

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

*Wotcher, Mate! Wie geht's, Liebchen?*

**Terms of greeting in English and German**

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

*Wotcher, Mate! Wie geht's, Liebchen?***Terms of greeting in English and German<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper establishes that there is a general lack of casual terms of address in German as compared to English, and finds that this is not so much due to lexical gaps in German, although this appears to be partly true, as to different sincerity conditions for the use of such terms in the two languages, particularly phatic communion in English. Exponents of such function are examined, as is the role of the various second person vocative pronominal forms in German, and speculations are raised as to the nature of friendship and acquaintance and their linguistic reflexes in the two languages.

To the surprise of its participants, in a class activity in an advanced German translation course for German native speakers and English-German bilinguals using the old and tried “Love variations”<sup>2</sup> exercise to demonstrate difficulties of computer translation caused by variations in punctuation, it quickly transpired that the version

1) What is this thing called, love?

where *love* is used as a vocative term of direct personal address, causes considerable difficulties for translation into German, and the innocent use of the form ‘love’ not infrequently arouses indignation amongst German women thus addressed in English. To be fair, however, it and its semi-synonyms can also arouse a similar, if generally less vehement, reaction amongst British women.

Its rough male counterpart ‘mate’, freely and possibly excessively used as a casual, phatic<sup>3</sup> greeting, particularly but not exclusively amongst speakers of ‘English English’<sup>4</sup> may similarly arouse some resentment:

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<sup>1</sup> It must be pointed out that this is still very much a work in progress, and that finer differentiations will need to be made along synchronic, diachronic, geographical and demographic axes.

<sup>2</sup> “Love variations” simply asking respondents to punctuate *what is this thing called love* to see how many interpretations it can yield. Without much particular effort it is quite easy to amass a total of over 20 versions, and many more if sometimes contrived and esoteric intonations are taken into account.

<sup>3</sup> The term *phatic communion*, to indicate recognition of the existence of the other participant(s) in a discourse, was originally coined by the cultural anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in ‘The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages’, published as an appendix to C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards’ (1923) *Meaning of Meaning*.

2) “Yeah, could a’ bin. Nothing to do with you, mate.”

“I’m not your mate,” said Morse, fishing for his warrant. (Dexter 1992: 98)

It will not pass unremarked that this exchange is marked for at least two features: personal distance and class. Morse rejects the amiability or closeness and the sincerity conditions associated with a literal interpretation of the word *mate* – comradeship and commonality, and regards his addressor as having made an intrusion into his intimate sphere. He also rejects the assumption that he and the addressee are on an equal footing. In general these principles will emerge in the discussion to follow: the use of casual forms of address occurs in informal contexts in a predominantly R1 register (Durrell 1992: 6-8), with working class connotations.

However, whilst *love*, *darling*, *sweetheart*, *mate*, etc. feature frequently in everyday casual English colloquial discourse, albeit at times involving some objection on the part of the recipient, it is very difficult to replicate the pattern of use of such expressions in German: not that there are lexical gaps, but unless addressor and addressee enjoy a bond of friendship and intimacy, usually across the gender divide, terms such as *Schatz*, *Liebling* and *Liebchen* seem to be otherwise simply unacceptable, except in parody, denigration or sarcasm. Similarly such English terms as *mate*, *chum*, *pal*, etc., which tend to be used between males, find few reflexes in German casual discourse, although in family and long-term friendship groups such terms as *Alte(r)*, *Alder*, *Aller* and *Olle(r)* do feature, and ‘junger Mann’ may be used as a semi-jocular form of address to strangers’.<sup>5</sup> This realisation similarly caused some surprise amongst the course participants, and indeed amongst the number of informants and correspondents thenceforward consulted.<sup>6</sup> The initial response elicited was that the term *Kumpel* generally covered the use of *mate*, but this was tempered by the observation that it is derived from and still associated with the now practically extinct *Kohlenpott* mining community in the *Ruhrgebiet* and that its use is far more self-conscious and far less widely distributed than that of English *mate*. A third realisation was that *Kumpel*, reflecting the idea of companionship and shared experience and historically derived from the archaic – or at least infrequently used term *Kumpan(e)*, itself derived from the

<sup>4</sup> This term is loosely used to include English speakers of Australian, Irish, New Zealand, Scottish, South African and Welsh origin.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Nils Langer for this observation.

