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## **A (too) brief explanation of the terms “Bildung” and “Erziehung” for the hurried English-speaking reader**

*This text is based on extracts of the paper >Concepts of “Bildung” vs. “Erziehung” in German Pedagogy and Their Potential Impact on Educational Assessment< by Christoph Schneider (University of Trier) and Peter H. Ludwig (University of Koblenz-Landau) presented in a webinar for the SIG “Assessment Cultures” of the “Association for Educational Assessment – Europe” (AEA-E), February 4, 2022.*

*Abstract:* The German terms “Bildung” and “Erziehung” are hardly translatable and are therefore occasionally used internationally as loanwords. This text attempts to explain their meanings in a brief manner to an international readership. In doing so, a distinction is made between formal definitions and supplementary connotative meanings. Furthermore, broad and narrow sense definitions are being compared.

*Zusammenfassung:* Die schwer übersetzbaren deutschen Ausdrücke “Bildung” und “Erziehung” finden bisweilen auch international Verwendung. Es wird der Versuch unternommen, die Bedeutungen dieser Termini in knapper Form einer internationalen Leserschaft nahezubringen. Dabei werden sowohl formale Definitionen von konnotativen Bedeutungszusätzen unterschieden als auch Begriffsbestimmungen im weiten und im engen Sinn.

It is not uncommon to leave the German terms “Erziehung” and especially “Bildung” untranslated in the international literature of education. The present text aims at providing a rough explanation of these terms for the English-speaking audience. Therefore, detailed justifications and references are left aside and referred to elsewhere (e.g. Ludwig 2020).

As a first approach, the meanings of “Bildung” and “Erziehung” are to a certain degree closely related to the English term “education” (or “formation”, “rearing”, “upbringing”, “raising” and “training”) (e.g. Biesta 2016, 152f, 167). However, even

merely attempting to translate these German terms leaves us in the midst of a terminological confusion that these terms may stir up in other languages and academic cultures, and sometimes even amongst speakers of German. The terminological field of the various multiple meanings of these terms is much too sophisticated in order to provide an adequate direct translation or a short explanation which covers all the facets of their meanings.

### Outlining the Varieties of Meanings

First, the considerable variety of meanings that the terms “Bildung” and “Erziehung” may adopt, either by formal definitions or by simply using them in different contexts, are displayed. In order to avoid the tedious process of listing all of the single meanings that have ever appeared in the respective literature or in oral language, we simply refer to a four-step taxonomy. For implementing this terminological taxonomy “nutrition processing” is primarily used as an example (similar to Ludwig 2021, 190–192):

*1st step:* Let us assume someone prepares or provides food for another person.

*2nd step:* The other person uses cutlery and eats food or takes a drink.

*3rd step:* The food is ingested by being taken into the body before then moving through the body and undergoing certain chemical changes within the digestive system.

*4th step:* These preceding processes may result in feelings of satiety, regaining of energy or a state of satisfaction.

Each step follows logically from the previous step; they are interconnected: Each step is a precondition for the next step and at the same time relates to entirely different things. Cooking is different from eating, eating is different from digesting and digesting is different from not feeling hungry anymore or feeling satisfied.

It is hard to imagine using the exact same word for all these different steps. Nevertheless, let us think for a moment of a fictitious language where there is just one word for all these four steps: Let us call this artificial word “xyz”. One can easily imagine the considerable risk of misunderstanding if somebody used this word in a sentence like: “I want to xyz”. The listener would not know whether the person wanted to cook, to eat, to digest or to simply feel fine.

However, it is precisely this state of confusion that occurs when we delve into the terminological sphere of education. By doing so, these four steps of the nutrition example can be transformed into abstract, generalized categories:

The first step is an *interpersonal action*, whatsoever.

The second step is an *intrapersonal* or self-directed *action*.

The third step is an *automatic process* within the body or *mind* of the target person.

Finally, the fourth step is an *outcome*, state or trait that the person experiences as a result from the previous processes (e.g. skills, abilities).

The English term “education” exists in at least three different meanings: step 1, 2 and 4.

For instance:

In the sentence “The education of her parents made her a decent person” the term is used corresponding to step 1. In this case, education is regarded as something that is done to others, in order to foster them.

In the sentence “I am educating myself” the term is consistent with step 2.

And when someone speaks of “somebody has or owns or possesses education”, then education is understood as a set of competencies that the person has acquired through the former process, thus step 4.

For “Bildung” and “Erziehung” we can find examples of formal definitions and implicit attributions of meanings by the use of the words in sentences for all four different categories. The same procedure can be applied to “socialization” and “learning” respectively (see Ludwig 2020). Figure 1 summarizes this variety of different meanings.

