



A Kiss and its Consequences

Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities



**HEIDELBERGER AKADEMIE
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Many everyday actions are legal matters as well. In the 'Deutsches Rechtswörterbuch', you can look up the historical legal language of the German-speaking countries.

The famous movie song 'As time goes by' claims that 'a kiss is just a kiss'. We would gladly believe it, but the project of a German legal dictionary undertaken at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities might change your mind.

For many centuries, a kiss was not so much an expression of spontaneous erotic enthusiasm as a rather serious matter. As a sign of legal validity, it was part of numerous rituals of self-degradation, deference and acceptance into a community. Even if it arose from passion, a kiss could quickly become a bone of contention in court. Two legal sources from the 18th century claim that a mere kiss does not express the intention to marry one another nor 'any other valid commitment'. J.G. Krünitz, on the other hand, is convinced that 'according to scholars, a kiss between bride and groom does not mean that marriage has taken place. By kissing the bride, though, the groom has shown that marriage surely will follow'.

These treasures from the **Deutsches Rechtswörterbuch** (DRW) show that many everyday actions are – often controversial – legal matters as well. The DRW is neither a dictionary of today's legal terms nor a lexicon for lawyers, but a historical dictionary whose sources cover the period from the 5th century to the Napoleonic era. Not only legal texts, but also excerpts from travel descriptions, religious and literary texts and economic records have found their way into the archives in Heidelberg that today contain two million slips recording examples of usage and an electronic text database.

For historical reasons, the DRW includes records from the whole West Germanic language family, following the decision of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences when the project was begun in the late 19th century. Out of the planned 16 volumes, eleven have already been printed, containing around 90,000 articles. The dictionary has long been available online at no cost, at www.deutsches-rechtswörterbuch.de. The complete work with 120,000 articles will be published by 2035.

As a 'unique and extremely impressive mirror of the values and customs of the past', the DRW explains life in bygone times from a distinctive perspective and also shows us the sources of modern legal thinking.

Annette Zerpner

Illustrations: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg

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