

THE CULTURAL AND PRAGMATIC DIFFERENCES OF THE WORD “FRIEND” IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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Abstract : *The cultural and pragmatic differences in the use and understanding of the word “friend ” in English and its German counterparts “Freund” and “Freundin”. Although often translated directly, these terms carry divergent connotations and pragmatic uses that reflect deep-seated cultural norms regarding social closeness, privacy, and interpersonal communication. Drawing on theories from cultural linguistics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, this study reveals how the concept of “friendship” is linguistically encoded differently in English-speaking and German-speaking cultures.*

Keywords: *Cross-linguistic semantics, cultural pragmatics, friendship terminology, English–German translation, intercultural communication, semantic scope of “friend”, Freund and Freundin, sociolinguistic variation, language and culture, pragmatic transfer, interpersonal relationships, second language acquisition, lexical equivalence, German-English contrastive analysis, semantic relativity.*

The word “friend” is one of the most common terms used to describe human relationships. In English, it denotes a wide range of interpersonal connections, from casual acquaintances to intimate companions. However, the German equivalents, “Freund” (masculine) and “Freundin” (feminine), are more restricted in their usage and often imply a closer, more personal relationship, sometimes even romantic. Despite frequent translations between English and German, these terms are not equivalent in meaning or function. This thesis aims to analyze the semantic scope, pragmatic functions, and cultural underpinnings of these terms. By examining real-world discourse, cross-linguistic patterns, and relevant theoretical frameworks, the thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of how “friend” and “Freund/Freundin” function within their respective linguistic and cultural systems.

Pragmatics: Concerned with how language is used in context and how meaning is interpreted by interlocutors (Levinson, 1983).

Cultural Linguistics: Examines how language encodes cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2011).

Intercultural Pragmatics: Discovers how speakers from different cultural backgrounds navigate and negotiate meaning (House, 2000).

Semantic Relativity: Based on the idea that meaning is shaped by cultural context (Wierzbicka, 1997).

In English, “friend” functions as a semantically wide and pragmatically flexible term. It can refer to: a) long-term, emotionally close relationships: “He is my best friend.”;

b) temporary or casual acquaintances: “I met some friends at the conference.”; c) online or digital contacts: “I have 500 friends on Facebook.”

This breadth is reinforced by common collocations, such as: “Work friend”, “school friend”, “family friend” “Online friend”, “Facebook friend”, “internet friend” “just a friend” (used to imply non-romantic relationship).

The semantic range of “friend” reflects the cultural tendency in English-speaking societies, especially in the U.S., toward informality, sociability, and a positive valuation of accessibility in interpersonal relations. (Hofstede, 2001)

In German, the terms “Freund” and “Freundin” imply a deeper level of closeness and exclusivity. Typically, “Freund” is reserved for: a) a long-standing, emotionally intimate friend; b) a romantic partner: “Er ist mein Freund” (= He is my boyfriend); c) a person with whom one shares significant personal trust. German speakers distinguish more explicitly between types of social relationships through terms such as: “Bekannte/Bekannte” = “Acquaintance” “Kollege/Kollegin” = “Work colleague” “Kumpel” = “Informal male friend, buddy” Pragmatically, the English “friend” often functions as a marker of friendliness, inclusion, or solidarity, even in contexts where little personal connection exists. In contrast, “Freund” in German often signals emotional investment, loyalty, or a significant level of familiarity. The use of friendship terms is not only linguistic but deeply cultural. Cultural models affect how relationships are formed, maintained, and expressed linguistically. English-speaking cultures (e.g., U.S., U.K.):

- 1) Tend toward individualism (Hofstede, 2001);
- 2) Encourage open communication and sociability;
- 3) View friendships as fluid, context-based;

German-speaking cultures (e.g., Germany, Austria):

- 1) Emphasize privacy, loyalty, and depth;
- 2) Establish boundaries between acquaintances and friends;
- 3) View friendship as a serious, enduring bond;

This comparative analysis highlights the limitations of direct lexical equivalence in translation. The word “friend” and “Freund/Freundin” do not represent interchangeable categories but rather index different cultural scripts and relational expectations. The English-speaking usage reveals an openness and inclusiveness, often set with social networking and informal social capital. In contrast, the German usage is more selective and signals deeper relational meaning. These differences affect everything from interpersonal introductions to professional networking, from classroom dynamics to romantic relationships. Intercultural miscommunication is likely when these distinctions are not acknowledged or taught, particularly in second language acquisition contexts.

The study of the word “friend” in English and its German counterparts “Freund/Freundin” reveals essential differences in cultural perception, semantic scope, and pragmatic function. While English allows for broad, often superficial use of the term, German treats friendship as a reserved, meaningful status, reflected linguistically through a narrower semantic field. These findings underscore the importance of integrating

cultural pragmatics into language education and translation studies. For meaningful intercultural communication, it is not enough to know what a word means in the dictionary—one must understand what it means in the minds and practices of native speakers.

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