

Some *Sonderwege* of German-English Translation

SPENCER HAWKINS

North American readers do not generally expect to encounter German phrases in non-specialist publications. A recent exception is revealing: in an article about the crumbling relations between Germany and the United States in the December 24, 2018 *New Yorker* issue, Susan Glasser inserts a recent German neologism, *Merkel-dämmerung*, to refer to the »sunset« of Merkel's chancellorship, without offering a translation.¹ Does Glasser imagine that non-German-speaking *New Yorker* readers are at least cultured enough to recognize a literary German word for sunset from the title of Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*? Or are readers not even supposed to understand, but just to see Merkel's name and note the truism that Germans mark the invention of important new concepts with long compound words? In any case, the untranslated word was clearly aimed at Anglophones who have internalized some form of the Humboldtian concept of *Bildung* – self-cultivation through the encounter with a variety of cultures. Nevertheless, while non-German-speaking *New Yorker* readers may have encountered some German terms like *Geist*, *Weltanschauung*, or *Schadenfreude*, most of their foreign phrases would come from Latin roots.

From the end of World War II to today, American English has had many channels of influence on German, from the loan translation of idioms (to make sense/*Sinn machen*) to the greater prevalence of »du« as a cultural translation of American familiarity. English is especially visible in the German language through the flood of technical, business, and slang loan words. It is unlikely that European politicians outside of Germany would use the English word »shitstorm« in a speech, but Chancellor Merkel did so at a tech industry conference in December 2018 when describing how internet users blew up at her for sounding old-fashioned when she called the internet »uncharted territory« (*Neuland*) in a speech back in June 19, 2013: »Ich habe früher ›Neuland‹ gesagt, das brachte mir einen großen Shitstorm ein. Jedenfalls ist es in gewisser Weise noch nicht

¹ | Susan B. Glasser: How Trump Made War on Angela Merkel and Europe. In: *New Yorker*, December 24, 2018.

durchschrittenes Terrain.² While English has a firm position in the global curriculum, Germany might even surpass some of Britain's former colonies in its rate of adopting anglicisms and pseudo-anglicisms, especially in the IT domain (computer, boot, crash, download). Perhaps the most prevalent pseudo-anglicisms is the word »Handy« to mean »cell phone,« but even »shitstorm« takes on a new, more IT-related meaning in German: *Duden* restricts its meaning to massive outrage on the internet (what English might dub a »Twitterstorm«), while English dictionaries extend »shitstorm« to massive outrage in any context.³

Besides German's postwar anglicisms, one might expect the two languages to be close linguistically for another reason: English belongs to the West Germanic language family along with German, Dutch, Yiddish, and Afrikaans. Yet the U. S. State Department ranks German as approximately one and half times as difficult for English speakers to learn compared to the Romance Languages (in terms of hours required to achieve fluency).⁴ Many translation problems have followed in the wake of the deviation that brought English closer to Latin than to German. German universities and publishers were generally slower (by several centuries) in abandoning Latin as the primary language of education and publication, but when it did, German authors found creative ways to distance themselves from Latinate vocabulary. When German became a language of letters, mostly during the eighteenth century, authors from the philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754) to the children's writer Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818) wrote Latin-German glossaries to promote new loan translations intended to Germanize established Latin concepts, like dependence (*de-pendere*/ab-hängen) and factuality (*factum/Tatsache*). The creative epoch deepened the division between English and German vocabularies.

Linguists classify English as a Germanic language mainly because it evolved from Germanic origins. Hungarian is not considered Turkic (or even »Altaic«) despite overlapping grammar and vocabulary because linguists ascribe the similarities to historical contact between speakers of separate ancestor languages. And just as premodern Huns lived alongside Turkic tribes and early modern Hungarians lived for a while under Ottoman rule, English is also the product of historical contact between speakers of different languages: the conquering Normans and the conquered Anglo-Saxons. Norman-Anglo social relations are most neatly differentiated by the German words for meat production (cow, swine, chicken, lamb), and the Latinate words for meat consumption (pork, beef, poultry, mutton). The etymologies of the latter are synonymous with those of the former – their respective German and French cognates name four different ani-

2 | Steffen Seibert: Twitter, December 4, 2018, online at <https://twitter.com/RegSprecher/status/1069982705058758656/video/1>.

3 | *Duden*-online-Wörterbuch, online at www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Shitstorm.

4 | FSI's Experience with Language Learning. U. S. Department of State, online at www.state.gov/m/fsi/sls/c78549.htm.

mals. But the fact that the latter now refer only to slaughtered and processed animals reveals an erstwhile chain of command on the island.

Language family classifications do not account for influence, and the influence of Old French on Anglo-Saxon after the Norman Conquest of 1066 made this Germanic language speak French. Although the effect was not as complete as Latin's supplanting of Gall's indigenous languages around 50 BC, English has departed dramatically from its Germanic origins. And even if French had not shaped English, England's geographic isolation would have set English on a path of deviation from modern German, even more marked than the Alpine isolation which separated Swiss German so radically from today's Standard German.

A German-English translator must rearrange syntax and select non-cognate equivalents for words. But these are not the largest challenges that a German-English translator faces. The largest challenge is to translate between a language with small total general vocabulary and a correspondingly higher density of polysemy (German) and a language with a larger vocabulary and correspondingly lower density of polysemy (English). »Strom« can mean »electric current« or »stream.« »Aufheben« can mean »cancel,« »preserve,« and »elevate« – a polysemy that Philippe Büttgen relates to the phrase »Konfitüren für den Winter aufheben« where preservation of fruit for storage results in both the improvement and death of the fruit.⁵

English presents alternatives where German lets you have it all. How has this difference mattered for translation history? This »Translation Problems« section looks at the complex intersection of linguistics, culture, and history where translation happens. Translation problems, in turn, are revealing of global power struggles – one of the most popular topics in contemporary translation studies.⁶ Entries in this new section of *andererseits* explore the difficulties peculiar to translation between German and English. While this language pair poses fewer problems than, say, English and Mongolian, the problems are both challenging and historically significant.

THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The two authors represented in this issue come from very different disciplines: Michael Scarpetti presents an original approach to the translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's work. He worked on the most recent translations of *On the Geneal-*

5 | Barbara Cassin (Ed.): *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Princeton 2014, p. 74.

6 | One of the only major American university presses to dedicate a series to Translation Studies is Princeton University Press, and its »Translation/Transnation« series focus is primarily on translation as an expression of political power differentials on the world stage.

ogy of *Morals* and *Will to Power* both of which have appeared in the Penguin Classics series. He aspires to a »literary« approach to translating philosophy, at least for authors as rhetorically complex as Nietzsche, since reproducing Nietzsche's witty rhetoric would do more to convey Nietzsche's sparks of insight than any dogmatic adherence of terminological consistency could hope to accomplish.

The other featured article is by Kenton Murray, a computer scientist who has studied and developed machine learning software, and whose research on artificial intelligence questions makes extensive use of German-English text comparisons. In this piece, he gives a kind of meta-translation history. Both because of the individuals involved in artificial intelligence research and because of semantic features particular to German and English, this language pair has been one of the most productive for developing intelligent translation software.

In future issues of *andererseits*, this section will present work that deepens the understanding German-English translation problems for a variety of disciplinary reasons: to understand the history of contact between German and English through migration and through the spread of ideas, the effects of that contact on both languages, and the vicissitudes of the translation histories between these languages; to weigh in on translation questions that professional translators face; to understand how factors like genre, political history, and the star power of authors relate to the *skopos*, or rhetorical purpose, of German-English translations; and ultimately to refine transdisciplinary methodologies for language-pair specific translation theory.