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BORROWINGS AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN ENGLISH AND GERMAN THROUGHOUT HISTORY

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Abstract. The article examines the historical dynamics of lexical and cultural exchange between English and German, two closely related West Germanic languages whose contact spans more than fifteen centuries. The study applies a diachronic analytical framework to trace five major phases of borrowing: the common Proto-Germanic heritage; the early medieval period of parallel West Germanic development; the Early Modern era of scholarly and religious contact; the 18th-to-20th-century influx of German loanwords into English in science, philosophy, and military discourse; and the contemporary dominance of English-origin Anglicisms in modern German. The results demonstrate that borrowing between these languages has never been unidirectional – it reflects recurring episodes of cultural prestige exchange, political contact, and technological transfer. The study concludes that English-German lexical exchange constitutes a mirror of broader European cultural history and carries significant implications for historical linguistics, cultural studies, and foreign language pedagogy.

Key words: lexical borrowings, language contact, Anglicisms, Germanisms, diachronic linguistics, cultural exchange, West Germanic languages, loanwords.

Introduction. The relationship between the English and German languages is one of the most historically significant and linguistically complex bilateral contact situations in the recorded history of European languages. Both languages descend from the West Germanic branch of the Proto-Germanic language family, sharing a common ancestor spoken in northern and central Europe approximately 2,500 years ago (Baugh & Cable, 2013: 12). This genealogical kinship means that the interaction between them is not simply a story of borrowing between two foreign languages, but a story of gradual divergence, periodic re-contact, and reciprocal cultural enrichment across a timeline that extends from the earliest attested Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the 7th century to the globalised digital communication landscape of the 21st century.

The scholarly attention paid to this relationship has been markedly asymmetrical. A substantial body of research has examined the impact of English on German – the phenomenon of Anglicisms – driven by concerns over the perceived cultural and linguistic dominance of English in the post-1945 global order. Studies by Onysko (2007), Fiedler (2017), and others have documented in detail the mechanisms by which English words, phrases, and discourse patterns have entered German across every domain of social life, from business and technology to popular culture and youth slang. By contrast, the reverse phenomenon – the influence of German on English – has received comparatively little systematic attention. As Schultz (2016) notes, “while there are plenty of studies on the impact English

has exerted on the German language, the reverse contact situation has been relatively neglected” (Schultz, 2016: 14).

This contradiction in the literature reflects a broader cultural assumption about the directionality of linguistic prestige in the contemporary world. Yet a diachronic perspective reveals that this assumption is historically contingent and relatively recent. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, German, not English, was the dominant language of science, philosophy, music, and scholarship in the European intellectual world, and the English lexicon was significantly enriched by borrowings from German during this period. Words such as *kindergarten*, *wanderlust*, *angst*, *gestalt*, *weltanschauung*, *leitmotif*, and *rucksack* entered English as markers of German cultural prestige. The vocabulary of chemistry, geology, mineralogy, and psychology in English retains to this day a substantial stratum of German origin: *quartz*, *cobalt*, *zinc*, *bismuth*, *nickel*, *protein*, and many more.

The purpose of the article is to provide a comprehensive, chronologically organised analysis of the bidirectional lexical and cultural exchange between English and German from their shared Proto-Germanic roots to the contemporary phenomenon of globalised English’s influence on standard German. It draws on the theoretical frameworks of contact linguistics, cultural borrowing theory, and diachronic lexicology, and synthesises findings from key studies in the field, including the corpus-based research of Schultz (2016, 2017), the diachronic analysis of Trutsunenکو and Vesolovskiy (2025), and the foundational historical linguistics scholarship of Baugh and Cable (2013) and Thomason and Kaufman (1988). The study is motivated by the conviction that understanding the full bilateral history of English-German lexical exchange is essential for historical linguists, cultural historians, and language educators alike.

Materials and Methods. The methodology of the present study is grounded in diachronic and comparative linguistics. The primary analytical approach is the historical-comparative method, which involves the systematic comparison of lexical forms, semantic fields, and phonological adaptations across different historical periods of English and German, with reference to their common Proto-Germanic ancestor. This approach is supplemented by the sociolinguistic analysis of the extralinguistic conditions – political, economic, cultural, and technological – that generated each major phase of interlingual contact and transfer.

