



Linguistic Introduction to Middle High German

Joshua Booth

joshua.booth@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk

Language & Brain Laboratory

Faculty of Linguistics, Philology & Phonetics

University of Oxford

Michaelmas Term 2025

1. Introduction to Historical Linguistics and Middle High German
2. Phonology I
3. Phonology II
4. Morphology I
5. Morphology II
6. Syntax
7. Lexis & Language Contact
8. Verse and Metre

Historical Linguistics

What does 'language change' mean?

- How?
- Why?
- What?
- Gradual or abrupt? Regular or irregular?

Areas of interest:

- Phonological, morphological, syntactic & semantic change
- Language contact
- Analogy
- Grammaticalisation
- Reconstruction

Synchrony vs. Diachrony

Cf. Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916.
Cours de linguistique générale. Paris:
Payot.

For more detail, see relevant
chapters in Campbell (2013)

Systematic sound change

- Change is language processing over time.
- Regular sound change is **systematic**
- This leads to **regular correspondences between related languages.**



Cognates & Systematicity

Latin	A. Greek	English	German	English	Italian
sāl / s a:l/	ἅλς / h als/	wind / w ind/	Wind / v ind/	father / f ɑ:ðə/	padre / p adre/
sex / s eks/	ἕξ / h eks/	wax / w æks/	Wachs / v aks/	fish / f ɪʃ/	pesce / p esʃe/
sōl / s o:l/	ἥλιος / h ɛ:lɪos/	wolf / w ʊlf/	Wolf / v ɔlf/	ford / f ɔ:d/	port / p ɔrto/
/s/ = [CORONAL] /h/ no PLACE feature		/w/ = [SONORANT] /v/ = [OBSTRUENT]		/f/ = [CONTINUANT] /p/ = [PLOSIVE]	

French	Italian	Romanian	Spanish	
<i>cit��</i> / s ite/	<i>citt��</i> / tʃ it:a/	<i>cetate</i> / tʃ etate/	<i>ciudad</i> / θ judad/	“city”
<i>ciel</i> / s j��l/	<i>cielo</i> / tʃ ��lo/	<i>cer</i> / tʃ er/	<i>cielo</i> / θ j��lo/	“sky”

Cognates vs. Loans



English: *hotel* Bengali: হোটেল [hoʈel] ← French: hôtel
German: *Hotel* Russian: отель [etɛlʲ]

Zeit	Affrikaten	Plosive			Frikative			Sonore	
		Tenues	Mediae	Mediae aspiratae	(einschließlich h)			Liquidae	Nasale
Vorgermanisch		p t k	b d g	b ^h d ^h g ^h	s			r l	m n
1. Lautverschiebung (und Verners Gesetz)		p t k			f b x	s b d g	z	r l	m n
Germanisch		p t k	b d g		f b x	s		r l	m n
2. Lautverschiebung (ca. 6.-8. Jh. n. Chr.)									
Ahd.	pf z [ts] (k)ch [kx]	p/pp t/tt k/kk	b d,th g		ff/f zz/z ch h s/ss s+k			r l	m n
Mhd.	pf z [ts] kch, ch (nur obd.)	p/pp t/tt k/kk	b d g		ff/f zz/z ch h s/ss sch			r l	m n
Nhd.	pf z [ts]	p t k	b d g		f ch h s [z] sch			r l	m n

Comparative *Reconstruction

- Based on evidence from daughter languages, we can reconstruct unattested forms in parent language
 - Ignore flukes
 - Majority verdict:
Eng *six*, Latin *sex*, Greek *hex*, Sanskrit *ṣáṣ*, eIrish *sé*, Tocharian A *ṣäk*, Old Church Slavonic *ŝestĩ*, Bengali *ছয়, ছ* [tʃʰɔ(ɪ)]
 - Phonological plausibility
 - Does the reconstructed system make sense?

