

Spelling Variations in German Given and Place Names

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Spelling variations within German names occur frequently, and therefore we must be aware of how they impact genealogical research. Spelling variations may be as simple as *Schmidt* to *Schmitt* or as complex as *Eddinger* to *Öttiker*. Basic principles of German phonetics can help us understand these variations and why they occur.

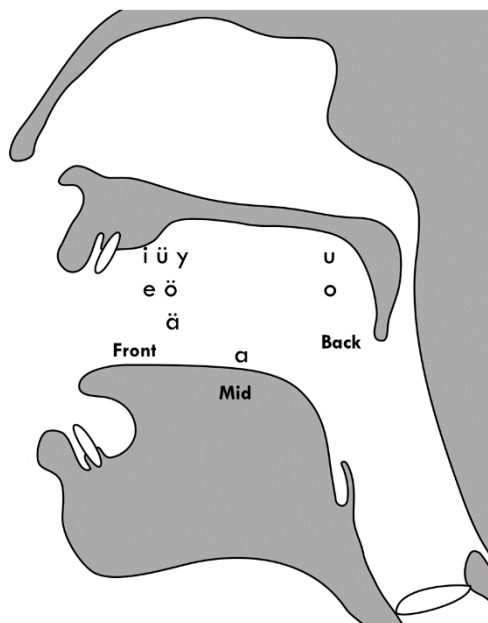
Vowels- a e i o u y ä ö ü

Vowels are produced when air passes through the throat and mouth. The location of the tongue and formation of the lips helps to determine which vowel sound will be created.

Common Vowel Alternations

VOWEL	ALTERNATION(S)
a	o
e	i , ö, ä
i	ü, ie, e,
o	u, a
u	o
y	ü
ä	e
ö	e
ü	y

Position of Vowels in the Mouth



Consonants- b c d f g h j k l m n p q r s ß t v w x z

Consonants are produced when air from the throat and mouth is constricted. The movement and position of the lips, tongue, and teeth allow a speaker to articulate certain consonants.

Common Consonant Alternations

CONSONANT	ALTERNATION(S)
b	f, p, v, w
c	g, k
d	t
f	b, p, v, w
g	c, k
k	c, ch, ck, g
p	b, f, v, w
s	z
t	d
v	b, f, p, w
w	b, f, p, v
z	s, ts

Non-phonetic variations

- **The Suffix –in** was often added to a woman’s maiden surname. The surname should be extracted without the suffix.
 - Example: Ursula Bauer**in**-> Ursula Bauer.
- **Possessive markers** such as s, n, and en were added to the end of surnames to show possession. The surname should be extracted without these endings.
 - Example: Hans Becken Frau-> Hans Beck.¹
- **Latin declinations** were added to the end of many given names in Latin records. These names can end with –us, -um, -o, or –i. Remove these endings in order to extract the original German name.
 - Example: Jacob**us**, Jacob**um**, Jacob**o**, Jacob**i**-> Jacob.²

Resources

- **Meyer’s Gazetteer** is the most important German gazetteer. It lists every place name in the German Empire (1871-1918). Using this gazetteer with search techniques will allow you to locate German place names despite spelling variations.

¹ Roger P. Minert, *Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics* (Woods Cross: GRT Publications, 2000), p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

- <http://www.meyersgaz.org>

Search Techniques

- Asterisk (*) wildcard: The asterisk wildcard will replace one or more unknown characters. For example, ‘*dorf’ will return Abbendorf, Billendorf, Liedersdorf, etc.
 - Beginning of names: Typing the beginning of a name will return all places that start with those letters. For example, ‘ober’ will return Oberach, Oberadlhof, Ober Alzenau, etc.
 - Umlauts: You do not need to include umlauts in your searches nor should you expand them (ü to ue). Searching ‘Düsseldorf’ or ‘Dusseldorf’ will return ‘Düsseldorf’.
 - Filter by region: Once a list of place names appears, you can filter the results by region. This is a helpful resource in locating the correct town.³
- ***Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems through Applications of German and English Phonetics*** by Roger P. Minert is a helpful resource to use in order to understand spelling variations in German names and how this impacts genealogical research.
 - **The Dialect Basis of Spelling Variation in German Surnames** is an article that provides examples and explanations of spelling variations in German names.
 - https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/The_Dialect_Basis_of_Spelling_Variation_in_German_Surnames
 - **Internal Dialectical Clues in German Surnames** by Theola Walden Baker is an article that lists prefixes, suffixes, and internal vowel shifts and consonant combinations within German surnames.
 - <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mstone/dialectical.html>
 - **Verwandt surname distribution map** shows the absolute and relative distribution of surnames throughout Germany. Every variation of a surname is shown separately.
 - <http://www.verwandt.de/karten/>

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Baker, Theola Walden. "Internal Dialectical Clues in German Surnames." Missouri State Genealogical Association Journal 25:3 (2005).

³ "The Homepage: Search the Meyers Gazetteer." Using this Website. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.meyersgaz.org/help/help.html>.

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