

German unchained

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A chance call from Hollywood led to Dietmar Felber being selected from the faculty members who teach German at Tulane University to be a language coach for actress Kerry Washington as she prepared her role for Quentin Tarantino's latest film, *Django Unchained*.



Dietmar Felber, right, goes to the set of Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* to be a language coach for actress Kerry Washington, who plays a German-speaking slave. (Photo from Dietmar Felber)

In the film's plantation scenes shot in Louisiana, Washington plays a German-speaking house slave. Her character, Broomhilda, understands German, having been taught it by her original slaveowners, and the language is central in a pivotal scene. Bounty-hunter Dr. King Schultz, played by Oscar-winning actor Christoph Waltz, slyly speaks German to Broomhilda as he attempts to free her from the plantation where she is enslaved.

"There is a historical plausibility for such a character and perhaps a New Orleans connection," says [Felber](#), a visiting lecturer who taught a Tulane course on Germans

in New Orleans last semester. "New Orleans was an important port of entry for German immigrants in the first half of the 19th century, and antebellum New Orleans had a German immigrant community. Some of these Southern Germans, once they had become wealthy enough, owned slaves."

Felber says Washington was "absolutely dedicated" to the role and worked diligently to pronounce German correctly during coaching sessions in the star's trailer near Evergreen Plantation in Edgard, La., and on a soundstage in downtown New Orleans.

Though her lines in German were short, Washington learned four stanzas of a German folk song, "Abendlied."

"In the end, she could nail it from memory, with every German sound correct," Felber says.

Though the song didn't make the film's soundtrack, Felber says he's glad that *Django Unchained* has made German cool, because the German-speaking Dr. Schultz is a "good guy."

Before the conclusion of the Louisiana shoot, Washington visited the Tulane uptown campus last May to talk about the film and sing the song along with some of the students in the [Department of German and Slavic Studies](#).