

German politeness phrases English doesn't have

— HÖFLICHKEITSFORMELN

Höflichkeitsformeln are German politeness phrases: some moments have a fixed phrase (Mein Beileid, Gute Besserung), others have none, and what you say there is a specific compliment, or nothing at all.

Some languages make these phrases **obligatory** — leave them out and you seem cold. German doesn't. So many of them have no German equivalent, and *saying nothing* is not rude.

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01 00:10

The problem isn't vocabulary, it's obligation

SHORTCUT ⚡ In some languages you **must** say these phrases; in German they are **optional**. Most of the phrases you can't find in German are missing because a German simply says nothing at that moment.

Everyone who has spent a year in Germany trips at the same spot: a colleague's mother dies, the neighbour is busy on a DIY job, a friend has cooked dinner — your mouth opens and **nothing comes out**. It's not that you lack the words. Some languages have a ready-made phrase that fills that gap; German doesn't.

Some languages are **relationship languages**: every situation has its own formula, and leaving it out counts as a gap. German is closer to an **information language**: if there is nothing new to say, people stay quiet. So half of the phrases you try to translate aren't in the system — you are not the one missing something.

✗ ~~Dein Kopf soll gesund sein.~~

A word-for-word translation of “may your head be well”, a condolence formula in some languages. To a German it means nothing at all — why would your head be sick?

✓ **Mein herzliches Beileid.**

My heartfelt condolences. → the one correct equivalent, and it is really used.

- ① The rule of this page: first learn the **six phrases that do have an equivalent** (easy, each is one sentence). Then learn what to do when there is none — that is the real issue.

02 01:20

Six phrases that DO exist — learn them and you're done

These six are easy: each has a German sentence that fits the moment exactly. Memorise them and use them as they are.

SITUATION	GERMAN	EXACTLY WHEN
Condolences after a death	Mein Beileid . - Mein herzliches Beileid .	On hearing of a death . In writing or formal settings : Mein aufrichtiges Beileid .
Get well (to someone ill)	Gute Besserung!	ONLY for illness or surgery . Not for an accident or a bad event .
Before a meal	Guten Appetit!	Before anyone picks up a fork . The reply : Danke , gleichfalls .
Welcoming a guest	Herzlich willkommen!	At the door , to a guest . The same in a formal setting .
After a sneeze	Gesundheit!	A reflex , said right away , just like "bless you" .
Toasting	Prost! - Zum Wohl!	Prost for beer and casual drinks , Zum Wohl for wine or formal occasions . When you clink glasses , eye contact is a must .



TRAP 01

"Gute Besserung" is not every "hope it gets better"

In English you might say "I hope you're OK" to someone who had a car accident or a burglary. In German, **Gute Besserung** is only said to **a body that will heal**.

✗ ~~Gute Besserung!~~

To someone whose car was damaged in an accident → the man isn't ill.

✓ **Das tut mir leid.**

I'm sorry to hear that. → the right reply to a bad event.

Even more natural: **Zum Glück ist nichts Schlimmeres passiert.** — "Luckily nothing worse happened."

03 03:10

Seven moments with NO German phrase — this is the real issue

For these there is **no** German equivalent. Stop looking. You have two options: say the closest functional sentence, or — often the right answer — say nothing.

MOMENT	CLOSEST THING	WHAT A GERMAN ACTUALLY DOES
Wishing an easy time to someone who is working	Viel Erfolg! · Frohes Schaffen!	To an acquaintance who is working you can say Frohes Schaffen , but it is a little jokey. To a worker you don't know, you say nothing — walking past is not rude.
Thanking the cook	Das hat richtig gut geschmeckt.	There is no phrase, there is praise . Be specific: Die Suppe war fantastisch . To a German this is worth more.
Praising someone's work	Das hast du super gemacht.	Same logic: praise the work, not a formula.
"Enjoy it" for a new possession	Viel Freude damit! · Viel Spaß damit!	Used when you hand over a gift, but it isn't obligatory.
Wishing luck on something new	Herzlichen Glückwunsch!	New home: Alles Gute im neuen Zuhause! · New job: Viel Erfolg im neuen Job! It depends on the case; there is no single phrase.
Replying to a welcome	—	No equivalent. Danke! is enough, and nothing is missing.
Wishing health after a shower or haircut	—	None. Germans say nothing to someone who just stepped out of the shower or the barber's.