Figure 1: Multiple meanings of terms

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Example: „Food Processing“	Provision of food Preparing and providing meals (i.e. cooking, baking)	Intake of food eating and drinking	Physiological, chemical processes of nutrition and absorption (i.e. digestion)	Achieved inner states Experiencing a sensation of satiety, energy
Generalized Categories	Social and physical environment interpersonal actions for target person	Intrapersonal actions of target person	Mental and physiological processes within target person	Result, outcome gained mental dispositions of target person
Education (as used in English)	to educate somebody	to educate oneself (self-education)		„educatedness“ skills, abilities
Erziehung	to educate somebody	to educate oneself	acquiring and developing knowledge, learning	„educatedness“ behavioral dispositions, attitudes
Bildung	to train somebody in something	to train oneself	Learning and development	knowledge, skills
Sozialisation / Socialization	„making social“	self- socialization	„becoming social“	„being social“ „socializedness“
Lernen / Learning	teaching, e.g. “Can’t learn an old dog new tricks”	e.g. doing one’s homework	processing and storing information	ability to develop new behavior

As a result, the situation is particularly challenging when one word has multiple meanings. In order to be fully understood, precise terminology is essential.

## Formal Definition

In Germany, the discourse among educational scientists is more or less strictly divided into two camps and the bridges between these two camps are few and far between: The traditional camp is *philosophically*-oriented with roots that can be traced back into the 19th century. The modern camp consists of *empirically* working colleagues. Typical of philosophical research is the use of a more metaphorical, embellished language with a tendency to explain terms rather loosely and instead paraphrasing and being content with vague hints when it comes to illuminating the meaning of terms. By contrast, the empirical group tend to define their terms more accurately, using a more formal language that at times displays a large gap between the meanings of the same words used in academic language as compared to ordinary language.

For now, a formal definition of the two terms in question is provided which is in line with the empirical section of educational researchers. This definition reflects the meaning of these terms in a broader sense. It is accepted by the majority of educational researchers and is well-justified. The definition is distinct. This suggests that we can determine relatively precisely which events or actions apply to “Erziehung” and which do not apply. However, one of the disadvantages is that not all connotations of these terms in colloquial language are covered. For this reason, we will proceed to metaphorical explanations that are typical for the philosophical camp. The latter was very influential with regard to incorporating these two terms into everyday language.

This formal definition of “Erziehung” basically goes back to Wolfgang Brezinka (1994; Ludwig 2020, 178–260) and corresponds with step 1 in figure 1. Brezinka defines (abridged)

“Erziehung” as a set of actions being executed in order to foster the personality of people.

Brezinka describes “personality” as all the “psychological dispositions” which are relatively stable, robust traits, such as all the competencies, skills, attitudes, beliefs and views a person has acquired over his or her lifespan. Technically, this definition would also work to explain “Bildung”. Hence, in a formal way both terms may be considered almost synonymous, and their common meaning might correspond more or less to the English term “education” (at least according to step 1 in figure 1; Ludwig 2020, 263–267).

The German noun “Bildung” or its verb “bilden” is also used in a *general* way beyond the educational context. In this sense, “bilden” means “to make”, “to create”, “to form” or “to construct” something, in the same way as the English word “to build” or “building” is used as a verb (e.g. in the idiom “nation-building”). So, the phonetical kinship of “Bildung” [pronounced 'bildʊŋ] to the English “building” is not purely coincidental. There are indeed common etymological roots for both words.

However, in the *educational* sphere “Bildung” stands for something more specific, the “(human) Bildung” or “personality Bildung”. In this way, “Bildung” adopts the

special meaning of “building” not just anything but building the personality of an individual.

### Connotative Distinctions

The aforementioned formal definition does not precisely mirror the usage of these words in everyday language. In colloquial language, these terms display a variety of additional connotations. To a certain degree, in conversational German, these two terms are not fully interchangeable. Depending on the context in everyday language, one of these two terms is to be used exclusively. There are three basic distinctions (see figure 2; Ludwig 2020, 264–267).

1) There is an *age distinction* concerning those being educated: The word “Erziehung” is preferably used when it comes to supporting children’s learning processes. By contrast, the term “Bildung” is more or less reserved for adults. It would sound strange to say “adult Erziehung” (for “adult education”) in colloquial German. One would rather say “adult Bildung”.

2) There is a *subject distinction* or a distinction in learning areas: The word “Erziehung” covers to yield a specific behavior, attitudes and beliefs. “Bildung” is especially used for creating knowledge in traditional school subjects. There is “mathematics Bildung” but not “maths Erziehung”.

