German Is (Not) Under Attack!: An Assessment of *Gendersprache* and *Denglisch*'s "Threat" to the German Language through a Historical Analysis of Linguistic Influences

Sidney Berger
Montclair State University

***

"The German language is currently under two life-threatening attacks" (translated; Verein Deutsche Sprache).[1] This is the opening sentence of Verein Deutsche Sprache's *Leitlinien* (guidelines) page. The Verein Deutsche Sprache is a German language association based out of Dortmund. In their guidelines, they define *Gendersprache* and *Denglisch* as dangerous threats to the German language. In their view *Gendersprache* is anti-democratic, misogynistic, ableist, xenophobic, and against diversity while *Denglisch* reduces the language's ability to express new facts and concepts. Verein Deutsche Sprache is not alone in this sentiment. Just last month, the Hessian government joined Bavaria in banning the use of *Gendersprache* in administration. Bavaria and Saxony have also banned its use in education.

Staatskanzleichef of the Christian Social Union (CSU) Florian Herrmann has addressed the topic, "The message is clear to us: Language must be clear and understandable" (translated; Jerabek). *Denglisch* has encountered similar animosity, albeit ban proposals have been less successful. As early as 2001, CSU politician Eckart Werthebach supported a language purification law penalizing English advertisements (Finn). He is quoted as saying on the matter, "The language is being abandoned, thanks to a growth in Americanisms, and older, less educated people, foreigners living in

Germany who don't speak English, and to some extent children, are excluded" (Connolly). In summary, both linguistic developments are described as reducing the language's ability to be spoken, either by the exclusion of differing groups or by restricting its creativity.

Aber stimmt das? ("But is that correct?") German has a long history of developing new words and grammar structures, as well as borrowing concepts from other languages even when it could create its own, Germanic alternative. This tradition highlights one key question to the discourse surrounding this topic: are there historical examples similar to *Gendersprache* and *Denglisch*? If one were to examine the history of the German language, would they conclude that the two "violent, dangerous threats" are simply contemporary examples of similar historical changes?

Before delving into Germany's linguistic history, we need to clarify *Gendersprache* and *Denglisch* and the roles they play within the language. Beginning with the former, *Gendersprache* refers to neologisms and novel grammatical structures introduced by feminist, gender-inclusive activists, and linguists. These linguistic changes are designed to better represent both women and (especially) non-binary people in the language. As many facets of the language are gendered and employ the generic masculine, words referring to people (e.g., pronouns, various agent nouns) default to a masculine form and have no gender-neutral equivalent which non-binary people could use. To solve this dilemma, a variety of gender-neutral neopronouns (e.g., *xier/xiem*, *sier/ihrm*) and gender-inclusive grammar structures have been promoted. One exceptionally popular affix, now found on many public advertisements in major German cities, is the gender asterisk (German: *Gendersternchen*). The gender asterisk marks nouns referring to people as gender-neutral, thereby avoiding the generic masculine and representing non-binary identities. For instance, the masculine *Radfahrer* (bicyclist) and the feminine *Radfahrerin* would become the gender-neutral *Radfahrer*in*. According to German linguist Dr. Antol Stefanowitsch, this asterisk, as well as other proposed albeit less widespread affixes, such as a semicolon or an underscore, have been represented in speech through a glottal stop. A glottal stop is the release of air after a complete closure of the vocal folds. One can easily identify it as the pause in the exclamation "uh-oh."

As for *Denglisch*, the portmanteau of *Deutsch* and *Englisch* refers to the greater use of Anglicisms within the language. This is due to the globalization of English and its current status as an international lingua franca. Many examples of *Denglisch* can be found in internet-related vocabulary where German users borrow English terms (e.g., *der Screenshot*, *die Website*, *downloaden/uploaden*). *Denglisch* is also common in *Jugendsprache,* or youth speech, specifically in slang (e.g., *cringe*, *crazy*). Other terms unrelated to the aforementioned category include *das Meeting*, *die Public Relations*, and *die Gender Studies*. There are also some pseudo-Anglicisms which have developed, that is, English loan words which have taken on a unique meaning in the German language. Two examples are *der Bodybag* (a messenger bag), *die City* (downtown/*Innenstadt*), and *das Public Viewing*, the latter of which Duden defines as "The shared viewing of live (sporting) events on large, outdoor screens" (translated; Bibliographisches Institut GmbH).

