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THE TRANSFORMATION OF GERMAN VOCABULARY UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: This article examines how digitally mediated communication, and social networking platforms in particular, have reshaped the lexicon of contemporary German. Drawing on descriptive lexicological analysis and on the documentation of neologisms compiled by German language institutions, the study argues that platform communication does not merely add isolated loanwords to the language; it redistributes the productivity of established word-formation patterns, accelerates the pace at which innovations are codified, and blurs the conventional boundary between written and spoken registers. Four processes are discussed in detail: the intensified borrowing of English material, the rise of hybrid compounding and clipping, the semantic reinterpretation of existing German lexemes, and the emergence of written pragmatic markers that substitute for prosody and gesture. The article concludes that the influence of social media is best described as an acceleration and reallocation of tendencies already latent in German rather than as a rupture with the language's structural history.

Keywords: German lexicology, neologism, anglicism, social media, word formation, youth language, semantic change, digital communication.

1. Introduction

Few domains of language change are as immediately observable as vocabulary. Phonological and syntactic developments unfold over generations and are usually noticed only in retrospect, whereas lexical innovation is visible almost in real time: a word appears, spreads across communicative networks, and is either absorbed into general usage or discarded within a few years. Social media has made this cycle both faster and far more public. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and X function simultaneously as sites of production, distribution and metalinguistic commentary, so that speakers not only coin new expressions but also discuss, ridicule and canonise them in the same communicative space.[1]

For German the question carries additional weight. The language possesses a highly productive compounding system, a rich inventory of derivational affixes, and a long-standing tradition of institutional lexicography that documents change with unusual precision. It is therefore possible to trace with some accuracy which innovations of the past two decades originate in digital communication and how the language has structurally accommodated them. The Neologismenwoerterbuch maintained by the Leibniz Institute for the German Language records a marked concentration of new entries in the semantic fields of digital interaction, self-presentation and online sociability.[2]

[1] On the general acceleration of lexical circulation in networked communication see D. Crystal, Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide, London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 57-72.
[2] Leibniz-Institut fuer Deutsche Sprache (IDS), Neologismenwoerterbuch, Mannheim, ongoing electronic publication, section on the vocabulary of the 2010s and 2020s.

This article pursues three aims. First, it describes the principal mechanisms through which social media affects the German lexicon. Second, it argues that these mechanisms are not uniformly innovative: several of them intensify patterns that German has employed for centuries. Third, it considers the sociolinguistic consequences of the fact that the innovations in question are produced in writing yet behave, in many respects, like features of spontaneous speech.

2. Borrowing: the English component of the digital lexicon

The most conspicuous effect of social media on German vocabulary is the influx of English material. This is unsurprising: the dominant platforms were developed in the anglophone world, their interfaces were first localised from English, and the professional vocabulary of the sector circulates internationally in English. Terms such as posten, liken, teilen in its digital sense, Follower, Feed, Story, Reel, Hashtag, Livestream and Influencer entered German usage in close succession, largely because the referents themselves were new and no established German designation competed with them.[3]

It is important, however, to distinguish between categories of borrowing that behave very differently. Necessary borrowings fill genuine designation gaps and tend to remain stable; luxury borrowings duplicate an existing German expression and compete with it. The verb liken, for instance, coexists with the German phrase etwas mit Gefaellt mir markieren, but the borrowed form has prevailed because it is morphologically economical and integrates effortlessly into German verbal inflection: ich like, du likst, geliked or gelikt. Such integration is the decisive criterion. A borrowing that acquires German inflectional endings, a fixed grammatical gender and native derivational potential has ceased to be a foreign body in the lexicon and has become part of it.[4]

Gender assignment offers a particularly clear illustration of how borrowings are domesticated. German assigns a gender to every noun, and speakers resolve the assignment for loanwords by analogy with a semantically equivalent native term, by the phonological shape of the word, or by the gender typically associated with its derivational suffix. Der Post aligns with der Beitrag, die Story with die Geschichte, das Reel with das Video. Where competing analogies exist, variation persists for some time and is subsequently resolved in favour of the more frequent form, as the fluctuation between der and das Blog demonstrates.[5]

A further observation concerns semantic narrowing during transfer. English words rarely enter German with the full range of meanings they carry in the source language. Story in German digital usage denotes almost exclusively the ephemeral photographic or video post that disappears after a set interval; the general senses of the English noun are not transferred. The borrowed lexeme thus arrives in a specialised form, occupies a precise slot in the German lexicon, and consequently competes far less with native vocabulary than purist criticism usually assumes.[6]

3. Word formation: hybrid compounds, clipping and derivation

If borrowing is the most visible consequence of digital communication, word formation is the most consequential one. German compounds freely and without formal limit, and this capacity has

[3] On borrowing motivated by referential gaps rather than prestige see P. Eisenberg, Das Fremdwort im Deutschen, 2nd ed., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 112-130.