Figure 2: Distinctions in colloquial German:

	Erziehung	Bildung
1) <b>age distinction</b>	children	adults
2) <b>content distinction</b>	behavior, attitudes, beliefs	objective world knowledge (school subjects)
3) <b>distinction in participants’ activity</b>	passive role of student / educand / educatee	active role of student / educand / educatee

3) And finally, there is a connotative *distinction* in the degree of *activity* that participants show: “Erziehung” is mainly regarded as an activity of the educator while the educatee stays passive. He or she only needs to accept the treatment. “Bildung” on the other hand is usually connected with the idea that the main work is done or has to be done by the educatee. The educator’s contribution is just providing a stimulus. Some people even define “Bildung” mostly or exclusively as “Selbstbildung” (“self-Bildung”), which can only be done by the learners themselves.

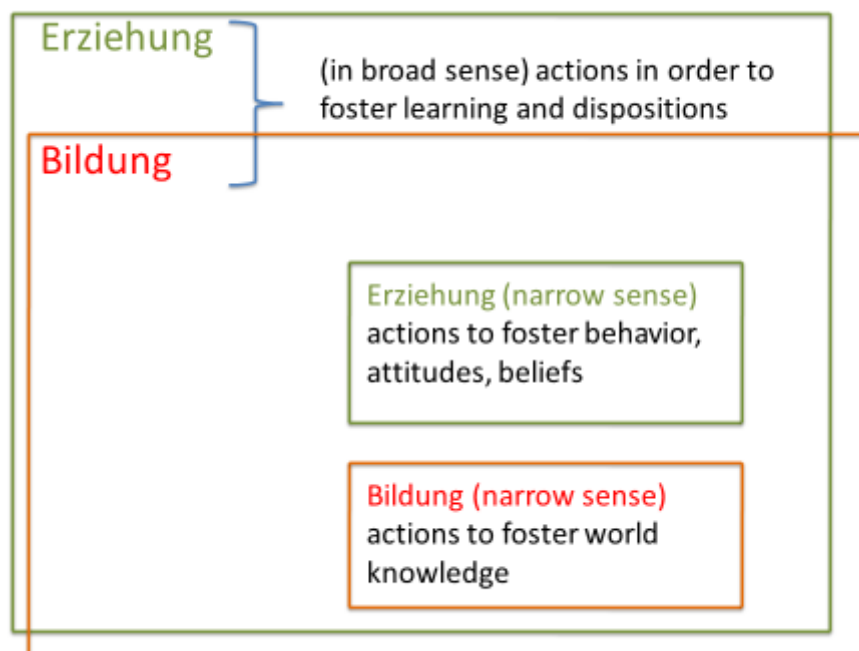
These three distinctions in age, contents and activity lead to **narrower** meanings of these two terms compared to the meanings determined by broad formal definitions. These narrow meanings are only partly reflected in definitions of “Erziehung” and “Bildung”, and if at all, the content distinction needs to be reflected.

**Erziehung** (in the narrow sense) is a set of actions being executed to foster certain behaviors, attitudes and beliefs (morality) of people.

**Bildung** (in the narrow sense) is a set of actions being executed to foster an objective world knowledge.

To put it briefly, Erziehung makes people “being good” and Bildung makes people “knowing much” (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Terms in broad and narrow sense



### Connotative “Coloring” of the Meanings of Terms

In addition, further special features of the concepts of Erziehung and Bildung restrict their meanings even stronger. These features are more connotative aspects in collo-

quial language that can be found in more metaphorical symbolic paraphrases or theories on *Erziehung* and *Bildung*. They are rarely precise and clear-cut definitions of these terms. As a result, it is challenging to explain and understand them because they leave room for various interpretations.

Therefore, let us now leave the area of precise terminology and draw a more or less *blurry* picture of these terms, entering the area of the philosophical camp (see figure 4).

The term “*Erziehung*” often connotes a strict or even a rude treatment of others, although this connotation mostly does not apply to formal definitions. Therefore, some educators seem to think that the word “*Erziehung*” is no longer compatible with ideas preferred by today’s “modern” education. This connotation can be traced back to the origin of the word, which consists of the two parts “*er-*” and “*-ziehen*”, literally meaning “to pull out (somebody of something)” or “to tear at somebody”, which is an altogether quite forceful act of making a person move. This word might form the image of someone treating another person in a rude, authoritative or even aggressive manner. The aforementioned connotation places “*Erziehung*” close to “direction”, “indoctrination” and as a means of reproducing the existing societal order (Biesta 2019; Meyer-Drawe 1999, 164).