WGmc	EGmc	NGmc	PGmc	Latin	Greek	Sanskrit	PIE
OE <i>fæder</i> OS <i>fadar</i> OHG <i>fater</i>	Gothic <i>fadar</i>	ON <i>faðir</i>	* <i>fader</i>	<i>pater</i>	πατήρ (<i>patér</i>)	<i>pitṛ</i>	* <i>patér</i>

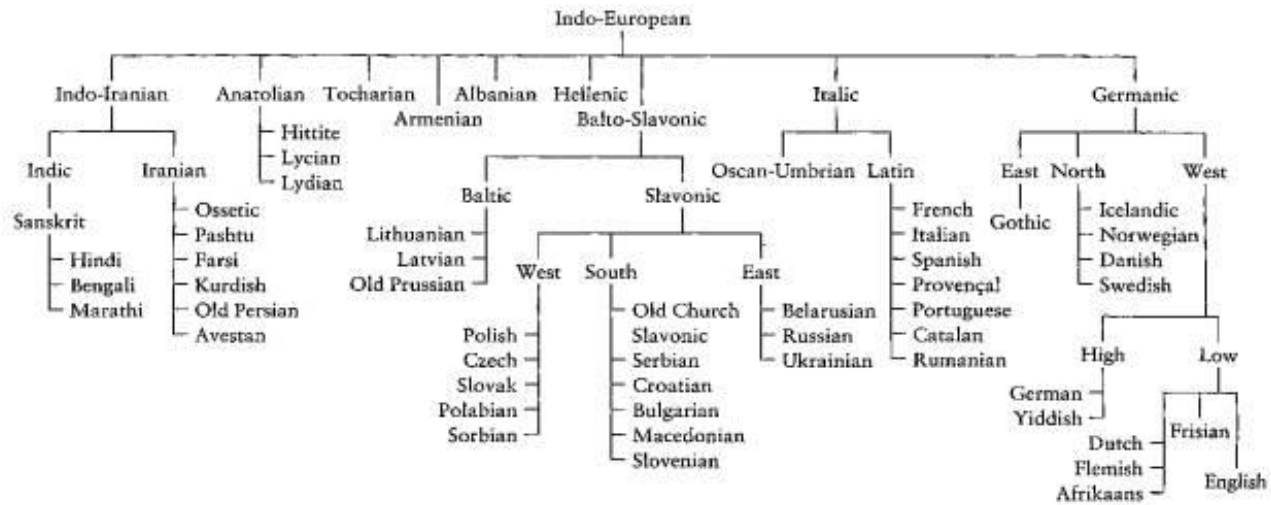
Comparative *Reconstruction

- Based on evidence from daughter languages, we can reconstruct unattested forms in parent language

WGmc	EGmc	NGmc	PGmc	Latin	Greek	Sanskrit	PIE
OE <i>fæder</i> OS <i>fadar</i> OHG <i>fater</i>	Gothic <i>fadar</i>	ON <i>faðir</i>	* <i>fader</i>	<i>pater</i>	πατήρ (patér)	<i>pitṛ</i>	* <i>pátér</i>

- Problems:
 - Allophones
 - Variant forms
 - Time limitations
 - Language contact

Family Trees



Family Trees

Hittite	u ₁ iten-, u ₂ ātar
Sanskrit	udan
Ancient Greek	ύδατ-, ύδωρ
Latin	unda

*wódr̥, *wéd̥n̥-, *wédōr

*watōr, *watiniz, *watini

*watar

wæter

watar

waʒʒar

['wɔ:tə]

['ʊaɪtər]

['vasə]

water

water

Wasser

watō, watins,
watin

vatn

['vǎt̪:ɛn̪]

['ʊɐ̯t̪n̪]

['ʊænʔ]

vatten

vatn

vand

Middle High German

- Abstract
- Arbitrary
- Awkward to define
- Debatable
- *Fuzzy*

Middle

• PIE		• PIE		• PIE	
• PGmc		• PGmc		• PGmc	
• WGmc		• WGmc		• WGmc	
• Pre-OHG	c. 500	• Pre-OHG	c. 500	• Pre-OHG	c. 500
• OHG	c. 750	• OHG	c. 750	• OHG	c. 750
• MHG	c. 1050	• MHG	c. 1050	• MHG	c. 1050
				• eMHG	1050-1170
				• 'Classical' MHG	1170-1250
				• lMHG	1250-1350
		• eNHG	c. 1350	• eNHG	c. 1350
• NHG	c. 1500	• NHG	c. 1650	• NHG	c. 1650

