



FOREIGN LANGUAGE LAB

## DID YOU KNOW?

### ARTICLES ABOUT THE LANGUAGES YOU STUDY

#### **Why are there three genders for singular in German? Why are plurals easier? Why must gender exist in the first place?**

Any student of German will quickly let you know how unfair, cruel, and mean it is to have to always keep more genders and articles in mind as they're learning their vocabulary and grammar. We know that gender is an essential part to German, but have you ever wondered why gender itself exists? And on the same line, how do words get their gender in the first place?

The quick answer to why gender exists is because of word formation and declension, different phonological patterns, earlier links to earlier languages, and the fact that words which clearly have a gender had to find a way to exist cohesively with words which did not. Beyond this idea, you could also say that gender has evolved because nouns and other parts of speech have evolved to undergo declension differently. Different word etymologies along with words borrowed from other languages needed a frame to develop and still sound "German". German has three genders because in German, having three classes of words best suits the ways that words were imported and then configured into grammar and language usage without being overwhelming.

While it's true that German can account for obvious gender differences in some words, there are certainly many words that don't have clear genders. Some of the ways these words were assigned genders were:

- Personification or historical myth, such as the concept of death being a male
- Using the last compound of a word as a final way to create a standardized system, regardless of content of earlier compounds in a compound word. This is why you can have rules about endings usually corresponding to one gender.
- Adjectives or animals which were viewed historically as being more masculine or feminine or having masculine/feminine traits acquired those genders.
- Neuter was often assigned to nouns which form basic categories that have further individual units, like "fruit", "clothing", and "car".
- Words which were borrowed from other languages would often be compared to similar words already existing in German, and take their gender from these already-existing words.

We also need to briefly address the question of plurals. As German students may know, in plural form, words always take one of two articles, regardless of their singular gender. Why is this? The answer seems to be that in most cases the plural endings of words in the three genders differ and this is the best marker of declension. In its earlier forms, German used to be more complex and demanded more, but by separating gender and declension along singular/plural lines, German has become easier on the brain.

Did you enjoy this article? Please let us know! We used the book "Gender" edited by Greville G. Corbett, located at P240.7 C67 in Middleton, and the article "The interaction of gender and declension in Germanic languages" from the October 2011 issue of *Folia Linguistica* to help us compile this article.