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## Volkswagen

Volkswagen: it's a world-renown brand. Maybe not quite as well-known as Coca-Cola or McDonald's, but as a German-based company, it is pretty safe to say there is a large amount of brand awareness if a great deal of people know about it in the United States. This word means a lot; not only in literal ways, but also in personal ways – also known as objective and subjective, respectively. First, I would like to delve into to the objective meaning of the word; one that can be backed by facts and statements. Once that is out of the way, I will begin to talk about the subjective meaning of the word as it has followed me through the course of my life.

The origin of the word *Volkswagen* can be traced back to 1930s Germany, most notably to a man named Josef Ganz (Schilperoord, "Standard Superior"). The word had begun circulating as the idea of a car suitable for the average working-class family began to surface (Nelson, 12), as the word means, quite literally, "people's car" in German. "In the summer of 1932, director Wilhelm Gutbrod of the Standard Fahrzeugfabrik in Ludwigsburg made contact with Josef Ganz to discuss the development of a small Volkswagen" (Schilperoord, "Standard Superior"). This car was called the "Standard Superior" and was advertised as the first real Volkswagen (Schilperoord, "Standard Superior"). Keep in mind, of course, at this time the word was simply a noun that meant "people's car."

The word began to take on a slightly different connotation starting in 1934 when Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Third Reich in Germany, began to advertise the idea for the creation of

the “people’s car,” or, in German, the “Volkswagen” (Busch, 178). This finally came to fruition thanks, largely, to the engineering from Ferdinand Porsche that culminated in the creation of the “Kraft durch Freude” (KnF abbr.) in 1937, the first (and only) Nazi-backed Volkswagen. No mass-produced model of this car was ever delivered, however, as World War II broke out soon after production began (Nelson, 81). As such, the word Volkswagen seemed to take on different connotations in these times: it went from an obscure idea, to an obscure reality in the form of a Jewish engineer’s car (Schilpoord), to a hopeful dream, to a dream only plausible for its wishful recipients at the end of the “great war.”

During World War II, the factory that was built to manufacture the KnF was used to build military vehicles for the war effort. As such, it was the target for many air bombings by allied forces. So, naturally, it seemed that the idea of the Volkswagen was lost at the end of the war with a factory in complete disrepair. This, of course, was not the case thanks to a British Army Officer by the name of Ivan Hurst. Hurst convinced the British Army to order the KnF model for its fleet to alleviate the lack of light transport. Between 1945 and 1948, the American and British played a game of hot-potato with the factory, which was producing around 1,000 cars a month; with a famous quote by Ernest Breech to Henry Ford II on the idea of being given the Volkswagen company to Ford, free of charge, “Mr. Ford, I don't think what we're being offered here is worth a dime!” (Nelson, 4). The word Volkswagen during this period, particularly for those in the Western automobile business, gained a connotation of almost comical thought. This did not last long.

Since it seemed that no British or American would take on the company, it was given to Heinrich Nordhoff, a German Engineer with previous experience in the automobile industry, in 1948. From then on, he led the Volkswagen company to build the *Volkswagen Beetle*, which at

the time was entirely synonymous with the name as it was the only car the company produced for decades. This is the time that the brand became to be known worldwide to the public, namely to those residing in the Western world. This is also when the word Volkswagen began to take on different connotations to different people. For example, initially in the United States, it was popular in the suburbs as a cheap, reliable automobile. Note, again, that the *Volkswagen Beetle* – then called the *Victory Wagon* - at this time was largely synonymous with the company as a whole as it was the only model the company offered. This also was most likely the origin of the connotation that *Volkswagen* has as a symbol of German craftsmanship. In West Germany, it became the symbol for the economic miracle that was the regeneration following World War II (Nelson, 141).

Beginning in the 1960s, *Volkswagen* began to take on its most famous connotation. As the “hippy” movement began to gain traction in the United States, the advertisers for Volkswagen used innovative techniques to lure in this young target market (Nelson, 235). During this time, *Volkswagen* started to slightly separate in connotation from the *Volkswagen Beetle* as the company came out with different models, such as the *Volkswagen Type 2* – also known as the *Volkswagen Bus* (“Volkswagen Type 2 T1.”). Consequently, *Volkswagen* during this time took on the connotation that is synonymous with the “hippy” movement. This connotation still persists today.

The history of the word for *me* began shortly after I turned nine years old. I had already spent some time watching the *Herbie* movies from the mid-twentieth century. However, in this year of 2005, an all-new *Herbie* movie was being released by Disney. Not only was a new *Herbie* movie coming out, but its main character was also Lindsay Lohan: my celebrity crush at the time. I was absolutely ecstatic. Believe it or not, but before this time I did not really know

that *Herbie* was actually a car that one could buy. So in this year, I was introduced to the Volkswagen company, and its cars; namely, obviously, to its *Volkswagen Beetle*. From then on, I always told everyone that as soon as I turned sixteen and could finally start driving, it would *obviously* be the *Volkswagen Beetle*. I also enjoyed playing the odd game which main objective was being the first to punch whoever was closest to you when a Volkswagen vehicle was spotted. This era of my life added the subjective meaning for the word to include *Herbie*, Lindsay Lohan, and the memory of Christmas at my grandparent's house – when they gave me a remote controlled *Herbie* car.

Fast forward to around the time that I was eleven. My grandpa owned a junk yard; that is, a large mass of land dedicated to junk cars that nobody wants anymore. I was walking in the overgrown field with my dad - as you see, my grandfather allowed this lot to fall into disrepair sometime after my uncles moved out (aka the employees of his little company). We were looking for some certain part that was on one of the cars in the lot that my dad needed. While walking along, I spotted a *Volkswagen Rabbit*. We most certainly had to take a detour so I could take a gander at the car. Knowing that I loved Volkswagen, my dad ripped off the logo on the car and gave it to me. I still have this logo; in fact, it hangs above the desk this essay was written on. This experience added another layer to the meaning of Volkswagen for me; it brings me back to the time spent play-driving with my cousin in the junk cars at my grandpa's junk yard. It also symbolizes the little time I spent with my dad during my childhood.