<sup>6</sup> My particular thanks in this respect go to members of the Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik of the Technische Universität Chemnitz.

late Latin *companio* from *cum* (with) and *panis* (bread), thus *bread-sharer* (cf. Wahrig-Burfeind 2008: 903 and the television series *Bill Bo und seine Kumpane*: torrentpump 1968), almost completely filled the lexical field of ‘mate’, which however has quite an extensive range of roughly synonymous expressions (see Table 2 below).

Corpus searching for vocative lexical forms in German by taking the first nominal in a sentence followed by a comma, nominals preceded and followed by a comma, and nominals preceded by a comma and followed by a full stop proved a fruitless and practically infinite exercise, as such items are entirely heterogeneous and I encountered no corpus tagged for vocative nominals. Extensive searching the Web for ‘forms of address in German’, ‘*Anredeform/el*’ and a multitude of similar heads yielded little but the information that German has a *t/v* system of second person address, hardly a revelation, but did throw up some terms of endearment in German, with English translation equivalences:

Table 1 (adapted from <http://german.about.com/library/bliebe2.htm>; 4.10.2010)

| A German-English Sweetheart Phrasebook  |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| Literal English Translations            |                        |
| * = translated form not used in English |                        |
| % = restricted use in English           |                        |
| Deutsch                                 | English                |
| Bärchen                                 | little bear*           |
| Biene                                   | bee*                   |
| Engel                                   | angel                  |
| Gummibärchen                            | Gummy Bear (!!!!)*     |
| Hasi                                    | bunny?                 |
| Honigbienenchen                         | little honey-bee*      |
| Knuddel                                 | cuddles                |
| Kuschelbär                              | cuddle/huggy bear*     |
| Liebling                                | beloved, darling, love |
| Mausi                                   | little mouse*          |
| Prinzessin                              | princess <sup>7</sup>  |

<sup>7</sup> This expression appears to have particular resonance in East London and Estuary English.

|                    |                            |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Schatz             | treasure                   |
| Schatzi/Schätzchen | little treasure*           |
| Schneckchen        | little snail*              |
| Schnuckelchen      | cutie (pie), little cutie% |
| Schnuckiputzi      | cutey-pie                  |
| Spatzi             | little sparrow*            |
| Süße/Süßer         | sweetie(-pie) (fem./masc.) |
| Tiger              | tiger                      |
| Zaubermaus         | enchanted/magic mouse*     |

These terms are really only (often terminally embarrassing) terms of intimate affection, and can only be used as such when sincerely meant, not used casually in the way *darling*, *honey*, *sweetheart*, *sweetie*, etc. can be used in English. Casual use of such terms is regarded as cavalier, patronising and highly insulting.

The following table, admittedly fairly arbitrarily compiled and undoubtedly incomplete, lists terms which may be used in a similar casual, phatic manner to *love* and *mate*, whilst undoubtedly having different semantic and pragmatic overtones, particularly with respect to commitment, sincerity and level of intimacy.

Table 2: English terms of casual address

| <b>Form</b> | <b>Comment</b> (R* = regional use, with resultant high frequency in areas in question.)  |
|-------------|--|
| Babe(s)     | Affectionate, AE influence? More female to male than vice versa? Seems more prevalent in Cockney, Estuary usage.   |
| Baby        | Affectionate, AE influence? Amorous situations, esp. pop songs!  |
| Bonny lad   | R*: Geordie Male/female to male  |
| Bonny lass  | R*: Geordie Male/female to female  |
| Buggerlugs  | R*: Midland/ Mid-northern (Scouse, Mancunian, mid-Yorkshire?). Jocular, fairly low frequency. Symmetrically usable, but predominantly male/female to male. |
| Chuck       | R*: Mid-northern (Scouse, Mancunian, mid-Yorkshire). Symmetrically used.   |
| Chum        | Generic, possibly minatory. Medium frequency. Predominantly male to male   |
| Colleague   | Formal, professional, academic, legal . Low frequency, usually premodified by <i>my dear/ learned</i> . Symmetrical use,                                   |

