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Phraseological borrowing from English into German: Cultural and pragmatic implications

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Abstract

The spread of English as the dominant means of international communication is having an enormous impact on other languages, driven by massive lexical borrowing especially in the sciences, the media and popular culture. This phenomenon, generally associated with the term Anglicism, has been intensively investigated. However, studies have so far concentrated mainly on simple and complex words, and one aspect that has hitherto not attracted much scholarly attention is the borrowing of phraseological units, i.e. prefabricated items in the form of word-groups and sentences. The pragmatic and cultural implications of their use take centre stage in this article. These include the incorporation of discourse patterns, norms of interaction (e.g. the use of address terms and verbal and non-verbal routines), traditions (e.g. holidays) and symbols. In the majority of cases, the transfer of linguistic elements and the extra-linguistic entities or practices they refer to go hand in hand. This paper addresses pragmatic borrowing in German from a phraseological perspective. It analyses contact-induced change in the use of catchphrases and formulae and their particular functions in spoken and written communication and includes a comparative study that reveals parallel developments in other recipient languages.

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1. Introduction

The use of English has become indispensable for a large number of people working in the sciences, in the media, in popular culture and in many other fields. This language therefore has an enormous impact on people's lives and has also left its mark on their respective native tongues. English as a major source of language influence has so far been investigated with regard primarily to lexical borrowing. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the impact of English on the German language. Among the most important investigations are large-scale descriptive studies by Carstensen and Galinsky (1963), Carstensen (1965), Fink (1970), Viereck (1980), Yang (1990), Lehnert (1990), Schelper (1995), Glahn (2000), Onysko (2007), and Burmasova (2010). Dictionaries of Anglicisms have been compiled for many individual languages and beyond (cf. Carstensen et al., 2001; Görlach, 2001, 2002). However, English imports are not restricted to individual words and terms; they also include longer items such as phraseological units like greetings, discourse markers, catchphrases and other types of pre-fabricated constructions.¹ They have significant pragmatic implications, because they are closely related to culturally influenced text patterns, discourse norms and speaker attitudes.

Phraseological borrowing has not received much scholarly attention so far. Isolated attempts that are worth mentioning are a study of film dubbing by Herbst (1994), who points to the hidden influence of literal translations of English phrases and proverbs, and Mieder's (e.g. 2004) exploration of the spread of Anglo-American proverbs in German. It should also be

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¹ Greetings and discourse markers can also be non-phraseological, i.e. word-like units (e.g. *hi*, *well*).

mentioned that the dictionary by Carstensen et al. (2001) does include phraseological units (e.g. *in einem Boot sitzen* En. *to be in the same boat* p. 153; *Kein Kommentar* En. *No comment* p. 757). Furiassi et al. (2012) add significantly to this new line of research by including a chapter on English-induced phraseology with articles focusing on French, Spanish, Polish, Danish and German. Zenner et al. (2013) study English catchphrases from movies and TV shows in newspaper corpora of Dutch. Andersen (2014) also recognizes the lack of attention paid to borrowed phraseology, and in his research on pragmatic borrowing he calls for comparative analyses of the discourse-pragmatic functions that the respective words and phrases fulfill in the donor and recipient languages. Detailed empirical work beyond the lexical level is necessary to understand how pragmatic functions are transferred cross-linguistically. The present study aims at contributing to this body of research by addressing the largely unexplored area of phraseological borrowing with a focus on cultural and pragmatic aspects.

This article will explore phraseological borrowing from an English–German perspective: section 2 presents a definition of phraseological unit and a classification of phraseological borrowings. With a focus on the connection between phraseology and culture, it describes the nature of pragmatic borrowing using the example of two English discourse markers that have recently come into use in German: *Das gesagt (habend)/Nachdem ich das gesagt habe* (cf. *(Having) said that/that said/That being said*) and *Nice try/Netter Versuch*. Section 3 goes beyond the German language and addresses the question of whether the parallel developments that can be observed in several languages are indicators of a homogenization of European languages. The article concludes with a discussion of the issue of whether, against the backdrop of the results of the study, it is legitimate to describe the present use of English as a “neutral” lingua franca.

2. Phraseology

The phrasicon of a language (Granger, 2009), i.e. the inventory of communicative formulae, catchphrases, slogans and other multi-word items, seems to be an especially suitable framework for the study of pragmatic borrowing, because these items are a product of the life of a speech community *par excellence*, representing its culture which is here to be understood as its shared set of beliefs, conventions, attitudes, values, discourses and practices.

2.1. Definition and classification

This study is concerned with phraseological units (PUs) (also known as fixed expressions, multi-word-lexemes, lexical bundles, prefabricated speech/prefabs, phrasemes, set phrases and formulaic sequences). They have the following five main defining characteristics (cf. Burger et al., 2007; Fiedler, 2007): (1) they have a polylexemic structure, i.e., phraseological units are word-groups or sentences; (2) they are characterised, in principle, by semantic and syntactic stability²; (3) they are lexicalised, i.e. they are ready-made units of the lexicon that are reproduced rather than being created productively by the speaker/writer; (4) they are mainly idiomatic³ and (5) most of them have connotative features (cf. Andersen in this volume).

There are different ways of classifying phraseological units (cf. Burger et al., 2007; Fiedler, 2007). That the focus of this study is on items borrowed from other languages suggests the need for a typology that is based on the lexical material that the phraseological units contain. Using Haugen's (1950) and Weinreich's (1953) classifications and their criteria of “substitution” and “importation” as a starting point, three main types of phraseological borrowings can be differentiated (see Fig. 1).

The first group includes direct loans, i.e. phrases and sentences that have been imported wholesale from English (e.g. *No risk, no fun; Meet and Greet; Blind Date*⁴). In contrast to these, there are indirect borrowings (or loan translations) whose lexical material was fully substituted by morphemes of the recipient language, German in this case (e.g. *etw. ist keine Raketenwissenschaft* ‘sth. is not rocket science’; *ein Problem adressieren* ‘to address a problem’; *die gläserne Decke* ‘the glass ceiling’). Within the latter group a further distinction might be made regarding the relative similarity to the original. While the examples mentioned above represent rather close translations, phraseological units/phraseological neologisms such as *Gib uns Süßes, sonst gibt's Saures/Süßes oder Saures* (lit. [Give us] something sweet, [otherwise you'll get] something sour; cf. En. *trick or treat*) and *Wem es in der Küche zu heiß ist, der sollte nicht Koch werden* (lit. if it's too hot for you in the kitchen, you shouldn't become a cook; cf. En. *If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*)

² The restriction “in principle” is to indicate the fact that, within definite constraints, there are variants. The use of function words (prepositions, determiners etc.) can vary (e.g. *in/by leaps and bounds*) as well as lexical constituents (e.g. *sweep sth. under the carpet/rug*).

³ Phraseological units can have different degrees of idiomaticity. At one end of the scale there are real idioms, i.e. fully opaque expressions. At the opposite end of the scale, there are fully transparent units, which are, however, legitimately included in the phrasicon because they are polylexemic, stable, and lexicalised. Idioms are therefore a subset of phraseological units.

⁴ As is well known, there is a blurred borderline between compounds and nominal phraseological units (cf. Witalisz, 2015:84–86).

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