[4] For criteria of morphological integration of anglicisms in German see B. Carstensen and U. Busse, Anglizismen-Woerterbuch, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993-1996, introduction to vol. 1.

[5] Duden, Die Grammatik, 10th ed., Berlin: Dudenverlag, 2022, para. 331-338, on gender assignment to loanwords.

[6] On semantic specialisation in the process of borrowing see U. Busse, Typen von Anglizismen: von der heilago geist bis Extremsport, in: G. Stickel (ed.), Neues und Fremdes im deutschen Wortschatz, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001, pp. 131-155.

been applied to the imported material with remarkable speed. Hybrid compounds that combine an English and a German constituent are now among the most productive patterns in the digital lexicon: Followerzahl, Kommentarspalte, Livestream-Uebertragung, Hashtag-Kampagne, Influencer-Marketing, Datenschutzeinstellung, Reichweitenverlust. The English element supplies the technical concept while the German element anchors it in familiar semantic territory, and the resulting compound is grammatically German throughout, since the head determines both gender and inflection.[7]

Derivation operates with comparable vigour. Borrowed verbs are formed with the native infinitive ending -en and then participate in the full apparatus of German prefixation: liken yields abliken, verliken and durchliken in informal usage; posten yields reposten and durchposten. Nominal derivation produces agent nouns in -er and abstract nouns in -ung and -erei, the last of these carrying an unmistakably pejorative colouring that speakers exploit deliberately, as in Selbstdarstellerei or Postereien. The evaluative dimension of German derivational morphology thus provides a ready-made instrument for the metalinguistic criticism of online behaviour.[8]

Shortening deserves separate attention because it runs counter to the traditional image of German as a language of long words. Character limits, mobile keyboards and the premium placed on rapid response have made clipping, acronymy and univerbation everyday strategies. Insta, Reko, Abo, Vid, App and the initialisms lg, vlg, hdl and kA are firmly established in written informal registers. The apparent contradiction dissolves on closer inspection: German has always tolerated abbreviation in informal and professional speech, and digital communication has simply extended it into writing, where it is now visible and therefore perceived as new.[9]

Two further patterns should be noted. The first is affixoid formation, in which a lexeme drifts towards the status of a productive prefix: the elements Mega-, Ultra-, Cringe- and Fake- attach with increasing freedom to native bases and behave morphologically like intensifying prefixes rather than independent words. The second is playful analogical coinage, in which a template established by one successful formation generates a family of imitations. Such coinages are typically short-lived, but they demonstrate that speakers manipulate word-formation rules consciously, treating them as a resource for humour and identity display rather than as a fixed grammatical mechanism.[10]

4. Semantic change and the rise of written pragmatic markers

Alongside the creation of new forms, social media has redistributed the meanings of words that German already possessed. The clearest cases involve the addition of a digital sense to an established lexeme. Teilen has acquired the meaning of forwarding content to a network, folgen that of subscribing to another user's output, Freund that of a reciprocally confirmed platform contact, and Wand that of a personal display surface. In each instance the new reading is metaphorically motivated by the older one, yet the two are no longer interchangeable: unfollowing someone on a platform is not the

[7] On hybrid compounding as the principal integration mechanism see W. Fleischer and I. Barz, Wortbildung der deutschen Gegenwartssprache, 4th ed., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 128-141.
[8] On the pejorative function of the suffix -erei in contemporary German see Fleischer and Barz, op. cit., pp. 213-215.
[9] C. Duerscheid and K. Frick, Keyboard-to-Screen-Kommunikation gestern und heute, in: Networx, no. 64, Hannover, 2014, pp. 8-24.
[10] On affixoids and the gradual grammaticalisation of lexical elements see E. Donalies, Die Wortbildung des Deutschen: ein Ueberblick, 2nd ed., Tuebingen: Narr, 2005, pp. 63-70.

equivalent of ceasing to follow them in physical space, and a platform Freund may be a complete stranger.[11]

