# Conrad Gessner's Preface to Josua Maaler's *Die Teütsch spraach* (1561)


## Abstract

Published in 1561, *Die Teütsch spraach* is a German-Latin dictionary compiled by the Swiss lexicographer and bookbinder Josua Maaler (1529–1599), whose name was Latinized as Pictorius. *Die Teütsch spraach* is widely recognized as one of the earliest German-language dictionaries and included important innovations (German terms, for instance, were listed before the Latin ones). The dictionary was motivated by humanistic goals and aimed to enhance the prestige of German, the language of the homeland or fatherland. This idea comes through clearly in the preface to the dictionary written by Swiss scholar Conrad Gessner.


## Source

As I was today with my great friend Johannes Frisius, a man of bright mind and erudition, and as we were engaged in familiar conversation (attended also, as it happens, by our excellent and well-learned fellow citizen Josua Maaler, a pious and faithful minister of the divine word at Elgg, a village near Zürich), there arose the matter of the common languages spoken throughout Europe; and we took stock of the many neighboring peoples, like French, Italians, English, and others, who adorn and enrich their languages day in and day out, and who have copious dictionaries in which individual words are explained in an orderly fashion, with their senses and meanings, as are everyday expressions as well; and we were sad that in our Germany no one does the same service for our language. And this negligence appeared to us to be even more deplorable considering that our vernacular tongue would hardly be inferior to the others in antiquity (excepting Hebrew, the prince of all languages), or in its abundance of words and expressions, and it is certainly much older, purer, and more wholesome than today's vernaculars such as Italian, French, Spanish, and English, which are all partly corrupted by Latin words, and partly mixed and mingled with terms of Gothic, Saxon, and other origins. It is doubtless heartening that some people have started working on books of this kind, but most of what could be illustrated from our language has yet to be treated. Now, since Pictorius[1] among us seemed to have a bit more time left over after his work, had some leisure to dedicate now and then to this most beautiful endeavor that would be pleasing and useful, not only for our homeland but also for all of Germany, and for all the students of both languages (I mean Latin and German), we acted as his advisors. We told him that this work would not be alien to his ecclesiastical duties, given that until now, when he was respected for his age and learning, he had already been exercising himself in the most correct, purest, and richest modes of expression and forms of speech. Convinced by these arguments, he willingly gave himself over to our advice: and he committed himself and his all entirely to this present instrument, to promote at once good letters and piety, and to shed light on the language of our homeland while deserving no less praise than anyone else. And so it was observed that in order to enhance the value of the work, by making it contain the wealth of material of a German-Latin dictionary, he should include the Latin-German contents of Johannes Frisius, who had himself translated from the Latin-French dictionary by Robert Estienne (a truly most learned man, in possession of all the best scholarship); and so that he would present the German terms before the Latin ones and sort them in alphabetical order anew, yet not doing this without consideration and discrimination, but rather that he would omit what he considered superfluous or hardly corresponding to the Latin, even though an initial translation from the Latin had appeared to show a correspondence. We also persuaded him that it would make his dictionary superior to any other if he would make it more copious than every other such work (regarding the quantity of Latin words and phrases taken only from highly select sources), while also providing a great abundance of German

material. And so, undertaking this endeavor on our advice, he finally completed it with great effort. If he did not bring everything to completion as he wished, and if not all was made as it could have been, nonetheless we all, students of our mother tongue, are greatly in his debt, for he lay before us a previously immense mass, bringing a certain form to it, that is the order of the letters; and for the greater part he adhered to certain principles to make the individual words and their meanings clear, to make them easy to find, and to make the use of the work in general quite straightforward. However, many improvements are still to be desired, and we shall mention them. All matters of this kind are indeed boundless and without end, and I believe that there is not a book to be found, nor will there ever be, that is not lacking something or without excess, among all those compiled eruditely in these three excellent languages by men who tried to bring number and order to their words so many times and for centuries.

There is an argument applied to every field, which says that whoever treated it first is superior to the rest. However, it is easy to exempt from this the arts that tend toward accumulation, when we see how often, in all matters that depend on skill and hard work, one has to make reductions instead of additions. Indeed, it is most difficult to force a profuse subject matter into the lines and limits of its own form so that there is nothing superfluous; but it is better to err on this side than on the opposite, since being outright ἀναμάρτητον ("flawless" in the words of Gellius) is beyond human reach. Actually, there is practically no error that is not committed due to either excess or deficiency from praiseworthy moderation. Certainly, there are many things that will seem superfluous to German speakers, but they will not be useless to many foreign students of our language, who will be occasioned to practice and learn many idioms. This is what there was to say about the present work. […]

**NOTES**

[1] The Latinized form of Maaler—trans.

Source: Preface by Conrad Gessner, in Josua Maaler, *Die Teütsch spraach: Alle wörter, namen, un*[*d*] *arten zu reden in Hochteütscher spraach, dem ABC nach ordenlich gestellt, unnd mit gutem Latein gantz fleissig unnd eigentlich vertolmetscht, dergleychen bißhär nie gesähen = Dictionarium Germanicolatinum novum.* Tiguri: Froschoverus, 1561, pp. 3–4. Available online at: https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10164043

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