

CHAPTER TEN

Phonetics and German Spelling

We have discussed the phonetics of the vowels and consonants of German. It is now time to try to relate this to the German alphabet. We have already established that the German alphabet does not reflect a one-to-one correspondence between sound and its representation, which is to say that the German alphabet is not phonetic. A given sound can be written in more than one way, and a given spelling may represent more than one sound. There are, however, a few simple rules of German spelling which are adhered to quite consistently and which give clues to the pronunciations of German words.

1. Double Consonants

German, like English, does not have phonetic double consonants. This means that the [t] in *Ritter* and the [t] in *Reiter* are pronounced exactly alike. The *-tt-* of *Ritter* does not indicate a “long” [tt] as it would in some languages like, for instance, Swedish and Italian. Since double consonants do not exist in German, the double consonant **spelling** is available to indicate other things. In German, a double consonant spelling indicates only one thing, and that is that the vowel which precedes the double consonant is **short**, or, to use the term introduced in the preceding chapter, **lax**. Double consonant spellings include *-ck-*, as in *dick*, *Decke*, *hacken*.

Double consonants can occur between vowels, e.g. *Ritter*, before consonants, e.g. *irrt*, and at the ends of words, e.g. *ritt*.

The fact that a double consonant indicates that the preceding vowel is short/lax does not mean, of course, that a short/lax vowel will always be indicated by a following double consonant. That is emphatically not the case, as words like *von* and *um* show.

However, the rule that a double consonant indicates a preceding lax vowel is without exception.

2. Single Consonants between Vowels

A single consonant between vowels when the first vowel is stressed indicates that the preceding vowel is long/tense. This, like the previous rule, is without exception. Thus the single intervocalic consonants of words like *leben*, *Leder*, *deren* and *jener* indicate that the vowels of the first syllables are long. If the preceding vowel is not stressed, it may or may not be tense, but as we have already seen, unstressed vowels are never phonetically long.

3. The Consonant -h- after a vowel

When written after a stressed vowel, -h- indicates that the vowel is **tense**, i.e. **long**. The -h- itself is not pronounced except in words of obvious onomatopoeic origin, e.g. *Uhu*, or in exclamations, e.g. *Aha! Oho!* Thus the words *gehen, sehen, sahen, blähen* all, predictably, have tense vowels, as do the words *früh, sah* and *Schuh*.

4. ß and ss

When to write *ss* and when to write *ß* is a mystery to many people, including many native speakers of German. The rule is actually very simple, although the way it is presented is usually very complicated, which leads to the difficulty. Let us examine a few words from the paradigm of *essen* "eat" with their phonetic transcriptions and attempt to establish the rule.

ich esse	[ʔɛsə]	ich aß	[ʔa:s]	gegessen	[gə'gɛsən]
du ißt	[ʔɪst]	du aßest	[ʔa:səst]		
wir essen	[ʔɛsən]	wir aßen	[ʔa:sən]		
ihr eßt	[ʔɛst]	ihr aßt	[ʔa:st]		
iß!	[ʔɪs]				

"Explanations" of when to write *ß* and when to write *ss* usually concentrate on *ß*. This is, after all, the strange symbol, so it is natural for people to want to know when to write it. Therefore the usual account concentrates on the three different environments in which one writes *ß* rather than on the **one** environment in which one writes *ss*.

Given what you have read above, it is clear that *ss* is a double consonant spelling, which means that the vowel preceding it must be short. Compare the vowel length of *esse, essen, gegessen*, all with *ss*. Both *ss* and *ß* indicate phonetic [s]. (The reason that it was necessary to introduce another symbol into the alphabet for [s] is that a single -s- between vowels represents [z], not [s].) Since *ß* is a single consonant in the spelling system, *ß* between vowels should represent a preceding long vowel, compare the vowel length in *aßest* and *aßen*. Thus far *ss* and *ß* are in accord with the rules given in 1. and 2. above.

The rule is that *ss* is written only between vowels, and only then when the first vowel is short/lax. In all other situations *ß* is used.

Therefore the singular noun is *Fluß* (not between vowels), but the plural is *Flüsse* (between vowels and the first vowel is short); *Fuß*, on the other hand, has the plural *Füße* because the preceding vowel is long. The symbol *ß* is ambiguous when it is not between vowels, because only when it is between vowels does it specify the length of the preceding vowel. Thus *iß, ißt* with short vowel, *aß, aßt* with long. *ss*, on the other hand, is never ambiguous. It is used only between vowels, and only if the vowel which precedes it is short. The simplest thing, then, is to define where *ss* is used. Then we can say that *ß* is used elsewhere.

4.1 Update

At the time of the original writing of this book, the situation described in the previous section was true. However, the German-speaking countries are now in the process of carrying out a spelling reform which affects, among other things, the distribution of *ss* and *ß*. The new rule is simpler and accords with the rest of the German spelling system. Now the rule is that *ss* is written after a short

vowel, regardless of what, if anything, follows. Therefore, what used to be written *daß* is now written *dass*, and what was written *Fluß* is now written *Fluss*. *Fuß*, on the other hand, is still written *Fuß*, since the vowel is long. The paradigm of *essen* presented above now looks like this:

ich esse	ich aß	gegessen
du isst	du aßest	
wir essen	wir aßen	
ihr esst	ihr aßt	
iss!		

The new spelling now makes it clear that the vowels in the present tense and in the past participle are all short and that the vowel of the plural is long. If we take *ß* as the single letter and *ss* as its doubled form, words containing these now are treated exactly as was described above in sections 1 and 2. Now we are in the position of being able to look at a word containing *ss* or *ß* and of knowing without actually hearing the word whether the vowel is long or not.

It should be mentioned, however, that not everything ever written in German is going to be reprinted using the new spellings. We will therefore still come across old spellings like *daß*, *muß*, *Fluß*, *ißt* etc. But anything printed in 1999 or later should have the new spellings.

5. Double vowels

Double vowels are pronounced like one long single vowel, e.g. *Staat*, *Saal*, *Boot*, *Spree*. *ie* for the most part counts as a double vowel, e.g. *bieten*, *wie*. If, however, the *e* is the first part of an inflectional ending, then *ie* does not count as a double vowel, e.g. *Schier* ['ʃi:ə] "skis". This is also the case if *ee* is similarly split, e.g. *Feen* ['fe:ən] "fairies".

6. Problems

Most problems in correlating German spelling with pronunciation arise as a result of:

- a) a single consonant sound written with a combination of letters, e.g. "ch" used for [ç] and [x], "sch" used for [ʃ], "th" used for [t]. These combinations are never doubled. It is therefore not possible to predict the pronunciation of words like *doch* and *hoch* from the spelling. *doch* is [dɔx] with lax [ɔ], but *hoch* is [ho:x] with tense [o:]. Similar pairs are *rasch* ['raʃ] and *drasch* (archaic past tense of *dreschen*) ['dra:ʃ], *Luther* ['lʊtə] with short [ʊ], *Mather* ['ma:tə] with long [a:].
- b) the occasional consonant cluster which occurs after a long vowel, e.g. *Obst* with [o:]. Normally (but obviously not always) a consonant cluster following a vowel indicates a short vowel.
- c) a single consonant in word final position. This tells us nothing about vowel length. Examples: *von* (short), *den* (long), *des* (short), *las* (long), *ab* (short), *Grab* (long).