The empirical basis of the study draws on several complementary sources. First, the lexicographic corpus established by Schultz (2016) from the Oxford English Dictionary Online, comprising 1,958 20th-century German borrowings in English, provides the primary quantitative foundation for the analysis of the most recent and systematically documented phase of German influence on English. Second, the diachronic survey by Trutsunenکو and Vesolovskiy (2025) of lexical borrowings across the history of the German language – covering Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Dutch, and English strata – serves as a complementary framework for understanding the German side of the bilateral exchange. Third, the standard historical reference works on the English language, particularly Baugh and Cable’s (2013) *The History of the English Language* and Pfeffer and Cannon’s (1994) *German Loanwords in English: An Historical Dictionary*, provide the etymological data for the pre-20th-century phases of the analysis.

The study employs the typology of borrowings established by Thomason and Kaufman (1988), which distinguishes between loanwords (direct phonological and morphological adoption of the source form), loan translations or calques (structural replication of the source form using native material), semantic loans (adoption of a new meaning for an existing word under the influence of a foreign equivalent), and partial loan translations (hybrid forms combining native and borrowed elements). This typology is applied to the analysis of examples across all historical periods examined, allowing for a differentiated picture of the depth and nature of contact at each stage.

The sociolinguistic dimension of the analysis draws on the framework of Trudgill (2004) and Crystal (2012), which situates individual language contact phenomena within the broader context of

macro-social factors: the demographic weight of speaker communities, the prestige relations between languages, the domains of social life in which contact occurs, and the institutional and normative constraints on language use. The integration of these macro-social factors into the analysis allows the study to move beyond a purely lexicographic inventory of borrowings towards an explanation of why each phase of English-German exchange took the form it did.

Results and Discussion. Any account of the relationship between English and German must begin not with borrowing but with the prior unity from which both languages diverged. English and German, together with Dutch, Frisian, and the Scandinavian languages, descend from Proto-Germanic, the reconstructed common ancestor spoken in Scandinavia and northern Germany around the first millennium BCE (Schrijver, 2014: 3). This shared ancestry means that a substantial proportion of the core vocabulary of both languages – covering kinship terms, body parts, numbers, basic verbs of motion and perception, and agricultural and domestic terminology – is not the result of borrowing but of retention from a common source (Baugh & Cable, 2013).

The phonological correspondences between English and German provide the most transparent evidence of this heritage. Jacob Grimm's systematic mapping of the consonant shifts that differentiate Germanic languages from other Indo-European branches, and the subsequent High German Sound Shift (circa 500–700 CE) that further distinguished High German from Old English, produced the regular correspondences visible in every modern speaker's intuition: English *make* corresponds to German *machen*, *water* to *Wasser*, *night* to *Nacht*, *book* to *Buch* (Schrijver, 2014). These correspondences are not coincidental resemblances but the predictable outcomes of sound laws operating on a common source, and any serious analysis of English-German contact must keep this common heritage analytically distinct from the borrowing that came later (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). The concept of false friends (*Scheinfremde*) in English-German lexicography (words that look similar but have diverged in meaning, such as English *gift* (a present) versus German *Gift* (poison)) illustrates the interpretive pitfalls that arise when the common heritage is not properly accounted for (Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994).

This shared foundation also carries deep cultural significance. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who migrated to Britain from present-day northern Germany and Denmark in the 5th and 6th centuries CE carried with them not only their dialects but their entire cultural world: kinship structures, warrior ethics, pagan religious beliefs encoded in the day-names (*Tuesday* from *Tyr*, *Wednesday* from *Woden*, *Thursday* from *Thor*, *Friday* from *Frigg*), and a shared heroic literary tradition (Baugh & Cable, 2013).

The Old English epic *Beowulf*, the oldest substantial work of English literature, is set in Scandinavia and features heroes whose names and attributes parallel those of Old High German heroic poetry, testimony to the cultural unity that preceded linguistic divergence. As Schrijver (2014) emphasises, this cultural substrate constitutes the deep foundation on which all subsequent English-German contact and exchange was built, and its traces persist in the core vocabulary of both modern languages in ways that continue to shape the experience of each as “familiar yet foreign” to speakers of the other (Schrijver, 2014: 15).

Following the Anglo-Saxon migration, Old English (c. 450–1100) and the Old High German dialects (c. 750–1050) developed in relative geographic separation, each responding to the distinctive pressures of its own social and political environment. Old English underwent intensive contact with Latin through the Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons beginning in 597 CE, and with Old Norse through the Viking settlements of the 9th and 10th centuries; Old High German evolved under the influence of Latin through the Carolingian court and monastic culture, and through contact with Slavic and Romance languages (Trudgill, 2004).