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Comrade            | Military, communist connotations. Restricted use, usually male to male   |
| Cunt               | R*: Caernarfon (see Crystal 2008:28). Male to male. Extremely low frequency, obscene elsewhere   |
| Darling            | Affectionate. Male to female, female to male. Frequent, both casually and committedly, sometimes affected/camp (in thespian environment) |
| Dear               | Affectionate, semi-archaic? Symmetrically used, older generation   |
| Duck(s)            | R*: Midlands/Northern. Symmetrical use.  |
| Duckie             | Implies addressee is homosexual Usually male to male.  |
| Dwarling           | Parody of affected thespian use. Restricted use.   |
| Friend             | Affectionate, but can be minatory when not premodified by <i>my dear/old</i> . More male to male than otherwise                          |
| Hen                | R* Geordie/Scottish. Male/female to female   |
| Hinny              | R* Geordie/Scottish Male/female to female  |
| Hon(ey)            | Affectionate, AE influence medium frequency, symmetrical use   |
| Jimmy              | R* Glaswegian. Male to male, unacquainted addressee  |
| John               | R* Glaswegian/London. Male to male, unacquainted addressee.  |
| Kid                | Affectionate; younger addressee – or sibling.  |
| La                 | R*: Scouse. Male to male.  |
| Lad                | R*: Northern Male or female to male.   |
| Love/lovey/        | Affectionate. Not male to male, otherwise freely used.   |
| Luvvie             | Symmetrically used, also male to male, female to female. Affected, thespian context.   |
| Marra              | R*: Geordie/Macca (Sunderland). Male to male.  |
| Mate/matey         | Generic. Very frequent, usually male to male.  |
| Old chap/man       | Affectionate, upper and upper middle-class. Male to male.  |
| Our/Ar Kid         | R*: Mancunian/Scouse/Midlands. Affectionate; younger addressee – or sibling.   |
| Pal                | Generic, possibly minatory Medium frequency. More male to male, but not exclusively.   |
| Pet                | R*: Northern, esp. Geordie. Symmetrically used.  |
| Sweetheart/sweetie | Affectionate + affected/camp. Symmetrically used.  |
| Treasure/[tʃrɛɜ]   | Affectionate, camp? Fairly infrequent, Symmetrically used.   |

As the comments indicate, a number of factors are at work influencing what vocative form is used: for instance gender symmetry/asymmetry in use; geographical provenance; relative age; class; presumed intimacy; irony; threat; insult.

Taking some neutral, uncoloured pro-form as base we may identify first of all terms which initially presume no particular animus or affection other than possibly bonhomie we have generic forms: *chum*, *love*, *mate/matey*, *pal*. With the exception of *love*, which is generally not used male-to-male, nor in a minatory sense, these may be used

symmetrically between the sexes, though *mate*, *chum* and *pal* tend to be used mainly male-to-male and may be used in a minatory manner:

3) Now listen here, *chum/pal/mate*, just keep your eyes and hands off my bird.

We note also that *friend*, when not preceded by an adjective, tends to be used in a similar manner.

If there is an affectionate overlay and/or a family connection we find *darling*, *sweetheart/sweetie*, *love/lovey*, although these may be used symmetrically and generically across the gender divide, e.g. across a bar, with a barman or barmaid addressing a male or female customer as *love*, etc., and *vice versa*. The terms *duckie* and *luvvie* tend – at least in popular perception – to be used in an affected theatrical, possibly parodistic context, with camp overtones, *duckie* also attributing homosexuality to the usually male addressee, as to some extent does *treasure* [t(ʃ)rɛɜ]. *Old chap/old man* tend nowadays to be regarded as upper and upper middle-class, even archaic and by definition may only occur in male-male exchanges; (*my (dear) friend* (but see above); *babe(s)*, *baby*, *hon(ey)*; (*my*) *dear* (grandparental / avuncular), *our/ar kid* (younger related addressee).

