

WORT DER WOCHE

Word of the Week: Mummenschanz

Every Friday, Germany.info and The Week in Germany highlight a different "Word of the Week" in the German language that may serve to surprise, delight or just plain perplex native English speakers.

Mummenschanz



Venetian-style carnival

From its historic connotation as a game of chance (Glücksspiel) played with dice, "Mummenschanz" has come to be associated with the carnival season in Germany to mean "Maskerade" (masquerade) and "Maskenspiel" (mummery, or a play involving mummies).

"Der Mummenschanz" (masculine) is derived from the Middle High German expression "schanz(e)," which meant "Würfelspiel" (game of dice) or simply "Spiel, Wagnis" (game, risk).

The etymological origin of the first part of this compound noun (Mummen), is by contrast more lost to the mists of time. On the one hand it is dated back to the Middle High German verb "mummen" or "mumman," which was used to describe a "Glücksspiel" (game of chance). On the other hand it also may be derived from the word "mumme" (mummer), which referred to a mask or a costumed person. Related modern German verbs include "vermummen" (to mask, dress up) and "einmummen" (to cover up in warm clothing).

The historic expression (die) "mumschanz" or "momschanz" (feminine) was purportedly used as a figure of speech since at least the 16th century as both a general description of a game of chance played with dice and in connection with the custom of people dressing up in masks and costumes during the Christian "Fastenzeit" (Lenten or fasting period) or "Fastnacht" (carnival, shrovetide, Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras) to visit homes and play dice games together.

Regardless of the precise origins of "mumme" in the German language, by the 18th century the relation to games of chance and dice had largely disappeared, so that "Mummenschanz" mostly came to mean "Maskerade" or "Maskenspiel," albeit with an often ironic tone.

Hence in modern parlance "Mummenschanz" may be deployed as a figure of speech to describe all manner of mischief-making mockery. The website of the European Parliament might, for instance, describe a comment regarding a stalled political procedure as follows: "Meines Erachtens ist es an der Zeit, diesem Mummenschanz und dieser Parodie einer demokratischen Debatte ein Ende zu setzen." (I believe it is time to call a stop to this masquerade and this caricature of democratic debate.)