

thinkpurpose

A systems thinker in a normal organisation. Or why Vanguard, Deming & systems thinking is bad for you



4 German words we should all use

The Germans have a language that seems a bit like Lego. You can stick lots of little bits together to make a new one that has never existed before. This way they can make all sorts of useful new words from ones they already have lying around.

Here are 4 real German words that should make their way into common usage due to all round *Airpiknesch*. (literally “epic-ness”, the state of being or achieving epic. Not to be confused with *Orschtumn*)

Verschlimmbesserung

(pronounced “*versh-lim-BESS-air-oong*”)

A supposed improvement that makes things worse.

If any word should be in everyday English use, it is this.

We don’t have a word like this, a neat mental category with a label just waiting to be used to describe a huge amount of work activity. Activity that purports to improve *but does the exact opposite*.

Imagine how useful it would be to say in five harsh guttural syllables what would otherwise sound like an articulation of pessimistic defeatism. The sheer fact the word exists is an acknowledgement that it describes things that *do* exist.

We can actually improve the quality of life for ourselves and future generations by introducing this word into common usage, especially amongst planners, designers, bureaucrats and policy makers. Our lives will be better when more people have the presence of mind to say, “Wait a minute! Let’s reconsider this issue. It’s clear that we are planning a Verschlimmbesserung, not an improvement.” [\[link\]](#)

Fachidiot

(pronounced “*fack-ID-yot*”)

An extreme specialist who only knows about their field, and doesn’t know or care about what happens around them

Onomatopoeia is a wonderful thing.

Not only is it virtually unspellable but it allows English-speaking readers of this blog to quickly grasp the meaning of Fachidiot. It sounds like what it is, but the actual literal translation is “*subject idiot*“. It is someone who knows a lot about a particular field, in a similar way to a one-track specialist. But they are an idiot because a one-track specialist still notices what is going on around him. A Fachidiot simply doesn't.

“...the exact opposite of a systems thinker, a person who divorces the context and consequences from individual actions.[...] so concentrated on the means they don't even notice the ends”

[\[link\]](#)

Fingerspitzengefühl

(pronounced “FINger-spitsen-GERful”)

Literally, “finger tip feeling”.

The ability to think clearly about many individual complex events and treat them as a whole. To have an understanding of something on multiple levels and how they all mesh. *Isn't this a bit like systems thinking?* It's a lovely Christmassy sounding word to say out loud, and describes an ability that you'd want to find wrapped up under the Christmas tree for you.

Who wouldn't want...

“a great situational awareness, and the ability to respond most appropriately and tactfully”

Thanks Santa!

Auftragstaktik

(pronounced “OUF-strag-TAK-tik)

Literally “Mission tactics”.

But it *doesn't* mean that. It means Think Purpose!

Contradicting the stereotypes, for at least a century the German army gave huge amounts of discretion to it's soldiers to do what was needed to achieve purpose. They weren't automatons who blindly followed orders. Instead they were given the “Commander's Intent” and the freedom to decide how to execute it.

“when the Germans attacked France Colonel Kurt Zeitzler told the assembled subordinated commanders, “Gentlemen, I demand that your divisions completely cross the German borders, completely cross the Belgian borders and completely cross the River Meuse. I don't care how you do it, that's completely up to you.”

In comparison...

“The instructions for the American Forces to land in North Africa had the size of a Sears Roebuck shopping catalogue.”

Commander's Intent gives up central control in place of local decision making by troops who were able and responsible to make their own decisions on the method of achieving the Commander's Intent. This was because it worked, and the opposite of it, command and control of method, didn't work.

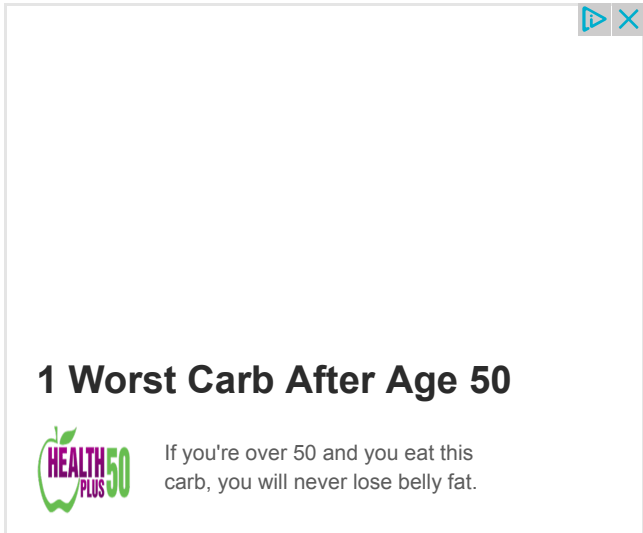
So next week at work don't be a Fachidiot, use some Fingerspitzengefühl and whatever you do avoid creating a Verschlimmbesserung.

ATTENTION VISITORS!

This page was written 3 years ago, and i forgot all about it, now 8th october 2016, theres LOADS of visitors, seemingly from google. Im being deluged. Could you please pop a note in the comments saying WHY you came here. What were your search terms? Or were you forwarded from somewhere else? I think it was google though.

MANY THANKS!