This is not to say there are not lexical equivalents for such terms in German, as Table 3, which makes no claim to be comprehensive, indicates: what varies are the frequency and circumstances of their use.

Table 3: Nominal address forms in German.

| German     | Comment   |
|------------|---|
| Alter      | Amongst friends and family, youth slang?                          |
| Altes Haus | Amongst friends   |
| Bua        | R Austro-Bavarian (cf. also Eng. )                                |
| Bub(e)     | R Age Exclusive to young boys? I'd say so, also with Bua above    |
| Freund     | Ironic/ admonitory/ minatory                                      |
| Genosse    | GDR/ socialist/ communist   |
| Jüngchen   | Idiosyncratic? ( <i>Der Vorleser</i> , Schlink 1997)              |
| Junge      | Exclusive to young boys, exclamations                             |
| Jungs      | Used in plural? (cf. <i>lads?</i> )                               |
| Kamerad    | R GDR/ socialist/ communist. Archaic?                             |
| Kollege/in | Professional. <sup>8</sup> Usually prefaced by <i>Herr/Frau</i> . |

<sup>8</sup> Melani Schröter points out that *Ey, Kollege* features in youth slang.

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Kumpel       | R Ruhrgebiet / mining community                    |
| Mensch       | Usually in exclamation, remonstrance/expostulation |
| Sportsfreund | Jocular  |

It will have been noted that Tables 2 and 3 both contain regional and professional terms of greeting: however the point still remains that their use in German is more limited than in English, and is almost exclusively limited to male addressees.

German's inventory of pronominal address, with grammatical forms expressing number, intimacy, authority and solidarity much more extended than that of English, is an initially attractive explanation for the distribution and apparent relative paucity of informal terms of address in German. Sadly, however, it doesn't work like that, though to use *du* / *dich* / *ihr* / *euch* as the informal and *Sie* as the formal paradigm is still the best rough and ready pedagogic strategy for teaching purposes (see Stevenson 1997: 132-141, who points out whole areas of doubtful applicability). The intensive study of the historical development of these forms as typified in Besch (1998), Simon (2003) and Besch & Wolf (2010) shows that what looks like a neatly-ordered system is more the result of historical happenstance rather than design, and Löffler (2010: 166) almost washes his hands of the matter:

Neue gesprächslinguistisch relevante Grammatikkategorien wie Gruß, Anrede, Duzen, Siezen [...] haben sich als nahezu grammatikalisiert erwiesen, und das jeweils einzelsprachlich.

Yet the social importance of using the correct pronominal form in German and thus establishing the mutual status of discourse participants is paramount, as the formality and practical irrevocability of offering the use of the *du* form as typified in the ritual of *Brüderschaft trinken* highlights, and quite clearly the apparently neat patterns of *du* and *Sie* use are not as symmetrical as it might seem. The withdrawal of *du*-status is highly insulting, indicating the deliberate dismantling of a social relationship and its arrogation, either in innocence or by intent, apparently can be a cause of irritation and worse, indicating an unwarranted intrusion into personal space or intimacy. Besch (1998) points out that there are oscillations in the popularity of the two paradigms of pronominal address. In recent years it would appear that younger people, in their teens and twenties, have been demonstrating a tendency to prefer the more formal *Sie* – perhaps a reaction to the egalitarianism of the late 1960s, but this seems rather a glib explanation.



Setting up a simple rule has German expressing respect and acceptance of authority primarily through the *Sie* form and intimacy, equality and solidarity through the *du* form, although the Austrian *Offiziers-Du* seems to counteract this rule as it observes both the barriers of respect, equality and solidarity, while the initial *Sie* used by professionals in, say, the commercial and academic worlds may over time be converted to the *du* solidarity or intimacy. The *du* of the GDR, a self-professed democratic state, created some embarrassment: in a land of equals, some were palpably more equal than others, and it would appear that the personal disparity between equals was accounted to by the use of *du* and titles denotative of political hierarchy and/or social/party function. However the middle, phatic, ground seems to be to some extent ignored. *Du* is canonical, and the appellation by title is an indication of hierarchical socio-political distinction, not sociability.