This period of parallel development is characterised by limited direct contact and therefore relatively little direct borrowing between Old English and Old High German. The simultaneous Latinisation of both languages, however, created a substantial shared stratum of ecclesiastical vocabulary: *church*

(Old English *cirice* from Greek *kyriake*), *bishop* (Old English *biscop* from Latin *episcopus*), *monk* (Old English *munuc* from Latin *monachus*) entered both languages through largely independent channels of transmission (Baugh & Cable, 2013). This Latinisation must be carefully distinguished from direct interlingual contact, a methodological point that Thomason and Kaufman (1988) identify as essential for the accurate attribution of borrowings in situations of multilateral contact. Crucially, as Trutsunenko and Vesolovskiy (2025) demonstrate in their diachronic survey of German lexical development, this early Latin stratum established a template of openness to prestigious foreign vocabulary that would characterise German lexical behaviour through every subsequent phase of its history.

The High German Consonant Shift, affecting German but not English, created the most immediately visible phonological differences between the languages, yet as Schrijver (2014) observes, the structural proximity that remained meant that phonological adaptation of borrowings between the two was always relatively straightforward, a factor that facilitated lexical transfer across every subsequent period of contact (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988).

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century opened the next major phase of intensified English-German contact, one with profound consequences for both languages. Luther's translation of the Bible into German (New Testament 1522, complete Bible 1534) standardised the High German dialect and elevated it to a literary and religious language of enormous prestige (Baugh & Cable, 2013). Both the Lutheran Bible and the King James Bible (1611) not only standardised their respective languages but created large bodies of shared religious vocabulary drawn from the same Hebrew and Greek sources, reinforcing parallel Latinate-Christian vocabulary strata.

The Reformation created direct channels of intellectual exchange: Protestant scholars, clergy, and refugees moved between England and the German states throughout the 16th and 17th centuries (Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994). The influence of German Protestant theology on English religious thought (visible in the career of William Tyndale, whose English Bible translation was shaped by Luther's) contributed to a shared religious vocabulary in which German-origin concepts entered English through Latin intermediary or through direct contact with German-speaking communities in England. German universities such as Heidelberg, Leipzig, Tübingen, Wittenberg, meanwhile became centres of humanist scholarship (Baugh & Cable, 2013), establishing the first systematic institutional channel for German loanwords into English intellectual discourse, a channel that would widen dramatically in the following two centuries.

The period from approximately 1750 to 1914 represents the most intensive phase of German influence on the English lexicon, driven by the extraordinary intellectual and scientific prestige of the German-speaking world during this era. German was the dominant language of European science and scholarship: the great majority of foundational research in chemistry, physics, biology, geology, medicine, psychology, philosophy, music theory, and literary criticism was published in German, and English-speaking scholars wishing to participate in these fields were effectively required to acquire reading knowledge of German (Schultz, 2016).

This structural condition of German intellectual dominance created powerful pressure for the adoption of German terminology into English across a wide range of domains, a pattern that Trudgill (2004) identifies as characteristic of contact situations in which one language community perceives the other as a source of prestige knowledge and cultural capital. The discipline of chemistry owes a particularly large debt to German lexis during this period: the element names *zinc* (German *Zink*), *cobalt* (from German *Kobold*, a goblin), *bismuth* (from *Wismuth*), *nickel* (from *Nickel*, a mischievous sprite), and *tungsten* (from Swedish-German *Wolfram*) entered English through the work of German-speaking chemists (Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994). The word *quartz* is of German origin (*Quarz*, first attested in the 16th century), and the terminology of crystallography, spectroscopy, and electrochemistry in English retains substantial German strata from this period (Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994).

The vocabulary of anatomy, pharmacology, and psychiatry – including psychosis, neurosis, and the conceptual framework of Freudian psychoanalysis – was developed primarily in German before being adopted into English (Schultz, 2016). The word *kindergarten*, coined by Friedrich Fröbel in 1837, was adopted into English in the latter half of the 19th century, first in the United States, where German immigrant communities had established kindergartens as early as the 1850s (Baugh & Cable, 2013).

Philosophy is perhaps the domain in which German borrowings into English are most intellectually consequential. Terms such as *Weltanschauung* (worldview), *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age), *Schadenfreude* (pleasure in another's misfortune), *Angst* (dread or anxiety), *Gestalt* (form, configuration), and *Übermensch* (overman, associated with Nietzsche) entered English not simply as loanwords but as conceptual imports carrying entire philosophical frameworks (Schultz, 2017). As Pfeffer and Cannon (1994) note, translators often found retaining the German form more intellectually honest than risking conceptual distortion through an inadequate English equivalent – a form of what Thomason and Kaufman (1988) term “prestige borrowing”, in which the foreign form itself carries epistemic authority. The vocabulary of Western classical music was similarly dominated by German terminology throughout this period: *Leitmotif* (associated with Wagner), *Lied* (German art song), *Singspiel*, *Kapellmeister*, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* entered English as markers of the cultural hegemony of German music from Bach through Wagner (Schultz, 2016).