At first glance, *Gendersprache* may seem quite confusing due to the plethora of proposed grammatical changes which are varied and not standardized. Additionally, *Denglisch* may seem unoriginal since it borrows English words rather than inventing and/or using a German equivalent. However, when one examines Germany's linguistic history, they will find parallels to the historical period when Latin was the lingua franca of Europe.

The Catholic Church's long-standing grip on Europe ensured Latin's dominance over the continent. Latin had been the Church's official language since its inception ("Latin Influence"), so it became prominent in artistic and scientific endeavors across Europe, including Germania. In fact, many early Germanic texts, which were written in Old High German (OHG), were either translations of Latin literature, or otherwise "[are] thematically close to [it]" (Hock 184). This influence, along with interaction between Germanic peoples and Latin-speaking communities in general, naturally led to manifold changes in the German language: lexical, morphological, and, debatably, syntactical.

The most ostensible effects of Latin's influence are identified in the modern German lexis with words such as *Museum* (from *mūsēum*), *Ministerium* (ministry; from *ministerium*), and *quasi* (so to speak/essentially; from *quasi*). Several high-use verbs additionally evolved from Latin, such as *schreiben* (to write), initially *scrīban,* which

was borrowed from the Latin *scrībere* in OHG (Ringe & Taylor 137; Bibliographisches Institut GmbH). *Pflanzen* (to plant) is another commonplace verb which originated from the Latin *plantāre* and first manifested in the OHG verb *pflanzōn/phlanzôn* (Lawson 163; Bibliographisches Institut GmbH).

The evolution of *plantāre* allows us to explore Latin's morphemic impact on German. As the verb evolved from Latin, Old High German translators of Latin texts observed Latin forms of this verb when constructing the forms of its German descendant. In his study of Williram of Ebersberg's translation of "Expositio in Cantica Canticorum," Dr. Richard H. Lawson, a linguist specializing in Old/Middle High German, determined a general correspondence between Latin verb classes and Old High German weak verb classes: *-en* verbs are generally formed from Latin *-ere* verbs, *-ôn* from *-āre*, and *-ên* from *-ēre*. (*Scrībere* becoming *scrîban* in OHG is an exception; most Latinate verbs became weak verbs but *scrîban* was strong.) As a result, in a majority of Williram's transcripts, the OHG equivalent to *plantāre* surfaced as *phlanzôn*. Lawson's pattern was maintained by most translators in conjugations of *phlanzôn*'s past participle, with examples such as *geflanzot*, *geflánzot*, and *gepflanzot*. It is worthy to note, however, that there were several exceptions to this rule—*phlanzôn* was joined by *phlanzen* and *phlanzenen*, sometimes even in the same text—and many conjugations were ad hoc by the translator. This plurality is to be expected, as the incorporation of *plantāre* into OHG was relatively new at the time.

Moreover, the German derivational suffixes *-ismus* (-ism) and *-ität* (-ity) evolved from the Latin suffixes *-ismus* and *-tas* (Bibliographisches Institut GmbH 511). These suffixes naturally carried over their conventional usage in German from their employment in Latin. For example, the German suffix *-ismus*, as defined by Duden, "signifies a movement, tendency, mentality, or a phenomenon itself" (translated; Bibliographisches Institut GmbH 511). The original Latinate suffix similarly serves to denote movements/philosophies (e.g., *cosmopolītismus* [cosmopolitanism], *pāgānismus* [Paganism]) and phenomena (e.g., *analphabetismus* [illiteracy], *barbarismus* ["an impropriety of speech, barbarism; esp. of pronunciation"]) (Lewis & Short).

Though contested, syntax has also been explored as a possible facet of Latin's influence on the German language. In particular,

"Latin influence on Modern German word order [is both] frequently invoked (e.g. Behaghel 1892, 1932) and frequently questioned (Hock 183). Several scholars, such as Diana Chirita, have argued that verb-final word order in dependent clauses emerged from Latin influence, citing evidence such as the fact that Latin texts tend to exhibit verb-finality more often in dependent clauses than in main clauses, as well as Latin's prior status as a lingua franca. Hans Henrich Hock disagrees with Chirita's claim, on the basis that several verb positions in early Germanic are exceptionally idiosyncratic, so much so that external influence is improbable.[2] He nevertheless concedes that the *Relativer Satzanschluss* (beginning a sentence with a relative pronoun), as well as "The tendency to use long complex syntactic structures with multiple embeddings" (204), could have both stemmed from Latin.