It is a commonplace that the people one can be most insulting to are one's friends, equals and intimates, the insults, however, being regarded as tokens of friendship rather than insults, as long as the insulting term in general does not break the bounds of the morally acceptable, although this is a moving target: in Löffler's words "jeweils einzelsprachlich", the bounds of what constitutes a language community being elastically defined.

The use of a (possibly obscene) insulting term or without a vocative seems to rob the insult of jocularly, and indicate a degree of separation in English: German has the distancing form *Sie* and it is generally felt that its absence indicates withdrawal of respect. The use of *du* plus an insulting expression to an unacquainted addressee of inferior status, e.g. *Du Arsch/ Du Affe/ Du Blödmann* might be seen to be going further still, the conventions of insult and intimacy being diametrically inverted, but it does indicate some kind of drawing together in a relationship, albeit an adversarial one in this case. Arguably this might mirror addressing children and God as *Du*: clearly, however, an overarching explanatory principle has yet to be identified.

It should not be assumed from the foregoing that English informal address forms and the German *du/Sie* distinction are two equivalent sides of the same coin. English, with its one vocative pronoun, lacks a morphosyntactic system for distancing and systematically allocating and recognising mutual status. The polite use of *Sie* between participants is expected in everyday discourse, unless a particular convention applies, e.g. *Offiziers-Du* or the use of *du* within the student community, where the use of *Sie*

would be construed as unfriendly or at best odd. To address a child as *Sie* is considered equally deviant: but the point at which the change to *Sie* is indicated is not always immediately obvious. The arrogation of *du* where *Sie* would to be expected, say between a student and a professor, is a serious *faux pas*, indicating an assumed commonality of status or its use to someone of greater age or rank, apparently signalling an assumption of intimacy, but one which is frequently perpetrated by British students, and has to be strenuously combated by the teacher of German, initially using the simplified algorithm sketched above until social antennae and the recognition of sociolinguistic conventions are sufficiently honed. Learners of German, having carefully learned morphological paradigms, are quite shocked to realise that their use is not a purely syntactic matter. They are being taught to use everyday language, and the conditions applying in their mother tongue are not the same. To assume that the use of casual English phatic forms of informal everyday discourse is a reflex of *du/Sie* is to make a serious error: for one thing there is very little terminological equivalence, as indicated above, and conditions of use are quite different. Generally the use of nominal vocative terms of address in German demands that the conditions of use implied by their semantics be sincerely invoked, which is hardly the case with many of the multifarious terms English has at its disposal.

Interestingly terms of friendship and acquaintance rather than phatic recognition in German also need clarifying definition: the word *friend* may be used freely in English to convey various levels of intimacy and acquaintance, but the use of *Freund/ Freundin* has quite definite implications and requires care. I can quite cheerfully say of (I hope) my future daughter-in-law

4) Lucy is my friend

without implying that we are involved in some dubious relationship. However, were I to say of our *Lektorin*

5) Susi ist meine Freundin

eyebrows would most certainly be raised, so that the solution to providing a morally unimpeachable statement would be

6) Susi ist eine Freundin von mir

without implying promiscuity on my (or her) part.

Friendship is clearly demarcated from acquaintanceship in both languages: although *acquaintance* perhaps enjoys more freedom of non-committal use in English than German *Bekannte(r)*.

7) ?Lucy is my acquaintance

and

8) ?Susi ist meine Bekannte

both have an uneasy ring, the two languages preferring a non-committal form:

9) Lucy is an acquaintance of mine

and

10) Susi ist eine Bekannte von mir

Friendship is clearly a more semantically and pragmatically marked term in German, and we find the term *Friend* has been unapologetically imported into the new, increasingly electronic, world of *Szenesprachen* as *frienden*, not *be-* or *anfreunden*:<sup>9</sup>

Das Prinzip sozialer Netzwerke ist – richtig –: das Vernetzen. Da das Wort aber wie verbekanntschaften etwas unpersönlich klingt, sagt man einfach *frienden*. Für unsere User gilt mittlerweile die Regel: Wer viele Freunde hat, hat viel Ansehen. (Duden 2009:17)