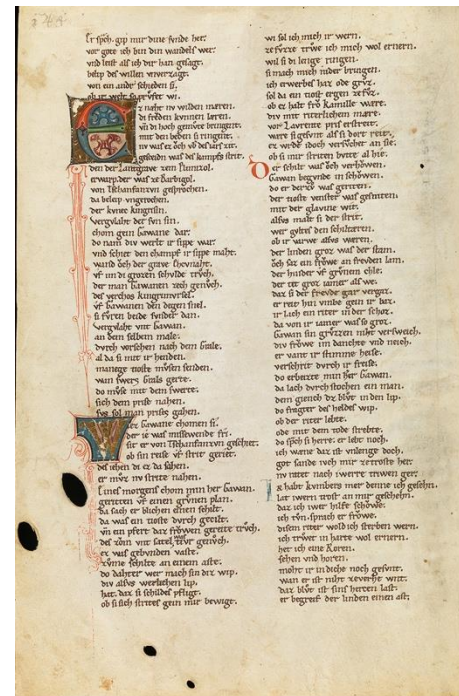
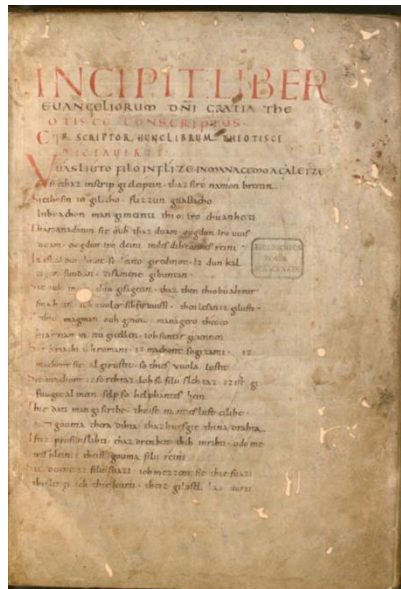
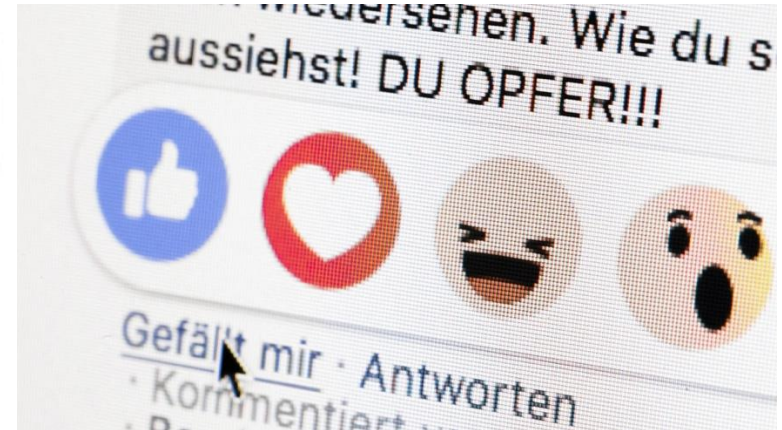
Middle

- Linguistic

Zeit	Affrikaten	Plosive						Frikative (einschließlich h)						Sonore			
		Tenues			Mediae		Mediae aspiratae							Liquidae		Nasale	
Vorgermanisch		p	t	k	b	d	g	b ^h	d ^h	g ^h	s			r	l	m	n
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch																	
Vorgermanisch															</		

Middle

- Linguistic
- Functional



Middle

- Linguistic
- Functional
- Extralinguistic



German

Difficult to define

- Linguistic?
 - Germanic dialect?
- Socio-political?
- Geographical?
- Historical?



High German

Central German

- West Central German
 - Central Franconian | Hessian | Rhenish Franconian
- East Central German
 - Thuringian | Upper Saxon | Silesian

Upper German

- East Franconian
- Alemannic
 - Upper Rhenish | Swabian | High Alemannic
- Bavarian
 - North, Central and South Bavarian



THE SECOND (HIGH GERMAN) SOUND SHIFT



Blocked after /s, f, x/ + /t/
Not shifted before /r/

(i) Voiceless Stops

In initial position, after a C or if the WGmc stop was geminate (doubled):

$/*p,*t,*k/ \rightarrow /pf,ts,kx/$

Else:

$/*p,*t,*k/ \rightarrow /ff,ss,xx/$

(ii) Voiced Stops

$/*b,*d,*g/ \rightarrow /p,t,k/$

2. Lautverschiebung

/p/	Pfund	pound
	offen	open
	Schiff	ship
/t/	Zaun	town
	Wasser	water
	was	what
/k/	[k x]alb	calf
	machen	make
	Storch	stork

