# #5: Compound nouns

Messe ratten tat
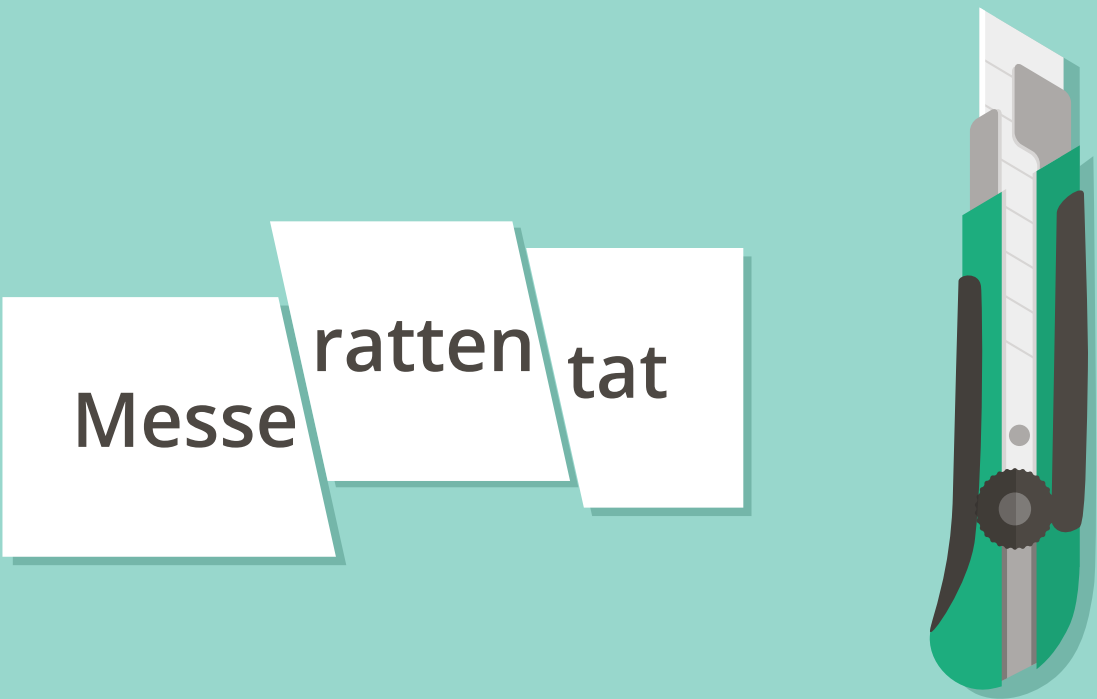
A clear difficulty with German to English translation is working out what to do with compound nouns, or Komposita. Theoretically, German compound nouns can be composed of an unlimited number of word particles. These limitless nouns crop up frequently, so it's a good idea to know what to do with subject-specific compounds, which often don't appear in dictionaries.

Sometimes—especially when hyphenated—these are relatively straightforward to translate: *UV-Bestrahlung*, for example. Others—like *Mitfahrgelegenheit*—present two issues: They are highly *specific* and very *dense*. The challenge is to find an equally precise English phrase that doesn't form a paragraph in its own right. Try breaking it into three steps:

## 1. Segmentation

First, break the compound down into its constituent parts. It is important to "sense-check" the outcome in cases with more than one possibility: Try translating *Messerattentat* as *Messe-ratten-tat* instead of *Messer-attentat* and you'll know what I mean.

## 2. Transposal into English

Next, break each part down into its possible translations. That's translation**S**! Having a range of choices is key to making it sound natural in the final stage. At this stage it can be very useful to explore multiple word forms related to the stem of each part, as they are often curtailed verb forms—especially compounds whose meaning is not obviously discernible. For example, with Kühleinrichtung, expanding Kühl back out into kühlen clarifies that this is a coo**ling** device, and not merely a cold one.

## 3. Reformulation

The tricky final stage is formulating a concise English phrase that sounds natural. Two techniques can help:

- Insert prepositions, such as "of" or "for", or a possessive "s"
  - Die Hauptschuld
    --> the main share of the blame

- Turn noun phrases into verbal or adjectival phrases
  - E.g. Parlamentsdebatte à parliamentary debate
  - E.g. das Löschwasser à water for fire-fighting

Often, multiple options are plausible. For example, a range of individual translations of Herstellungskosten from the previous step might include:

- Fabrication costs
- Costs of production
- Manufacturing expenses

In such cases, use your natural Sprachgefühl or a web search for the most common variant.

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