

# From angst to hamburgers

*Herbert Eppel explores the dilemma of translating a word that the target language has made its own – and has given a meaning different from the original*



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What happens when you wrestle with a word that the target culture has already adopted – and made its own, but rather differently? The word *Angst*, for example, means ‘fear’ in German, but in English it now denotes a more specialised and psychological sense of anxiety. *Ersatz* has made a similar change, and in English it now means a rather inferior substitute, rather than just a spare part or replacement component. How, therefore, should we translate these words from German to English?

In our own somewhat technical area, my colleagues and I find ourselves frequently trying to assess how foreign or familiar a particular term will be, and how well readers will understand it. It may require several words of clarification, or additional information in brackets; or it may need italicising, capitalising, or even a footnote or glossary entry. We began building up our own list of German words used in English, and it has created quite a wordfest on the HE Translations website.

## Loanwords and clonewords

Linguists have proposed two indexes to assess a language’s openness to imports: adaptability and receptivity. The index of adaptability views languages with high numbers of sounds as the ones best able to accommodate imports. On this scale English rates high, with 24 consonants and 11 vowels, though this presumes that imports mimic the original pronunciation, which may

not be at all the case. The index of a language’s receptivity measures the number of imports it has absorbed over time (so far English rates high on this, and Chinese very low).

Once fully adopted, a word is often called a ‘loanword’, from the German word *Lehnwort*. A *Gastwort*, or ‘guest word’, is unassimilated and remains fully foreign, and may also be called a foreignism and require explanation. A *Fremdwort* or ‘foreign word’ is widely used and understood

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but not yet a fully fledged loanword. Loanwords, in fact, might be better described as ‘clonewords’. They can spread everywhere and replicate the original autonomously ad infinitum, coining new phrases which add to the riches of language, or else cluttering up the place with kitsch (and there’s another!).

## Freedom of movement

As with peoples and religions, words tend to migrate and mix with others, often overcoming local notions of cultural or linguistic purity. They travel with people, with texts, with empires, with product packages,

labels and interfaces, on film, television, radio, video, social media, and in songs. A word may be adopted because there is no other there to do its job, or because speakers want to use it for reasons of fashion, prestige, concision, precision, or just the sheer fun of it. Or it may be the best option; take, for example, the Spanish translator who found no single word available to render into English the term *golpista*, a participant or plotter in a coup d’état. ‘Coupers’ could be misunderstood as barrel makers or even drivers of minis...so they chose the German loanword ‘putschist’.

And languages, like cultures, can be enriched and extended by this mixing, even if the new words may be hard to pronounce at first. The English language has never had an academy or authoritative body (other than dictionaries) to pronounce on what words should be used and which are verboten, so the borders are open. The German word for ‘vocabulary’, *Wortschatz*, itself contains the root word *Schatz*, meaning ‘treasure’, and 19th-century German emigrants to the Americas took their words and foods with them, giving rise to the now global culinary phenomenon of the hamburger. In the 20th century, developments in psychology and politics brought more German terms into English to reflect the zeitgeist (itself another adopted term), and in the 21st century we may see far more of them.

## All things change

There are no hard and fast rules as to when a new term should or indeed could be brought in. Authoritarian regimes and high-minded attempts to force new terminology on people are not always successful. Individual translators can look lazy, inaccurate, or unclear by presenting an awkward foreignism. Yet new terms are being brought in all the time. All the words we now use were created at some point, and will change meaning, pronunciation and popularity, and then pass away, with today’s neologism eventually becoming tomorrow’s archaism. Bearing this in mind, we have even begun compiling our own list of German words which the English language really could use. *Wunderbar*. 