even when he has them by the collar.”

2. The Sell

The Priming Angle

or: German makes your brain work faster.



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Die große Katze jagt den kleinen...

Facilitating



Die große Katze jagt den kleinen...

Inhibiting



Sources:

- Grüter et al (2007)
- Kamide & Altmann (2003)

3. The Natural



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“Second language acquisition follows a predictable developmental sequence.” (Pienemann 1998)

Second Language Acquisition (age of onset 4 years) according to Wegener (1995)

1. Omission of articles

Example: Junge will Ball (Boy wants ball)

2. Use of different articles in free variation

Example: die Junge will den Ball, der Junge will die Ball (the boy wants the ball, variations)

Or: reduction of form variety, overgeneralisation of a single form

Example: der Junge will der Ball, der Mama zieht der Hose (the boy wants the ball, the mum puts the trousers)

3. Two-part gender system (der & die acc. to natural gender, schwa, monosyllabic rules), no case system

Example: der Junge will der Ball, die Mama zieht die Hose an (the boy wants the ball, the mum puts the trousers on)

4. Two-part gender system, two-part case system (nominative, accusative)

Example: der Junge will den Ball, die Mama zieht die Hose an (the boy wants the ball, the mum puts the trousers on)

5. Three-part gender system and three-part case system

Correct usage

4. The Crutch



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“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler. (attributed to Albert Einstein, 1930s)”

Ditch the lists

strommeninc.com/blog

German Gender Rules

Gender	Definite Article	Common Endings & Examples
Masculine (der)	der Mann (the man)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• -er → der Computer• -en → der Garten• -ig → der König• -ling → der Lehrling• -ismus → der Tourismus
Feminine (die)	die Frau (the woman)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• -e → die Blume• -heit → die Freiheit• -keit → die Möglichkeit• -ung → die Zeitung• -schaft → die Freundschaft• -ion → die Nation
Neuter (das)	das Kind (the child)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• -chen → das Mädchen• -lein → das Fräulein• -ment → das Instrument• -um → das Zentrum• -ma → das Thema

Instead:
Focus on the three main rules (natural gender, schwa, monosyllabic)

Ditch the colours

M	F	N	PL
der	die	das	die
den	die	das	die
dem	der	dem	den
des	der	des	der



Instead:
Focus on signs (written and hand) for the three main rules (natural gender, schwa, monosyllabic)

4. The Crutch



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Fixed Mindset:

Articles in German are arbitrary; I have to learn thousands by heart.



Growth Mindset:

When I use the three main rules, I get a majority of the articles right.