Finally, I would be remiss to explore Latin's impact on the German language but exclude its most obvious overhaul: the adoption of the Latin writing system. While Germanic runes were still used to some extent, Old High German was largely written with the Latin alphabet (Sonderegger 11). Old High German contained several sounds which did not clearly correspond to Latin letters, thereby resulting in great ambivalence in the representation of these incongruent sounds. For instance, several letters represented multiple sounds: *h* represented both the *Hauchlaut*, or English /h/ sound, and fricative sounds (Braune & Heidermanns 14). Moreover, *z* similarly represented both fricative and affricate sounds (Braune & Heidermanns 15). In any case, this plurality eventually resulted in the adapted Latin script German employs today.

Similarly, excluding French in any examination of foreign influences on the German language would be negligent. Much like ancient Latin and modern English, French enjoyed the status of lingua franca in Europe for a time. This led to significant influences on both German morphology and the lexicon. With regards to morphology, German developed the *-ieren* category of verbs: verbs which end in *-ieren* and are mostly of French origin (Donahue 19). Within this group are the relatively high-frequency verbs *funktionieren* (to function), *passieren* (to happen/occur), *informieren* (to inform), *interessieren* (to interest), and *organisieren* (to organize). Each verb has over one million uses on the *deTenTen* corpus, a resource that compiles five months of web texts from 2020. The suffix *-ieren*

derives from Old French and occurs as early as the 14th century (Öhmann et al. 160). These verbs are uniquely conjugated in the sense that their past participles do not take the prefix *ge-*, which precedes all other German participles, and that they always end in *-t*. For example, when one would expect the past participle of *funktionieren* to be *gefunktioniert*, they would instead find it to be simply *funktioniert*.

As suggested by the above morphological influence, the German lexis was home to a significant amount of Gallicisms in a plethora of facets by the end of the 17th century (Spáčilová 75). In the realm of gastronomy, German cuisine took on extensive French vocabulary: *Orange*, *Limonade* (lemonade), *Menü* (set menu; from *menu*), and *Likör* (liqueur; from *liqueur*), among several other terms.[3] Family life also saw French influence, as the French words *oncle* (uncle), *tante* (aunt), *cousin* (male cousin), and *cousine* (female cousin) supplanted the Germanic equivalents *Oheim*, *Muhme*, *Vetter*, and *Base*, leading to the current German familial terms. Miscellaneous French-derived words and terms appeared as well such as *Chance*, *aktuell* (current/present; from *actuel*), *interessant* (interesting; from *intéressant*), *à la*, and an innumerable list of others that see various use in German.

The rise of French influence in German was accompanied by a rise in linguistic purism within German society. Multiple *deutsche Sprachvereine* (German language associations) emerged to "combat" the perceived threat of Gallicisms. Founded in 1885, one of the most prominent groups, Der Allgemeine Deutsche Sprachverein, published its first newspaper volume with three objectives:

> To foster the cleansing of the German language from unnecessary foreign components; to maintain the preservation and cultivate the restoration of the German language's authentic spirit and specific essence; [and] in this way, to strengthen the general national consciousness in the German people. (translated; Riegel 1)

The existence of these past societies illustrates how linguistic purists espousing fears of language degradation, such as Verein Deutsche Sprache, have always existed, and will continue to do so as long as languages interact with other languages, especially linguae francae.