A second type of change concerns evaluative reorientation. Words that were formerly neutral acquire positive or negative connotations through their characteristic contexts of use. Reichweite, once a technical term of media planning, has become an object of aspiration; Algorithmus, a neutral mathematical concept, is now frequently used with connotations of opacity and external control. Such shifts are not lexicographical curiosities: they document the attitudes of a speech community towards the infrastructure that mediates its communication.[12]

The most theoretically interesting development, however, is the emergence of written pragmatic markers. Spontaneous spoken interaction relies on intonation, facial expression and gesture to signal irony, hesitation, empathy or emphasis. Written platform communication is fast and dialogic but lacks these channels, and speakers have compensated by developing a functional inventory of written signals: modal particles imported from speech into writing, iterated punctuation and letters, capitalisation as a marker of loudness, emoji and the abbreviated action descriptions of the type *seufz*, which are conventionally framed by asterisks and function as an explicit stage direction.[13]

This inventory is of lexicological relevance because several of its elements have become genuine lexemes. The word Cringe illustrates the process: borrowed as a verb, it entered German as an adjective and a noun, was assigned the meaning of embarrassment experienced vicariously, and now appears in native compounds and derivations. What began as a pragmatic reaction token has been fully lexicalised. Similar trajectories can be observed for Hype, Fail and Vibe, each of which now supports a family of derived forms.[14]

Taken together, these developments support a conclusion that has been drawn repeatedly in the research literature: digitally mediated writing constitutes neither written nor spoken language in the traditional sense, but a distinct communicative mode with conceptual proximity to speech and medial realisation in writing. Vocabulary is the layer of the language in which this hybrid status is most clearly registered.[15]

5. Youth language, visibility and codification

Youth language has always been a laboratory of lexical innovation, but until recently its products circulated within relatively closed peer groups and reached the wider community slowly, if at all. Social media has removed this barrier. An expression coined in a small community can achieve national currency within days, be adopted ironically by advertisers within weeks, and be abandoned by its originators precisely because of that adoption. The life cycle of youth vocabulary has therefore not merely accelerated; its dynamics have changed, since visibility now actively shortens the lifespan of the innovations it promotes.[16]

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[11] On metaphorical extension as the dominant mechanism of digital semantic change see A. Blank, Prinzipien des lexikalischen Bedeutungswandels am Beispiel der romanischen Sprachen, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1997, pp. 157-180.

[12] Compare the entries on Algorithmus and Reichweite in Duden, Deutsches Universalwoerterbuch, 9th ed., Berlin: Dudenverlag, 2019.

[13] J. Androutsopoulos, Netzsprache: ein Ueberblick, in: Deutsche Sprache, vol. 35, no. 1, 2007, pp. 72-97.

[14] Cringe was selected as Jugendwort des Jahres in 2021 by Langenscheidt; see Langenscheidt, Jugendwort des Jahres, annual editorial announcements.

[15] On the distinction between medial and conceptual orality see P. Koch and W. Oesterreicher, Sprache der Naehe - Sprache der Distanz, in: Romanistisches Jahrbuch, vol. 36, 1985, pp. 15-43.

[16] E. Neuland, Jugendsprache: eine Einfuehrung, 2nd ed., Tuebingen: Francke, 2018, pp. 143-160.

The annual selection of a Jugendwort des Jahres, conducted in Germany by the Langenscheidt publishing house, offers a convenient, if imperfect, record of this process. Since the introduction of public online voting the shortlists have been dominated by items whose currency derives from platform usage, and the winning words of the early 2020s - smash in 2022, goofy in 2023 and Aura in 2024 - are all of English origin and all owe their diffusion to short-form video. The selection is a marketing exercise rather than a scientific survey, and its results should be treated as an indicator of public salience rather than of actual frequency in youth speech.[17]

Codification has responded in kind. Successive editions of the Duden orthographical dictionary have admitted substantial numbers of digitally motivated entries, and the editorial criterion applied - sustained written attestation across a range of sources over a period of years - means that inclusion functions as a reliable indicator of the transition from ephemeral usage to established vocabulary. The table below summarises the principal mechanisms discussed in this article.[18]