The military vocabulary of English acquired significant German influence through the two World Wars. *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war) entered English in 1939 and gave rise to the abbreviated *blitz*; *Flak* (from *Fliegerabwehrkanone*) acquired the broader metaphorical meaning of severe criticism; *strafe* (from German *strafen*, to punish) entered English during the First World War; *U-boat* (*Unterseeboot*), *Wehrmacht*, *Panzer*, and *Luftwaffe* all entered English through conditions of military conflict (Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994). As Schultz (2016) observes, the vocabulary of the two World Wars accounts for a significant proportion of German loanwords that remain in active use in contemporary English, and their semantic integration has been particularly complete: *blitz*, *flak*, and *strafe* have all developed extended metaphorical senses that no longer require any awareness of their German origin (Schultz, 2017).

The most systematically documented phase of German influence on English is the 20th century as a whole, which forms the subject of Schultz's (2016) monograph and her related article in *English Today* (2017). Drawing on a corpus of 1,958 German borrowings retrieved from the Oxford English Dictionary Online, Schultz (2016) demonstrates that the German influence on English in the 20th century was far more extensive than commonly recognised. Schultz (2017) identifies major thematic clusters: the natural sciences account for the largest group, including terms from physics (*bremsstrahlung*, *eigenvalue* from *Eigenwert*) and geology; the arts and humanities contribute *Bildungsroman*, *Weltliteratur*, and *Gesamtkunstwerk*; food and drink have yielded *bratwurst*, *sauerkraut*, *schnapps*, *Riesling*, and *delicatessen*; and the political vocabulary reflects turbulent history: *Nazi*, *Anschluss*, *Kristallnacht*.

Particularly notable is Schultz's (2016) finding that the semantic integration of German borrowings into English is, in the majority of cases, complete: borrowings have been absorbed into English word formation processes, generating productive derivatives and collocations. *Kindergarten* has spawned *kindergartener* and *kindergarten teacher*; *Gestalt* psychology gave rise to *gestalt therapy* and *gestalt switch*; *rucksack* generated the calque *backpack* while remaining in active British English use (Schultz, 2016). Schultz's (2016) further finding that German borrowings were most intensive in the first half of the 20th century, declining sharply after 1945, reflects the geopolitical reversal: the rise of English-language global dominance after 1945 fundamentally reversed the prestige relation between the two languages.

The post-1945 dominance of English as the global language of science, business, popular culture, and digital communication has produced what is arguably the most intensive phase of lexical borrowing

in the entire history of the English-German relationship but now flowing overwhelmingly from English into German. The phenomenon of Anglicisms in German has been extensively documented by Onysko (2007), Fiedler (2017), and Trutsuneneko and Vesolovskyi (2025), all of whom situate contemporary English borrowings within the longer diachronic history of German lexical enrichment from external sources.

As Trutsuneneko and Vesolovskyi (2025) demonstrate, German has absorbed successive waves of loanwords from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Dutch across its history; the contemporary English influx is thus the latest episode in a long tradition of German lexical openness to culturally dominant languages. Onysko (2007) documents this breadth across business and technology (*Meeting, Workshop, Feedback, Management, Marketing*), digital communication (*online, downloaden, uploaden, chatten, googeln*), and informal everyday speech (*cool, chillen, checken, sorry*), identifying a steady rise in Anglicism density in German print media from the 1950s to the early 2000s.

Fiedler (2017) draws attention to the particularly consequential phenomenon of phraseological borrowing – the adoption not merely of individual words but of prefabricated phrases, discourse formulae, and interactional routines. The English-origin phrase “*to make a difference*” has generated the German calque “*einen Unterschied machen*”; the greeting formula “*Have a nice day!*” and its German counterpart “*Einen schönen Tag noch!*” represent the adoption of an entire speech act convention (Fiedler, 2017). These phraseological imports carry cultural implications beyond their lexical content: they transfer norms of interaction and associations of modernity inseparable from English-language communication culture.

The grammatical integration of English borrowings into German follows systematic patterns documented by Onysko (2007): English verbs acquire German infinitive endings and inflect according to the weak verb paradigm (*googeln, downloaden, liken, posten*); English nouns are assigned grammatical gender, though with considerable variation that remains a source of prescriptive dispute (*das Blog, die App, der Stream, das Update*).