Between this time and my senior year of high school, there wasn't a whole lot of new development that occurred in terms of my relationship with the word. My first car wasn't a *Volkswagen Beetle*, but I did remain a fan of it and enjoyed looking at the *Volkswagen Buses* that I saw from time to time. However, beginning sometime the fall of my senior year, I began

researching the purchase of a new car. My first car was actually a Chevrolet Corsica that my parents bought brand new when I was born. So, essentially, the car was the same age as I. However, as it was reaching its eighteenth year of service, this car with over two-hundred and sixty thousand *rough* miles was reaching the point where it was no longer reliable and I needed something to bring to college with me. Of course, the first idea that I had was to buy a Volkswagen. By this time, I no longer had the dream of buying a *Volkswagen Beetle* but I did still like the company, and I had found a new love: the *Volkswagen Jetta*. Despite my upbringing, I wasn't a huge automobile buff, and in fact, I disliked the look of most cars. Especially the new ones. The one exception to this was the Jetta.

So, I began researching used Jetta's and their prices. The more I researched, however, the more I learned that my dad's comment that they had a history of bad transmissions was not actually a myth. My best course of action would be to buy a new one. I just needed my good ole' Corsica to last a few more months. Then I would be free to finally buy a Volkswagen. I even went to a Volkswagen dealership and test drove a 2014 model. It was amazing! I definitely made the right choice.

My good ole' Corsica had a little problem, however. One of the heads was cracked on it. My dad had been babying it for years, in fact. It still ran fine, but it was basically a ticking time bomb. At any second, it could die. One Saturday evening in late December, I was driving home from work. It had lightly snowed in the past few hours, so I was driving pretty cautious; but it was mostly dry and the roads weren't all that slick. Except on this one curve that went down into this valley. Although I was going only about 25 miles per hour on this curve that I normally went 55 on, my back two tires lost traction and I spun around and went into the ditch. While doing so, I rolled up a hill, almost going upside down before I rolled back on to the tires. Great! My first

wreck, and it broke my windshield. Not only that but I didn't have a phone at the time. I had to walk through the cold snow to a nearby house and try to call my parents – whom I only barely remembered the phone numbers of. As this was a wreck that I figured was obviously going to be credited as my fault, but it didn't involve anyone but me... I wanted my parents to come pick me up and just not deal with the cops. However, the owners of the house that so graciously let me come in and use their phone forced me to call the police. Luckily, the guy didn't cite me for anything.

Anyway, something in this wreck caused an issue with my car, and a few months later it finally died. Literally went up in smoke; right along with my dreams to finally buy a Volkswagen. With this turn of events, a new layer of meaning for the word Volkswagen was added for me. Much like the working-class families of pre-WWII who wanted a Volkswagen of their own, it now symbolized unattainable dreams. This wasn't the last layer that was added to the subjective meaning of Volkswagen for me. The next layer came in September 2015, my sophomore year of college.

In my sophomore year of college, I was put to the task of writing a personal narrative on the subjective and objective meanings of a word for me. Of course, I chose *Volkswagen*. Not to say that I have some unhealthy obsession with the word; but out of any word, name, or brand in my life, it has to be one of the most interesting to me. If not just for the sound alone. The subjective portion of the word is easy – that doesn't take any research. That's personal. However, the objective portion takes a bit of research. Included are its origin, historical meanings, and popular connotations (Groves).

In the early process of forming the essay, I stumbled upon an interesting fact about the company that the word is attributed to that I had not known before. Turns out, the word

*Volkswagen* did not see its first usage after the formation of the company. This bit of information is not too surprising. I had already known about the troubles that occurred in Germany during the Weimer Republic, and the name is a literal noun in German. What I was surprised to find out, however, is that the word can largely be attributed to a car engineer named Josef Ganz in the early 1930s. This man, in fact, had invented a car named the *Maikäfer* (Schilperoord). This is interesting, because the name translated into English is *May Bug*. Bug, being another nickname given to the *Volkswagen Beetle*. How much of a coincidence this is, I am not sure. The *real* coincidence is that he showed a car called the *Standard Superior* that he advertised as the first real Volkswagen in 1933 at the Berlin motor show. Of the attendees? Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Isn't it interesting that Adolf Hitler would later create a company by that name? Also, funnily enough, this particular model of the *Standard Superior* bears a resemblance to what would later become the KnF (Schilperoord).

Why is this information important? Well, Josef Ganz happened to be a Jew. It's not uncommon knowledge that Hitler was not particularly fond of the Jews. In fact, Josef Ganz was later "arrested by the Gestapo and any connection between him and [the term *Volkswagen*] was erased from the pages of history" (Schilperoord). Learning this bit of information was revolutionary for me, as it added another layer to the already complex subjective meaning of the word. It almost cements the fact that *Volkswagen* is my favorite word. Why is this? Well, Volkswagen is mostly German, but it definitely has some Jewish origin. I feel like this is the same case for me: of my ethnicities, I am almost entirely German in descent, but I do have some Jewish descent coming from my father's side of the family.

So to summarize, the word *Volkswagen* objectively is of German origin and carries the connotations related with the *Volkswagen Beetle*, the "hippy" movement of the 1960s, and

German craftsmanship. However, subjectively it carries many connotations and meanings for me, including the popular connotations, but also the personal ones I have gained throughout my life. For me, *Volkswagen* isn't just a company. It is more of a symbol of different feelings and memories.



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