

## LONG WORDS IN GERMAN AND OTHER LANGUAGES

SOLOMON W. GOLOMB

Los Angeles, California

The German language routinely forms very long words by incorporating (sometimes) long adjectival phrases and the nouns they modify into a single word. And such words find their way into everyday use.

Here are some examples I encountered.

The second word in a story in my high school German class was "spatherbstnachmittage", with an umlaut over the first "a", decoding to "late autumn after-noon". A humorous story in my college German class, about a guy compulsively addicted to sharpening pencils, had the word "Bleistiftspitzmaschine", i.e. "pencil-point-machine" for "pencil sharpener"; and when he offered a policeman a few sharpened pencils, he was accused of the crime of a "Beamtenbestechungsversuch", an attempt ("versuch") of bribery ("bestechung") of an official ("Beamt").

Then, in reading math books in German, I encountered, in a book on Number Theory, "the Law of Quadratic Reciprocity", as the Quadratische Reziprozitatsgesets (with an umlaut over the "a" in the second word).

Even so simple a concept as "consecutive numbers" was "nacheinanderfolgende Zahlen", where the word for "consecutive" decomposes as "after-one-another-following". I don't know why the noun Zahlen (numbers) wasn't incorporated into the same word!) Then, in the Introduction to a Lehrbuch (textbook) on Topologie (Topology), the authors explained that they would proceed "ohne Differenzierbarkeitsvoraussetzungen", i.e., "without assumptions of differentiability", using a 35-letter word.

Among other Germanic languages, only Danish seems to follow this German model, to a limited extent, with "Eftermiddagskaffe" (after-mid-day's-coffee) translating as "afternoon coffee"; but very rarely forming words of twenty or more letters. Even Norwegian, which is very similar to Danish in its written form, explicitly rejects this "German" model of forming words by running together adjectives. Thus, for "consecutive", Danish is content with "paahinandenfolgende" (on-one-another-following) whereas Norwegian uses "suksessive". (successive).

I've been told that there are extremely long place names in Wales, but I am unfamiliar with the Welsh language. The agglutinative Finno-Ugric and Ural-Altaic languages routinely form words by sticking pieces together. In Finnish, where even the numerals from 1 to 10 are all polysyllabic, and four of them have eight letters and three syllables each, a year number with four digits, when written out in words, leaves no spaces, and can have dozens of letters.

Words in general use in English rarely have more letters than the fifteen in "Americanization" or the fourteen in "beautification", and such examples as "antidisestablishmentarianism", or even "sesquipedalianism", generally occur only in articles about unusually long words.