With the analysis of Latin and French's influence on the German language complete, we will now move on to a comparison between these influences and *Denglisch* & *Gendersprache*, as well as an

exploration of several Verein Deutsche Sprache arguments against these linguistic movements. German has always been influenced by linguae francae: Latin, French, and now English. This is relevant because Verein Deutsche Sprache claims that younger generations are more and more dissuaded from using German to express themselves, and that the use of Anglicisms by German scientists leads to the exclusion of the German language from scientific conversation. This undergirds their idea that "This linguistic self-abandonment is more than a fad, [the increasing use of English] weakens the cultural independence of non-Anglophone countries" (translated), and that the German language is literally shrinking in status as a dialect. However, one can easily observe that German is a thriving language. The German platform deutschland.de, of Germany's Federal Foreign Office and FAZIT Communication GmbH, explains in a 2018 article that 130 million people speak German natively or as a second language, and that it is the most common mother tongue in the European Union. This is despite all the aforementioned heavy influences on the German language. If German did not go extinct from two prior linguae francae and their major impacts, and it is thriving today, then there stands no reason to believe that German would be overtaken by the globalization of English and its lexical influence.

It is also important to note that, as illustrated by the pseudo-Anglicisms mentioned earlier, German does not just sponge up words from other languages; rather, it uses them to form unique words and meanings. To observe this, one can examine the colossal collection of compound words which contain Latinate words and Gallicisms: *Chancengleichheit* (equal opportunity), *Kunstmuseum* (art museum), and *Rettungsaktion* (rescue operation), the latter of which is formed with *Aktion*, which derives from the Latin *āctiō* (Bibliographisches Institut GmbH). If one extends their examination to German words formed with foreign suffixes, then they will find *Autismus* (autism; from Greek *autós* + *-ismus*) and *sinnieren* (to meditate/muse; from *sinnen* + *-ieren*). Rather than underscoring German's supposed creative decline, these novel words say the exact opposite: borrowing broadens German's innovative capabilities.

Additionally, not all loanwords survive; some fall out of popularity with speakers and become archaic. For instance, the terms *proponieren* (to propose) and *Viktualien* (daily edibles), derived from

the Latin words *prōpōnō* and *victualia*, have for all intents and purposes been supplanted by the wholly Germanic words *vorschlagen* and *Lebensmittel* respectively.[4] It is quite likely that the same will occur with several English loanwords in the future, especially when one considers that a lot of them are slang (*Jugendsprache*), which largely become obsolete between successive generations per their nature.

Gendersprache is not as clearly mirrored by past linguistic influences: neopronouns and gender inclusivity in general do not have any historical precedence (in German). However, as mentioned at length prior, morphological elements such as affixes, like the gender asterisk and its variants do. Moreover, while there are no "standardized" proposals for gender inclusive language, this is to be expected with novel language developments. Examples of non-standard language developments can be observed in both the past participles of *phlanzôn/phlanzen/phlanzenen* and the ambivalent representations of German phonemes in Latin script. The ever-evolving nature of grammar is ultimately what takes place here and why labeling *Gendersprache* as xenophobic and ableist due to its supposed overcomplication of the language, as Verein Deutsche Sprache does, is no more valid than labeling other conventionally complicated and sometimes ambivalent grammatical aspects as bigoted, e.g., grammatical gender. As a final note, while *Gendersprache* does still confuse due to its plurality of approaches, most seem to agree on the inclusion of a single affix and the use of another third-person singular pronoun, both of which are relatively simple when compared to manifold grammatical changes outlined above.

In summary, the parallels are clear: while *Denglisch* and *Gendersprache* are novel, when compared to past linguistic influences and examined in the bigger picture of German's diachronic changes, neither Anglicisms nor novel neologisms and affixes are threatening. *Denglisch* reflects German's interaction with not one, but two linguae francae, all of which clearly portray creative innovation with word borrowings. *Gendersprache* is somewhat less familiar, but it is still consistent with the rise of other morphosyntactic changes that have occurred to the German language. Verein Deutsche Sprache proclaims in its guidelines that "Until now, an unwritten intergenerational contract has facilitated newer generations' linguistic access to their own history and culture, as well as a future of their own design. The widespread contempt for our national language calls

this intergenerational contract into question" (translated). However, it is ostensibly apparent that the association's leaders have not participated in this generational exchange, at least with regards to *die Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (the history of the German language); otherwise, they would observe how similar German's past is to German's present.

Notes

[1] All quotes from German sources were translated by the author of this essay.