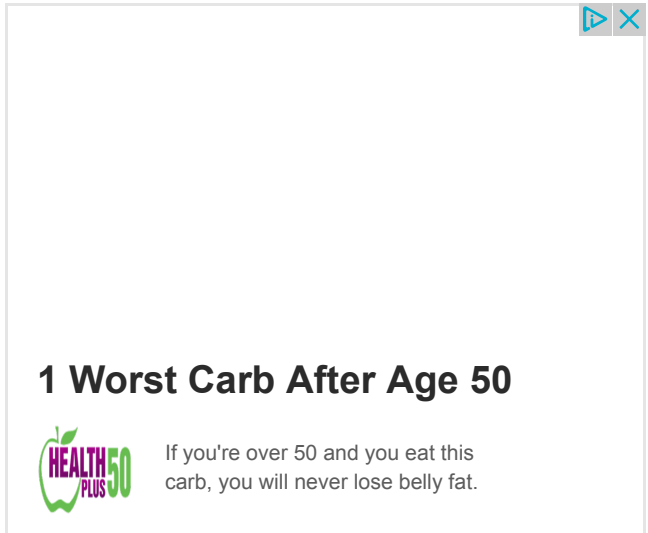
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Sascha on [August 28, 2013 at 9:51 pm](#)

How about “Strumpfhalter”. And if it’s only for the joy of hearing people mis-pronouncing it.

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Alan Stanton on [October 9, 2013 at 9:25 am](#)

Excellent advice in the final paragraph.
Except that the people I know who most need the advice are the very last to realise it. “Very amusing”, they’ll say. Or perhaps, with another patronising smile: “Very erudite”. Adding: “But of course, we are already doing exactly this”.

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ThinkPurpose on [October 9, 2013 at 8:55 pm](#)

I've found this too. Lessons sourced from reality become merely amusing anecdotes, depending on who the listener is

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Alan Stanton on [October 10, 2013 at 1:48 pm](#)

"Lessons sourced from reality" – a stylish way to put it. So possibly one of my mistakes has been a fondness for fictional examples.

One is Wil.E.Coyote after he runs off the cliff top for the umpteenth time. His legs blur as he cycles in mid air getting nowhere. But he doesn't fall. Not unless and until he looks down and realises the "lesson sourced from reality".

Gregor Samsa is a bit the same. Metamorphosed into a giant insect he desperately ignores the reality of his new body and simply wants to get back on the hamster wheel at his workplace – and please his boss.

Maybe they're both caricature fachidioten?

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Pingback: [Die Kommunikation komplexer Themen](#)



Lewis W on [October 10, 2016 at 7:46 pm](#)

Hey Thinkpurpose, I believe the reason so many people are visiting the blog is because of this video that was uploaded on the 8th: youtu.be/WNNAYQhn3Dk?t=1m46s

The youtuber in the video is playing a 'True or False' fact game, and a fact regarding "Verschlimmbesserung" showed up. I think people wanted to find out more about this word and check the legitimacy of the word. Hope this helped 😊

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ThinkPurpose on [October 10, 2016 at 8:12 pm](#)

That's fantastic, thanks. Just checked and I'm number TWO on Google for that word! Which is the word that best describes my ENTIRE blog, result!

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Jeffrey Daversa on [November 1, 2016 at 6:04 pm](#)

Yes, I was searching for verschlimmbesserung as well. I saw it in the Urban Dictionary and wanted to

find a more reliable source.

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ThinkPurpose on November 1, 2016 at 6:07 pm

Cripes, I'm RELIABLE?! thanks for the note anyway.

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Girl on November 4, 2016 at 5:06 am

Had a German government teacher who taught us about fachidiots 7. got a memory of it today on fb.

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ThinkPurpose on November 4, 2016 at 6:46 am

Brill, thanks for the comment

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Jane Bowden on November 6, 2016 at 7:36 am

Listening to BBC World Service "Weekend" this morning, 6/11/16 about 7.10a.m. London UK time, and an American visitor to the prog mentioned German compound words/expressions so good at describing something. Talking about Syria crisis. He couldn't remember word – too early in the morning – but described. Quickly looked up on Internet. Came to your blog as he clearly meant Verschlimmbesserung. I think the chap must have been reading your blog ...

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ThinkPurpose on November 6, 2016 at 7:40 am

That's fantastic, thank you very much for the detail.

This is very weird. I spent a year at high school bemused in German classes until i could thankfully drop them AND NOW LOOK WHAT'S HAPPENING.

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Chris greaves on [November 17, 2016 at 4:01 pm](#)

<http://www.eileenslounge.com/viewtopic.php?f=44&t=25187>

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Pingback: [We're number 2! We're number 2! Yay us! Now who's US exactly? | thinkpurpose](#)



Gijs on [December 16, 2016 at 1:10 pm](#)

there's a meme going around on FB about Verschlimmbesserung 🤔 You're site ranks high on a google search for it, that's how I ended here anyways 😊

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mr. daylight on [March 7, 2017 at 7:16 pm](#)

stumbled here searching for more context behind the meaning of verschlimmbesserung, but i'm impressed by the other words on your list as well #knowledge #likeminded

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ThinkPurpose on [March 8, 2017 at 9:13 am](#)

German words are epic

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Mike Haber on [March 8, 2017 at 9:12 am](#)

The yiddish work "farpotshket," means something that was a little bit broken, you had a go at fixing it's now a complete mess. It's totally farpotshket 😊

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ThinkPurpose on [March 8, 2017 at 9:14 am](#)

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