Therefore, in educational terminology, it was even suggested to disregard the use of the word “*Erziehung*” entirely and replace it by other less authoritarian terms in the 1970s when new fashions of “free” or “democratic” education appeared. It is not surprising that this movement towards giving up terms did not take place in other countries because in most European languages the word for “education” is, as in English, derived from the Latin verb “educare” or noun “educatio” (e.g. French “*éducation*”, Spanish “*educación*”, Portuguese “*educação*”, Italian “*educazione*”, Dutch “*educatie*”, Romanian “*educație*”). “E-ducare” literally means “to lead out – to guide someone out of something, e. g. from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge. So, the root word sounds more appropriate than to “pull someone out by force”.

However, it is a different matter with the term “*Bildung*”. Its connotations point in the opposite direction. Whereas “*Erziehung*” is connoted with the image of strictly appointing or determining for others the way they have to go, “*Bildung*” is associated with far greater degrees of freedom being granted to the educatees. In processes of “*Bildung*”, a teacher or educator just gives hints, while most of the “work” is in the responsibility of the educatees.

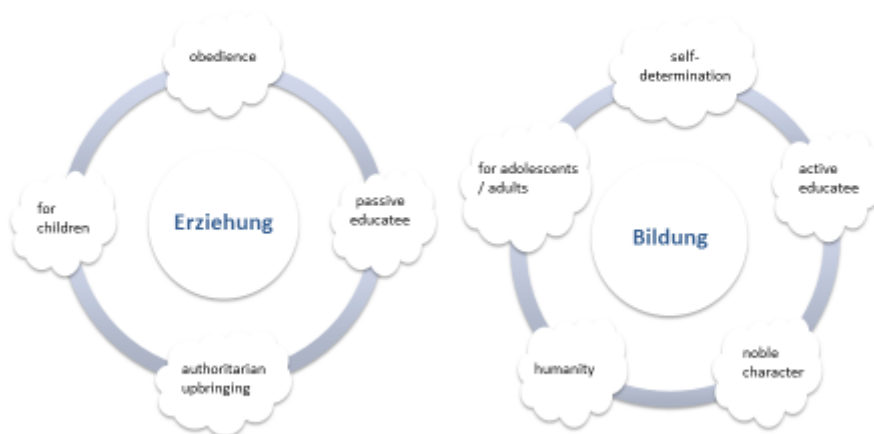
*Bildung* is not only seen as a process of people’s adjustment to given societal norms and values but rather as a process of self-design, self-formation, self-determination, autonomy, self-direction or self-guidance. It has emancipatory potential that brings out the individuality of a person (Koller 2021, 52, 54).

These ideas mainly date back to the 19th century thinking of the educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt, brother of natural philosopher Alexander von Humboldt. He focused on the term “*Bildung*” and conceptualized it in detail for the Prussian school



system. In doing so, he has formed the ideas around “Bildung” up to the present. A similar line of thinking is displayed in the middle of the 19th century in the works of Friedrich Fröbel, the founder of the institution and term “kindergarten”.

Figure 4: Frequent connotations



The term “Bildung” is sometimes even charged with downright pathetic, emotional, enthusiastic or even melodramatic and unrealistic connotations. The “Gebildete” (“educated person”) was derived from the concept of the British noble Gentleman of the 18th century: Knowledge brings out the „beauty” of the soul, ennobling a person’s character and personality, like humanity, generosity or noble-mindedness. Humboldt hoped that these desirable traits could be generated by offering school subjects such as dead languages (ancient Greek and Latin), history, arts and literature. So up to this day, a “gebildete Person” (learned or educated person) has been associated with a person being able to discuss paintings, theater plays and novels. A person who knows about natural sciences or is able to repair a broken car is usually not considered “gebildet” (educated).

Attempts to unify these ideas concerning “Bildung” into a kind of definition of the term inevitably turned out to be ineffective, often taking recourse to idiomatic expressions shaped by Humboldt. One typical example of these attempts can be found in the Brockhaus Encyclopedia (Vol 2, 20th edition 1997, s. v. “Bildung”): “Bildung means the stimulation of all the powers of a human being so that these develop harmoniously and proportionately through the appropriation of the world and lead to a self-determining individuality or personality which enriches humanity in its ideality and uniqueness”. One could ask: What is meant by “powers of a human being”? What is

the “appropriation of the world”? What does humanity in its ideality and uniqueness mean?

Even though it may not be easy to transfer these terminological connotations into clear and distinct explanations of the term “Bildung”, these connotations nevertheless do exist and are present in the minds of people, while at the same time forming people’s understanding of “Bildung” and possibly influencing concepts of teaching.

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