[2] Hock examines Germanic languages as a whole. This leads him to argue that Frisian, a language traditionally confined to rural communities, hardly could have been influenced by Latin [204], a contention that would obviously not apply to German

[3] It is also possible that the expression *guten Appetit* is a calque of the French *bon appétit*, as claimed in "A History of French Culinary Words in German and English" by Hannah S. Solloway (14). *Appetit* has French/Latin origins (Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bibliographisches Institut GmbH), and *bon* is the French translation of *gut*. Despite the likelihood, this nevertheless remains unsubstantiated by historical analysis.

[4] The Viktualienmarkt of Munich, Germany is quite popular (and is another example of loanwords being used to form new meanings). However, this is most likely the only appearance of *Viktualien* in contemporary German. The word returns less than 1,000 results on the aforementioned *deTenTen* corpus. Moreover, it (along with several other compound words, such as *Viktualienhandlung* and *Viktualienkeller*) are listed as historical/old-fashioned by Duden.

Works Cited

Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. "Appetit, der." *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, dwds.de/wb/Appetit. Accessed 11 May 2024.

Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. "sinnieren." *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, dwds.de/wb/sinnieren. Accessed 26 May 2024.

Bibliographisches Institut GmbH. *Duden Online*, duden.de. Accessed 12 May 2024.

Braune, Wilhelm, and Frank Heidermanns. *Althochdeutsche Grammatik I: Laut- und Formenlehre*. 15th ed. De Gruyter, 2018.

Chirita, Diana. "Did Latin Influence German Word Order? Aspects of German-Latin Bilingualism in the Late Middle Ages." *Aspects of Multilingualism in European Language History*, edited by Kurt Braunmüller and Gisella Ferraresi, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003, pp. 173–200. https://doi.org/10.1075/.

Connolly, Kate. "Germany Declares War on Invasion of 'Denglisch.'" *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 2001, theguardian.com. Accessed 11 May 2024.

Donahue, Frank E. *Deutsche Wiederholungsgrammatik: A Morpho-Syntactic Review of German*. Yale University Press, 2008.

Finn, Peter. "Achtung! Englisch Verboten! Germans Wage War Over Words." *The Washington Post*, 24 Feb. 2001, washingtonpost.com. Accessed 11 May 2024.

Hock, Hans Henrich. "Latin Influence on German Word Order?" *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 33, no. 1, Dec. 2019, pp. 183–209.

Jakubíček, Miloš, et al. *deTenTen: Corpus of the German Web*. 2020, https://www.sketchengine.eu/.

Jerabek, Petr. "Bayern beschließt Verbot von Gendersprache." *BR24*, 19 Mar. 2024, br.de/nachrichten/bayern/.

"Latin Influence." *Brigham Young University*, https://script.byu.edu. Accessed 10 May 2024.

Lawson, Richard H. "Latin Influence on German Weak Verbs in the 'Expositio in Cantica Canticörum' of Williram of Ebersberg."

The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, vol. 82, no. 2, Apr. 1983, p. 157-167.

Lewis, Charlton T., and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1879. *Perseus Digital Library Project*, www.perseus.tufts.edu.

Öhmann, Emil, et al. "Zur Geschichte des deutschen Suffixes '-ieren.'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1953, pp. 159-176.

Riegel, Herman. "Der allgemeine deutsche Sprachverein." *Zeitschrift des allgemeinen deutschen Sprachvereins*, 1 Apr. 1886, pp. 1+.

Ringe, Don, and Ann Taylor. *The Development of Old English*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Spáčilová, Libuše. "Der Allgemeine deutsche Sprachverein und seine Zweigvereine in Mähren." *Acta Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Ostraviensis. Studia Germanistica*, vol. 28, 2021, pp. 73–88.

Solloway, Hannah S. "A History of French Culinary Words in German and English." *Academia.edu*. Accessed 11 May 2024.

Sonderegger, Stefan. *Althochdeutsche Sprache und Literatur*. De Gruyter, 1974.

Stefanowitsch, Anatol. "Gendergap und Gendersternchen in der gesprochenen Sprache." *Sprachlog*, 9 July 2018, sprachlog.de.

Verein Deutsche Sprache. "Leitlinien." *Verein Deutsche Sprache*, summer 2021, vds-ev.de.

"We Speak German." *deutschland.de*, 20 Feb. 2018, https://www.deutschland.de.