/b/	bruoder > Bruder	brother
/d/	tohter > Tochter	daughter
/g/	käpen > geben	give

/p, k/ go back to /b, g/ in l.OHG

Not /t/ (because /θ/ → /d/) *except /nt/ > /nd/

*/*p,*t,*k/*

OS	p	legan	giskap	an	tiohan	giset	an	korn	wak	ôn			
	kam	p	skô	p	un	her	ta	sâ	tun	wer	k	tê	kan
	ske	pp	ian	skô	p	sitt	ian	sat	we	kk	ian	i	k
OHG (Bav./Alem.)	p	flegen	giskaff	an	ziohan	gise	zzan	khorn	wah	hên			
	kam	p	f	skuof	(f)um	her	za	sâ	z(z)um	wer	ch	zei	h(h)an
	sche	p	fen	skuof	sitzen	saz	we	c	chen	i	h		

N.B. */*p/* > */pf/* only UG, */*k/* > */kx/* only Bav. & Alem.

*/*b,*d,*g/*

OS	b eran d ohtar g ast sib b ia bidd i an hru g gi ge[β]an bind a n ô g a
OHG (Bav./Alem.)	p eran t ohter k ast sip p a pitt e n ruk k i ke p an pint a n ou c a
MHG	b ern t ohter g ast sip p e bitt e n ruc k e ge b en bind e n ou g e

/p, k/ go back to /b, g/ in l.OHG

Not /t/ (because /θ/ → /d/) **except* /nt/ > /nd/

2. Lautverschiebung

Many texts refer to the shift of voiceless /p, t, k/ as *Tenuesverschiebung* and voiced /b, d, g/ as *Medienverschiebung*.

I refer you to Wright (1888/[1951]: 3):

“Some German books use the terms *media* for **b, d, g**, and *tenuis* for **p, t, k**, but these meaningless terms are better avoided.”