1-jadval. Mechanisms of social-media-driven lexical change in German

Mechanism	Linguistic operation	Representative examples
Direct borrowing	Transfer of English lexeme wi morphological integration	posten, liken, Follower, Fee Reel
Hybrid compounding	English constituent combin with German head	Followerzahl, Kommentarspalte, Reichweitenverlust
Derivation	Native affixes applied borrowed bases	reposten, Influencer Selbstdarstellerei
Clipping and acronymy	Reduction of form und conditions of speed	Insta, Abo, lg, kA
Semantic extension	New digital reading added existing lexeme	teilen, folgen, Freund, Wand
Pragmatic lexicalisation	Reaction token becomes a fi lexeme	Cringe, Hype, Fail, Vibe

6. Discussion: register variation, generational asymmetry and purist criticism

The developments described above are not distributed evenly across the language. They are concentrated in informal written registers and in oral usage among younger speakers, while administrative, legal and academic German remain largely untouched. A parliamentary report, a court judgment or a doctoral dissertation displays almost none of the features discussed here. This distributional fact is frequently overlooked in public debate, where evidence drawn from platform

[17] Langenscheidt, Jugendwort des Jahres: winners for 2022, 2023 and 2024; on the methodological limitations of the vote see Neuland, op. cit., pp. 38-41.
[18] Duden, Die deutsche Rechtschreibung, 29th ed., Berlin: Dudenverlag, 2024, editorial preface on the selection of new entries.

communication is presented as evidence about the state of the language as a whole. Register variation, not language-wide transformation, is the accurate description.[19]

A generational asymmetry nevertheless exists and has communicative consequences. Speakers who acquired their linguistic habits before the diffusion of social media command the innovations passively at best, and the resulting comprehension gap is exploited deliberately by younger speakers as a marker of group membership. This is a familiar sociolinguistic mechanism rather than a novel one: youth registers have always functioned in part to exclude. What is new is the speed with which the excluded material becomes publicly available, and hence the speed with which it loses its exclusionary value.[20]

Purist criticism, voiced most persistently by associations dedicated to the defence of the German language, holds that the accumulation of anglicisms threatens the integrity of the lexicon. The linguistic evidence does not support the strong version of this claim. The borrowed material is overwhelmingly nominal and adjectival; the grammatical core of the language - verbal inflection, case morphology, word order, the structure of the noun phrase - is unaffected. Moreover, the borrowings are processed by native word-formation rules the moment they enter the language, which is precisely the behaviour of a system in good structural health rather than one under threat.[21]

A more substantial concern lies elsewhere. Because platform vocabulary is generated within commercial infrastructures, the categories it supplies are not neutral. Terms such as Reichweite, Engagement or Content encode a specific, quantified conception of communication, and their transfer into everyday usage carries that conception with it. The relevant question is therefore not whether German is being anglicised, but which model of social interaction its new vocabulary makes it easy to express and which it renders difficult.[22]

7. Conclusion

Social media has altered the German lexicon in four principal ways: it has intensified borrowing from English, redirected the productivity of native word-formation patterns towards the resulting material, extended the meanings of established lexemes into the digital domain, and generated a written inventory of pragmatic markers that compensates for the absence of prosody and gesture. None of these processes is unprecedented in the history of German. What is new is their pace, their public visibility and the fact that they unfold in writing, where they are documented, debated and codified almost as they occur.

The evidence assembled here suggests that the appropriate description is one of acceleration and reallocation rather than rupture. The structural core of German is untouched; its derivational and compositional machinery is being used more, not less, and is being used to domesticate foreign material rather than to yield to it. The genuinely open questions concern sociolinguistic rather than structural matters: how far the informal digital register will encroach on formal written German, how the generational asymmetry in lexical competence will develop, and what conception of

[19] On the register-specific distribution of digital lexical innovation see A. Storrer, Sprachverfall durch internetbasierte Kommunikation?, in: A. Plewnia and A. Witt (eds.), Sprachverfall? Dynamik - Wandel - Variation, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 171-196.

[20] Neuland, Jugendsprache, op. cit., pp. 55-72, on the identity-marking and boundary-drawing functions of youth vocabulary.

[21] For a critical assessment of purist argumentation see Eisenberg, Das Fremdwort im Deutschen, op. cit., pp. 15-32.

[22] On the ideological dimension of platform terminology see J. Androutsopoulos, Digitale Kommunikation und Sprachwandel, in: Zeitschrift fuer germanistische Linguistik, vol. 49, no. 3, 2021, pp. 505-530.

communication the vocabulary supplied by commercial platforms brings with it. These questions can only be answered by longitudinal corpus research, and the corpora required for that research are, for the first time in the history of the language, being produced automatically and continuously by the speakers themselves.

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