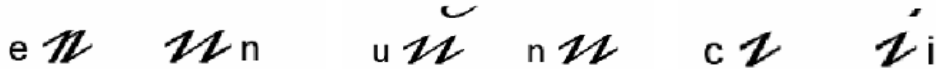


Translating Tips

After considerable time spent trying (without success) to find someone who could translate old German letters for me, I finally bit the bullet and tried translating them myself. Even if you are German literate, it can still be a bit of a chore. Many of the letters in the handwritten “alte Schrift” are so different from the anglicized (or Latin) letters we are familiar with. What makes it more difficult is the similarity between different letters, e.g. the “e” and “n”, the “u” and “n”, or the “c” and “i”. That is illustrated below.



The image shows six pairs of handwritten letters in Kurrent script. The first pair is 'e' and 'n', which look very similar. The second pair is 'u' and 'n', also very similar. The third pair is 'c' and 'i', which are also very similar. The letters are written in a dark ink on a light background.

(See the table of *Kurrent* Letters for a complete list.)

Also, rather than writing “nn” or “mm” at the end of a word or name, one frequently sees a horizontal bar over the single letter. Most people’s handwriting is not “Palmer penmanship” perfect. So, slight differences in the spacing of the strokes or missing some of the marks over the letters can be confusing. Furthermore, the flourishes of an individual handwriting do not generally fit perfectly with the conventional form, i.e. the loops may not be full or there may be missing or extraneous strokes.

I have found that one of the best ways to aid in the identification of individual letters is to follow the way in which the pen moves. First of all, look for descenders below the line for many of the letters. Capital “J” has a descender while capital “T” does not. Look for the direction in which the pen turns or hooks. The capital letters “B”, “C”, and “L” are similar. Capital “B” has a little extra loop at the end compared to capital “L”. Capital “C” does not have the loop at the top. The lower case “f” has a loop in the middle compared to the lower case “s”. In the lower case “h”, the descender loops in the opposite direction. The letter “d” and the ending form of “s” loop in opposite directions. “p”, “y”, and “z” have slightly different strokes at the start of the letter.

Note. If the letter was written after about 1900, it may be the *Sütterlin* script which is very similar to the older *Kurrent* script but with some of the flourishes rounded or simplified. Also, some of the documents/letters that I have looked at do not use all of the same script consistently. One may see occasional letters in a Latin form scattered within the document, even switching between letter types in the same word. I believe that some writers were possibly influenced by the printed typeface *Fraktur* (like one sees in old German books and bibles) when using letters like “a”, “c”, “e” or “s”. Some of the letters in that type were actually closer to the Latin letter style and without all of the flourishes in the handwritten script. Generally, people were good about putting the stroke over the lower case “u” (U-Bogen), but it may have been missed occasionally. Also, the writer may not have lifted the pen when adding the stroke which gives the appearance of an added flourish in the next letter.

For a novice like me, the process involves transcribing individual letters and forming the words in German; then translating the words into English. The best way to decode some























































of the more difficult letters is in the context of a word or sentence, i.e. the surrounding letters or rest of the word. The larger the document is, the easier it becomes to learn a particular writer's style by comparing different words.

My ancestors were from Northern Germany where Low German (Plattdeutsch) was the common dialect. I was surprised that the letters that I looked at contained very few Low German variations from the "standard" High German. One possible explanation is that, in school, the children were trained in Hochdeutsch. (The Bible was translated in that dialect.) So, when they wrote letters, they reverted to the High German dialect rather than Low German which they normally spoke.

When translating old letters, one other thing to be aware of is the idioms that were used. For example, my grandfather's one brother would always start his letters with the phrase "*Ich ergreife die Feder...*" (literally "I grab the feather (quill)", i.e. "I take up the pen"). As you read more letters, particularly from the same person, you will become familiar with particular phrases the writer uses.

Give it a try. You might be surprised at how soon you will be able to recognize many of the words. There can be a lot of interesting information in some of those old letters.

Kurrent Letters

Kurrent	Transcribed	Kurrent	Transcribed	Kurrent	Transcribed
	A		S		k
	B		T		l
	C		U		m
	D		V		n
	E		W		o
	F		X		p
	G		Y		q
	H		Z		r
	I		a		s
	J		b		s
	K		c		s
	L		d		t
	M		e		u
	N		f		v
	O		g		w
	P		h		x
	Q		i		y
	R		j		z