
Listen, Paul, Robert Di Donato, and Daniel Franklin. *The Big Yellow Book of German Verbs: 555 Fully Conjugated Verbs.*

New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Includes: Textbook and Interactive CD-ROM. ISBN: 978-0-07-148758-0.

The Big Yellow Book of German Verbs is a comprehensive reference resource of 555 fully conjugated, commonly used verbs that highlights the “top fifty” in terms of frequency and usage. The verbs are listed in alphabetical order with exhaustive paradigms, a list of possible usages, and a cross reference to other closely related verbs and their page numbers. The book contains thirty-seven pages of English prefatory material on the basics of verb conjugation and explanations of grammatical verb categories such as person and number, mood, tenses, and voice. Notes on sentence structure/word order, which affects verbs strongly in German, as well as the relatively recent spelling reform, are also given.

Following a brief overview of the properties of German verb grammar and the exhaustive lists of verb conjugations and use, the book offers written practice exercises, an English-German verb index, an irregular forms index, and a cross-referenced index of 4,200 verbs that are derivatives of the 555 primary forms fully modeled in the book. In sum, this represents primarily a lot of information “about” language, using the metalanguage of grammatical instruction.

An important component is the interactive CD-ROM. It includes a diagnostic test consisting of 40 multiple-choice questions to help learners determine their strengths and weaknesses. There are multiple practice modules that parallel the organization of the reference book divided into verb categories addressing tenses, moods, and aspects as well as irregular forms and sentence structure/word order practice. The third component of the accompanying CD is dedicated to the “Top Fifty” verbs in German and is divided into two components: special cases of usage and commonly confused aspects of certain verb pairs, as well as idiomatic verb usage that may not be literal in nature. Finally, there is an eighty-question, multiple-choice review test that gives a final score expressed as a percentage and a breakdown of performance on sub-skills expressed as a fraction.

The Big Yellow Book certainly has many positive features: it covers idiomatic usage, identifies high frequency verbs, and indexes a multitude of other verbs that are formed by adding particles to the most frequent ones represented in the materials. However, I cannot help but feel that the concept had the potential to be so much more, particularly the CD-ROM component. The graphics are attention-grabbing and nicely laid out with beautiful photo montages, inspiring music, and a real life “helper” who steps out of a box to give verbal instructions on completing the module at the click of a button. However, beyond these surface features and some nice visual support, the program soon turns out to be another, spiffier version of the same old “drill and kill” of yesteryear.

The module exercises consist of three options: click and drag, fill in the blank, and multiple choice. These are not interactive in the sense that the program

allows the user to drag incorrect answers into the box. There is no indication of incorrectness until the user finishes the module and clicks on the assessment button. What shows up at this point is a red check mark and an indication that this answer is not correct, with a reference to pages in the main reference book where more information can be found.

In line with current pedagogical knowledge of corrective feedback, error correction is proven to be more effective when it is both pro-cognitive and pro-affective. This means that learners are both made immediately aware of the error and given the opportunity to fix it on their own. The materials could have easily been programmed so that the user could not put an incorrect answer in a box, such as having an incorrect answer bounce back out with a funny sound or something alerting the user to error. Immediate feedback explaining why an answer is incorrect and a message of encouragement to try again before moving on is precisely the kind of engagement with error that results in both uptake *and* repair. Also, the green checks and red Xs are too reminiscent of punitive, decontextualized feedback and are not necessarily as pro-affective as the technology could allow.

There are also some glitches in the feedback algorithms that cause correct answers given by the program user to be flagged as incorrect, even when closer inspection reveals that the user did indeed type in exactly what the computer states should have been the answer. While this feature is certainly not a deal breaker for effective use of this program, students should be warned that it does occasionally happen. In the modules tested, as well as in the final exam, there were some isolated instances of poor question design that resulted in the answer set containing two grammatically plausible answers for fill-in-the-blank exercises. Although the sophisticated user can infer that one of those choices is not likely to happen in real life and is therefore not the best answer (though sometimes the more intriguing), these kinds of anomalies should be eliminated in piloting.

While *The Big Yellow Book of German Verbs* is particularly well suited for the needs of analytic, independent learners and those who find themselves in need of a good and easily navigated verb reference for other projects, it misses its mark as an instructive tool by not only replicating the decontextualized efforts of its predecessors in the written materials, but also failing to introduce learners to a new generation of technology-based modules.

With the visual and auditory possibilities offered by newer technology, engaging contexts for verb forms such as the written narrative simple past that occurs in fairy tales vs. the verbal present perfect that occurs in informal narration could be capitalized upon to deal more effectively with sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of verb usage rather than remaining at the level of knowing “about” it. Even click and drag exercises that were contextualized in naturally occurring formats such as handwritten letters or in response to a recorded conversation would serve to optimize this kind of practice toward a more meaningful overall outcome when considering form, meaning, and use.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Publisher's Response

McGraw-Hill thanks Dr. Ashby for her review of *The Big Yellow Book of German Verbs*. As she indicates, this is an extensive reference to German verbs, incorporating numerous sample sentences that illustrate meaning and common usage; it also features an index of 4,200 verbs, with principal parts, that are cross-referenced to the 555 verb paradigms.

I appreciate in particular Dr. Ashby's constructive criticism of the accompanying CD-ROM. The 400 exercises on the CD-ROM can with some justification be termed "drill and kill," though this might be considered an appropriate complement to a verb reference book! That said, I am very receptive to her suggestions for improvements: in corrective feedback that utilizes sound effects, in ironing out the minor glitches that she identifies, and in providing greater context within the exercises.

However, I do feel that the CD-ROM currently provides students with significant opportunity to fix their errors, as each exercise offers the option to immediately re-set and repeat. As Dr. Ashby points out, the CD-ROM offers an appealing visual interface that, I believe, encourages students to spend more time interacting with the program. In addition, the random shuffle feature ensures a different sequence of exercises each time, so learners have an incentive to return to sections that have proved challenging to them in the past.

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