Conversely, we find *entfreunden* and *defrienden* in the same source:

Auch im realen Leben werden Freundschaften aufgekündigt, aber in der anonymen Netzwelt fällt das Entfreunden oder DEFRIENDEN um einiges leichter. Der Begriff drückt in seiner Sachlichkeit bereits die bei dem Vorgang herrschende Distanz aus, der mit wenigen Mausklicks offiziell abgeschlossen ist, ohne dass große Aussprachen oder Streit nötig sind. (Duden 2009:15)

*Ansehen* and *Distanz* are factors which have come into the discussion before, and they seem to exert considerable influence in the themes at issue here. In another source we find the concept of *abkumpeln* surprisingly in the sense of *pair off* or *mate up with* rather than *dump* or *entfrienden*:

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<sup>9</sup> This concept of *friend* is rather different from and much looser than the traditional one. Even in an age of apparently increasing informality, there is little idea of mutual affection or relationship as expressed even in, say, the not necessarily heartfelt *Brieffreund*, or *pen pal* relationship. *Friends* in this context appear to be rather more objects to acquire. Having for example a longer list of friends on *Facebook* would appear to be a matter of social prestige rather than an indication of popularity.

Mit jemandem abzukumpeln bedeutet mit einer Person, mit der man eigentlich nicht befreundet ist „abzuhängen“. Abkumpeln wird anscheinend auch oft auf Myspace für das befreundeten mit im realen Leben unbekannt Personen benutzt. (<http://szenesprachenwiki.de/words/verzeichnis/?c=8>; 4.10. 2010)

So through a roundabout route we have identified the concepts of *Distanz* and *Ansehen*, *intimacy*, *authority*, *respect* and *solidarity* and come back to *Kumpel* as our best candidate for a term for *mate*, but generally without its casual, even superficial phatic inclusivity. Terms of address in German, when used canonically, expect more commitment and sincerity, though this does not imply that they cannot be sincerely ‘meant’ in English.

Martin Hofmann, in translating Hans Fallada’s (1947) *Jeder stirbt für sich allein*, selects *mate* as a translational equivalent for *lieber Mann*:

- 11a) Von meiner Familie reden Sie lieber nicht, lieber Mann! Ich habe heute die Nachricht erhalten, dass mir mein Sohn gefallen ist. (Fallada 1947/68: 41)
- 11b) Listen, mate, don’t talk to me about my family today. I’ve just had news that my son has fallen. (Fallada/Hofmann 2009: 51)
- 12a) Dass ich den Braunen mit «Lieber Mann» angeredet habe, das hat ihnen den Rest gegeben! (Fallada 1947/68: 42)
- 12b) When I called that Nazi ‘mate’ that did it for them! (Fallada/Hofmann 2009: 52)

What clearly irritated ‘that Nazi’ about the use of *lieber Mann* is its sardonic ironic disdain, not amiable phatic communion. *Lieb* is not sincerely meant, and *Mann* is a statement of the obvious.

This is perhaps in contrast to the use of *chum* to translate *Kumpel*, with its casual but inclusive assumption of equality and solidarity.

- 13a) Der kleine Enno Kluge<sup>10</sup> hat es viel schlechter getroffen als sein ‘Kumpel’, Emil Borkhausen, [...] (Fallada 1947/68: 68)
- 13b) Little Enno Kluge had a much worse time of it than his ‘chum’, Emil Borkhausen, [...] (Fallada/Hofmann 2009: 89)

Note that in both the German and English versions the term in question appears in scare quotes: a hint in itself?

<sup>10</sup> I find the use of the nominative here (where I would have expected the accusative) confusing – and ungrammatical. Hofmann clearly ignores it.

There is, as this short study has shown, much yet to be investigated in this area, especially in looking at more closely at regional exponents, and the concept of relative distance in German, plus the relevant sincerity conditions – but that's about it for now, love.

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**Keywords:** Casual address: contrast German-English: conditions of use: lexical gap: sincerity: intimacy: solidarity: distance