Dialectal Variation

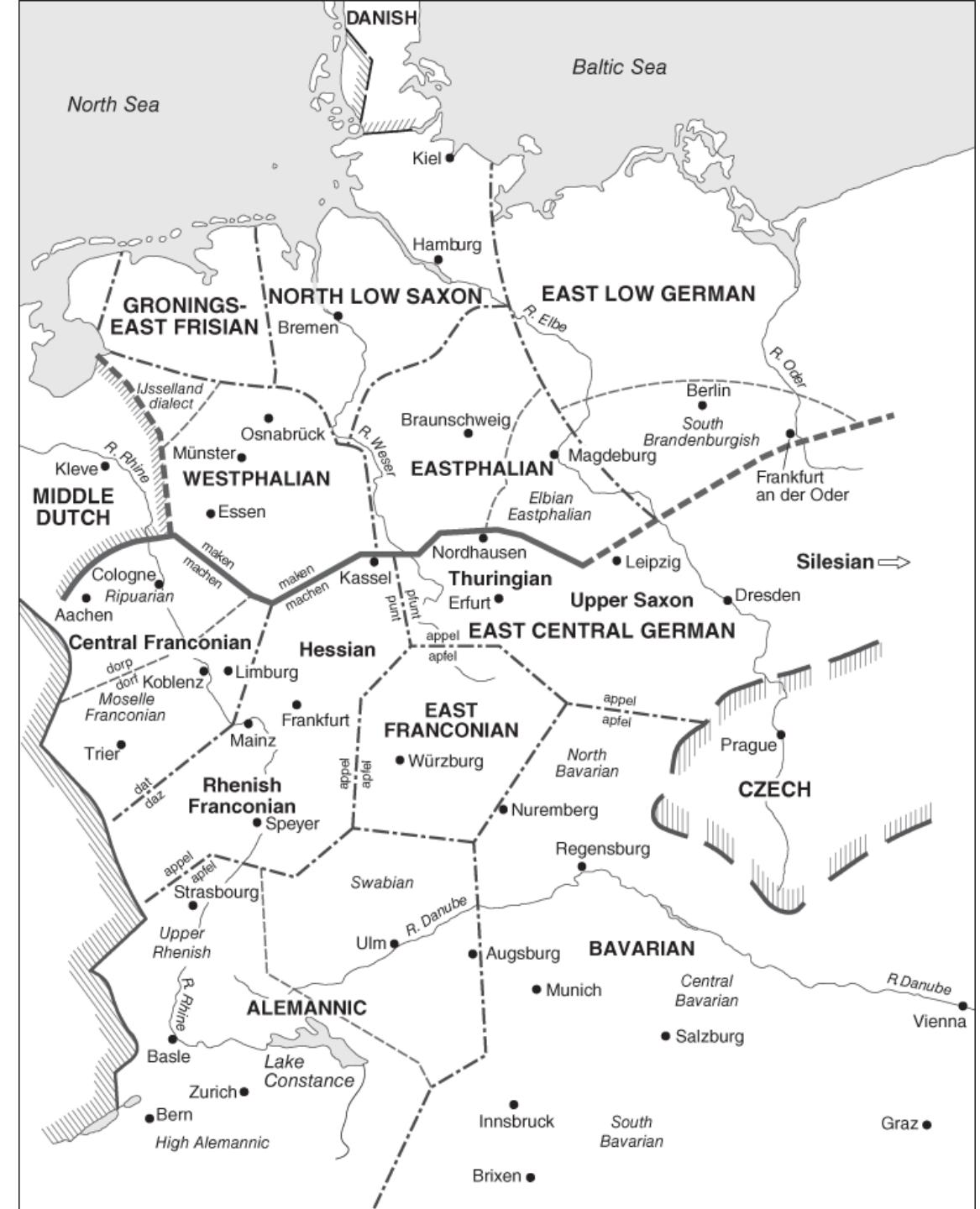
Isoglosses

b. machen/maken (Benrath Line)

c. Dorf/Dorp (South of Bonn)

d. das/dat (South of Koblenz)

e. Apfel/Appel (Speyer Line)



Middle High German

Middle High German can be defined in terms of:

- Time
 - Space
 - Linguistic features
-
1. (West) Germanic language
 2. Affected by the 2nd Sound Shift
 3. Spoken in High German dialect area
 4. Spoken in later mediaeval period (ca. 1050–1350)

Middle High German

Middle High German can be defined in terms of:

- Time
- Space
- Linguistic features

Such a periodisation of MHG is at once:

1. A useful abstraction
2. A simplification of a very complex picture
3. Flawed and somewhat arbitrary

Useful resources

Linguistics

*Campbell, Lyle. 2013. *Historical linguistics: An introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.

Joseph, Brian D, and Richard D Janda. 2003/[2017]. *Handbook of Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hock, Hans Heinrich. 1986. *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Millar, Robert McColl, and R. L. Trask. 2023. *Trask's Historical Linguistics*. Fourth edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

*The *Understanding...* series (Phonology, Morphology & Syntax)

https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/IPAcharts/inter_chart_2018/IPA_2018.html

Useful resources

(Linguistic) Histories of the German Language

Keller, R. E. 1978. *The German Language*. London: Faber Faber.

Nübling, Damaris. 2010. *Historische Sprachwissenschaft des Deutschen*. Tübingen: Narr.

*Polenz, Peter von. 2020. *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Russ, Charles V. J. 1978. *Historical German Phonology & Morphology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

*Salmons, Joe. 2018. *A history of German: What the past reveals about today's language*. Oxford : Oxford University Press

Wells, Christopher J. 1985. *German: A Linguistic History to 1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Young, Christopher, and Thomas Gloning. 2004[2013]. *A History of the German Language through Texts*. Oxford: Routledge.

Useful resources

Introductions & Primers

*Bergmann, Rolf, Claudine Moulin, and Nikolaus Ruge. 2023. *Alt- und Mittelhochdeutsch : Arbeitsbuch zur Grammatik der älteren deutschen Sprachstufen und zur deutschen Sprachgeschichte*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Jones, Howard, and Martin H. Jones. 2019. *The Oxford Guide to Middle High German*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Jones, Howard, and Martin H. Jones. 2024. *An Introduction to Middle High German*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Wright, Joseph. [1888]/1951. *A Middle High German primer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wright, Joseph. 1906. *An Old High German primer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Useful resources

Grammars

*Paul, Hermann. 2007. *Mittelhochdeutsche Grammatik*. 25th edn. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Wright, Joseph. 1907. *Historical German Grammar: Phonology, word-formation and accidence*. London: Oxford University Press.

Dictionaries

<https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de>

<https://www.dwds.de>