- ① The real lesson here: staying silent because you can't find an equivalent is **not a gap in German, it is the rule**. A speaker used to fixed formulas may read silence as coldness; a German ear finds an unnecessary formula affected.

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04 05:30

Word-for-word disasters

The sentence is grammatically flawless, nobody corrects you — they just look at you oddly. The four most common:

× ~~Gesundheit zu deiner Hand.~~

A word-for-word “health to your hand”, meant as thanks to the cook. A German who hears this thinks something is wrong with your hand.

× ~~Es soll leicht kommen.~~

A word-for-word “may it come easy”, meant as good luck at work. There is no such phrase in German; the sentence hangs in the air.

× ~~Gute Besserung!~~ (to a friend whose car was hit)

He isn't ill, his car is damaged. Correct: **Das tut mir leid.**

× ~~Guten Appetit!~~ (after the meal is over)

Guten Appetit only comes BEFORE the meal. For afterwards there is no phrase — there is praise.



TRAP 02

“Mahlzeit” does not mean “enjoy your meal”

The **Mahlzeit!** you hear in an office corridor around noon is actually a **greeting** — it means “hello, it’s lunchtime”. Say it over dinner and it sounds odd.

✓ **Mahlzeit!**

In the corridor at noon, to a colleague. → a greeting.

✓ **Guten Appetit!**

At the table, to someone sitting down to eat. → enjoy your meal.

05 06:40

Keep it in your pocket — one frame

One last freebie: to someone about to sit an exam or go on stage, Germans say **Toi, toi, toi!**, often knocking on wood as well. It is a **good-luck wish**, much like “break a leg”. It goes back to an old superstition: people spat three times to keep bad luck and envy away, and “toi” is said to imitate the sound. The gaps aren’t one-way, either — German has phrases English lacks, too.

TIPS

Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

Six phrases have an equivalent — just memorise them

Condolences, sneezing, enjoy your meal, good luck, get well, welcome: for these the German phrase fits the moment exactly. Say them the way you hear them.

Mein herzliches Beileid. ·
Gesundheit! · Ich drücke dir
die Daumen!

02

Seven moments have NO phrase — don’t translate, say what the moment calls for

Thanking the cook, wishing a worker an easy time, answering a welcome, “enjoy it” for a gift: German has no set phrase for these. A German says what they actually feel: the food was good, have a good day at work, thanks, enjoy.

Das hat richtig gut
geschmeckt. · Frohes
Schaffen! · Viel
Freude damit!

03

The same idea needs two different phrases

A single “get well” phrase may cover death and accidents in some languages; German separates them. Death → **Beileid**, accident/illness → **Das tut mir leid** or **Gute Besserung**.

Zum Glück ist nichts
Schlimmeres passiert.

✗ ~~Gesundheit für deine Hände!~~

✓ Das hat richtig gut geschmeckt.

Translated word for word, “health to your hand” is not a German wish, just a meaningless sentence. Praise the meal, not the hand.

✗ ~~Möge es leicht kommen!~~

✓ Frohes Schaffen!

There is no German for “may it come easy”; to someone working you say **Frohes Schaffen** or **Viel Erfolg**.

✗ ~~Mahlzeit! → thinking it means “enjoy your meal” and waiting for food~~

✓ Mahlzeit! = the midday greeting; you answer with “Mahlzeit!” too

Said in the office corridor at noon, no table needed. You give it back like a hello.

06 07:40

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

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