

Dear Mr. Stanley,

I write you today to ask you for help with a language problem. I date since three years a young lady from New York. Lately, she tell me often that I use the phrase “too late” too much and at the wrong time. She say that that she is not “too late” when I say she is too late, but she say that she is only “late”. It really makes her angry when I tell her that she is “too late”. Is she just being too sensible or am I really making some problems?

Greetings,

Marcus, Lenz (Germany)

Dear Marcus,

I could imagine that your girlfriend is perhaps a bit overly sensitive when it comes to her punctuality, for Germans generally don't have the same appreciation for the American tendency to be “fashionablylate.” For it is an important cultural difference that, in many regions of the English speaking world, it is actually a wee bit rude to show up for an appointment a few minutes early – which in Germany is rather common and generally viewed in a positive light.

Apart from this cultural difference that may or may not be at issue, there is certainly a linguistic problem in play here, and – I am sorry to tell you this – but your girlfriend is right. In English, “too late” is used to mean something different in English than the German “zu spät.” The German means primarily simply “not on time,” “not punctual.” In English, we have two ways of saying “not on time”: “late” and “too late.” The first one – “late” – means simply “not punctual.” (In German you tend to say “spät dran.”) The second one – “too late” – is much harsher in its meaning: it says not only that one is not punctual, but also that whatever activity was planned can no longer be carried out because there is not enough time left to do it. Thus, if you invite your girlfriend over to dinner, and she come ten minutes late, she is not “too late,” but merely “late.” After all, you will still be able to enjoy the dinner you have prepared, won't you? If you do in fact tell her she is “too late,” she will be insulted, for it implies that she is so late that the meal has had time to ruin completely.

I hope this facilitates your cultural exchange!

John Stanley