The response of German linguistic institutions to this influx reflects a tension between prescriptive anxiety and descriptive recognition of the naturalness of lexical borrowing as a mechanism of language change (Crystal, 2012). Crystal (2012) places this resistance in comparative perspective, noting that anxiety about English loanwords is a recurrent feature of the metalinguistic discourse of many European languages, reflecting a concern about cultural sovereignty that exceeds any strictly linguistic justification.

Historical precedent supports Crystal’s (2012) scepticism about the effectiveness of puristic intervention: the German Sprachreinigung movement sought to replace foreign loanwords with native coinages, and while some calques succeeded spectacularly – *Fernsprecher* for telephone, *Fernseher* for television, *Flugzeug* for aeroplane, *Briefmarke* for postage stamp – others failed to displace the foreign form (Trudgill, 2004). These calques themselves, as Thomason and Kaufman (1988) note, constitute loan translations in which the structural model of the foreign word is replicated using native material, demonstrating that even puristic responses to lexical contact involve a form of structural cultural exchange (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

Taken together, the findings of the diachronic survey invite several theoretical observations that extend beyond purely lexicographic documentation. The most important is the confirmed bidirectionality of the English-German language contact relationship over historical time. The contemporary assumption, reinforced by the dominance of Anglicism studies (Onysko, 2007; Fiedler, 2017), that English is the donor language and German the recipient is shown to be historically contingent and relatively recent. For approximately two centuries before 1945, the prestige relation was arguably reversed, with German the dominant language of intellectual life and English the absorbing party (Schultz, 2016; Pfeffer & Cannon, 1994). As Trudgill (2004) emphasises, the direction of borrowing is determined not by intrinsic linguistic properties but by social, political, and cultural

factors subject to historical change – a conclusion the English-German case illustrates with unusual clarity. A further observation concerns the relationship between lexical borrowing and cultural exchange. Loanwords do not simply carry lexical information across language boundaries; they carry cultural frameworks, conceptual systems, and social meanings (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). The English adoption of *Weltanschauung* imports a German philosophical tradition; the adoption of *Angst* carries the existentialist connotations of the Kierkegaard-Heidegger tradition; the adoption of “*cool*” into German imports associations of African-American jazz culture and Californian youth culture inseparable from the word’s pragmatic meaning (Fiedler, 2017; Onysko, 2007). As Crystal (2012) observes, the study of loanwords is necessarily also the study of cultural history, and the English-German case provides one of the most richly documented illustrations of this principle available in the history of any language pair.

Conclusion. The present study has traced the history of lexical and cultural exchange between English and German across five major phases, from the shared Proto-Germanic heritage through the contemporary dominance of English-origin Anglicisms in modern German. The findings demonstrate several overarching conclusions that have implications for historical linguistics, cultural studies, and language pedagogy.

First, the relationship between English and German is one of the most historically consequential bilateral language contact situations in European history. The two languages have been in continuous, if varying, contact for fifteen centuries, and the lexical traces of this contact are woven into the core vocabulary of both modern languages at every level of register and domain.

Second, the direction and intensity of borrowing has fluctuated historically in response to changing cultural prestige relations. The 18th and 19th centuries saw a massive transfer of German vocabulary into English in the domains of science, philosophy, music, and culture, reflecting German intellectual and cultural hegemony in the European world. The post-1945 period has seen an equally massive transfer of English vocabulary into German, reflecting the global dominance of English-language culture in the era of Americanisation and globalisation.

Third, lexical borrowing between English and German has never been purely linguistic; it has always been simultaneously cultural. Loanwords carry with them the cultural frameworks, conceptual systems, and social associations of their source communities. The study of English-German borrowings is therefore at the same time a study of the intellectual, cultural, and political history of Europe.

Fourth, the response of language communities to external lexical influence has varied historically between adoption, adaptation, calquing, and puristic rejection, and all four strategies are attested in the English-German contact situation. Understanding which strategy is employed under which social conditions is one of the most productive areas for further research in contact linguistics applied to this language pair.

The study contributes to the advancement of the scholarly understanding of English-German language contact by providing a comprehensive diachronic overview that integrates the rich contemporary literature on Anglicisms in German with the comparatively neglected literature on German borrowings in English. Future research should focus on the corpus-based analysis of German loanwords in current English usage, the sociolinguistic investigation of attitudes to Anglicisms in different German-speaking communities, and the pedagogical implications of English-German lexical history for language teaching in both English and German as foreign languages.

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