The Influence of German on English since 1801: Lexical borrowings, their semantic change, morphological development and pragmatic-contextual use

Abstract

While there are a plenty of investigations of the impact of English on German, the reverse language contact scenario has been comparatively neglected. Many surveys carried out before the publication of Pfeffer's (1987) study *Deutsches Sprachgut im Wortschatz der Amerikaner und Engländer* pointed out that German was a relatively minor donor of words in English over the centuries.

Stanforth (1996: 50-53) rightly comes to the conclusion that there was an increase in the borrowing of German words during the second half of the eighteenth century in particular, which peaked in the nineteenth century. Until today, the influence of German on the English vocabulary in the last centuries has not yet been comprehensively studied.

The present paper will focus on the German influence on the English lexicon more exhaustively than previous investigations. The results are due to the analysis of several thousand nineteenth and twentieth-century German borrowings collected from electronic dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

Dictionaries such as the *OED* record a number of highly specialized terms that the "ordinary" native speaker of English would normally not encounter and which are not documented in balanced corpora of English usage, such as the *British National Corpus* and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*. An important objective of this survey is to differentiate between German-derived items which occur fairly frequently in English corpora reflecting authentic language usage and those borrowings which are restricted to specific contexts. A careful perusal of the *BNC* and the *COCA* permits the identification of those borrowings belonging to a "core area" of comparatively widespread terms. Much attention will be given to high frequency German borrowings which underwent semantic and morphological change after their introduction into English. *Blitzkrieg* represents an example of a fairly common German borrowing manifesting a semantic and morphological development. The term was initially adopted into English in the context of the Second World War, referring to a series of German air-raids on the United Kingdom from 1940-1. A careful perusal of the *BNC* and the *COCA* shows that *blitzkrieg* developed several transferred and figurative uses. Examples from the *COCA* are *blitzkrieg of scandal and media* and *financial blitzkrieg*. The different corpora also comprise various examples of the clipping *blitz* in the meaning of 'something which is carried out with much effort and energy', as in *marketing blitz* (see *COCA*). In addition, the corresponding verb *to blitz* was converted from the noun. It is also recorded in informal use, as in the spoken section of the *COCA*, which encompasses the following example: *Obama blitzed her on new media* ("War against ISIS," *NBC*, 2014).

Much value will be attached to the use of German borrowings in informal contexts, which has as yet been considered little in current research. Considering the linguistic documentary evidence in sources revealing everyday language usage such as the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014* and the *Corpus of American Soap Operas*, the typical informal context in which a nineteenth or twentieth century German borrowing occurs will be identified.

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Online resources:

British National Corpus <https://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>
Corpus of American Soap Operas < https://corpus.byu.edu/soap/>
Corpus of Contemporary American English <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>
OED Online searchable at: <http://www.oed.com/>
Spoken BNC 2014 <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2014/>